

# The Language of Opportunity: Expanding Employment Prospects for Adults with Limited English Skills

By Heide Spruck Wrigley, Elise Richer, Karin Martinson, Hitomi Kubo, and Julie Strawn

## Introduction

Adults who have limited English skills, usually immigrants or refugees, often face poor labor market prospects. The number of such individuals in the U.S. workforce has grown dramatically over the past decade—accounting for nearly half of all workforce growth—yet the workforce development implications of this growth have received scant attention. Current resources for language and job training services are dwarfed by the need. Moreover, few programs focus on providing the nexus of language, cultural, and specific job skills that are key to helping low-income adults with limited English skills increase their wages

and economic status—and to helping our nation's economy grow.

More help is urgently needed. Virtually all of our nation's new workforce growth for the foreseeable future will come from immigration, so failure to assist immigrants in improving their language and job skills is likely to hurt workforce productivity over the long term. Other key national priorities, such as meeting high educational standards in our public schools and helping welfare recipients move toward economic self-sufficiency, also depend on expanding opportunities for individuals with limited English skills and helping them gain the skills they need to get ahead economically and socially.

In this policy brief, we describe the demographics and economic circumstances of low-income adults with limited English proficiency (LEP) as well as the language and job training services available to them. We summarize lessons from scientific evaluation research on employment programs for low-skilled adults and provide recom-

## About the Authors

Heide Spruck Wrigley is a consultant associated with Aguirre International, Elise Richer is a Senior Policy Analyst at CLASP, Karin Martinson is a consultant based in Washington, D.C., Hitomi Kubo is a Policy Research Associate at CLASP, and Julie Strawn is a Senior Policy Analyst at CLASP.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This brief summarizes the report, *The Language of Opportunity: Expanding Employment Prospects for Adults with Limited English Skills* by Heide Spruck Wrigley, Elise Richer, Karin Martinson, Hitomi Kubo, and Julie Strawn. The full report covers how the United States can better provide high-quality education and training services for adults with limited English skills. It includes profiles of programs already providing such services. To obtain the full report, visit the CLASP website at [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org), or call (202) 906-8000 to order a printed copy.

This report and policy brief were made possible by the National Institute for Literacy, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Moriah Fund, the Joyce Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, the Casey Foundation, and an anonymous donor.



mendations for policy and practice that would increase access for LEP adults to higher-paying jobs.

## Adults with Limited English Skills: Who Are They and How Are They Faring?

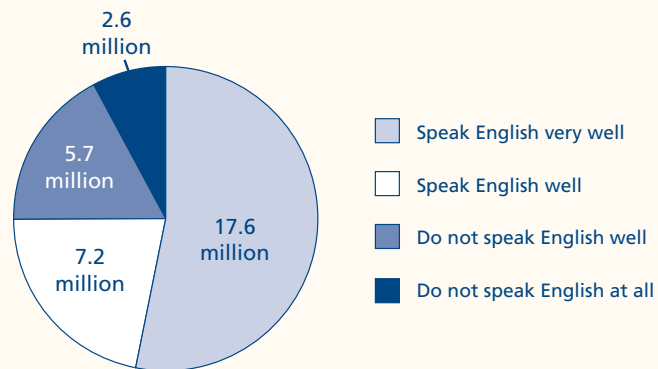
Adults in the United States with limited English skills are a diverse group. While some are highly educated, many have low levels of literacy and formal education in their native languages that further limit their labor market prospects.

- More than eight million working-age adults in the United States—5 percent of all adults—do not speak English well or at all.** The 2000 Census found that among adults who speak a language other than English at home, 2.6 million do not speak English at all. An additional 5.7 million do not speak English well, adding up to 8.3 million adults—nearly 5 percent of the adult population—who speak English poorly. (See figure 1.) Most of those who do not speak English are immigrants representing a wide range of countries and cultural backgrounds.

- Adults with limited English skills represent a growing and critical segment of the U.S. workforce.** Half of the growth in the U.S. workforce between 1990 and 2001 was due to immigration. By contrast, in the 1980s, immigrants accounted for just one-fourth of workforce growth, and in the 1970s, just 10 percent. (See figure 2.) Further, over the next two decades, the percentage of American workers whose English is limited will keep increasing due to continued growth in immigration and to the aging of the native-born

### FIGURE 1

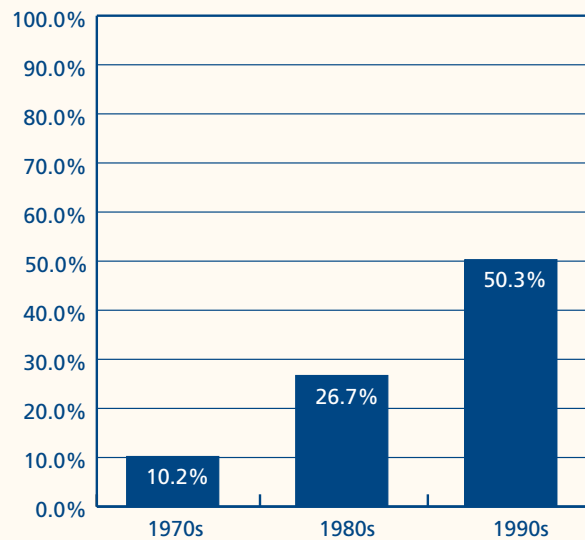
Number of 18- to 64-Year-Olds Who Do Not Speak English at Home, By Level of English Skill



CLASP calculations from U.S. Census Bureau. (2002). Retrieved from tables produced at [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_lang=en) on September 25, 2002. Figures include the District of Columbia, but not Puerto Rico or other territories.

### FIGURE 2

Share of Workforce Growth Due to Immigration in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s



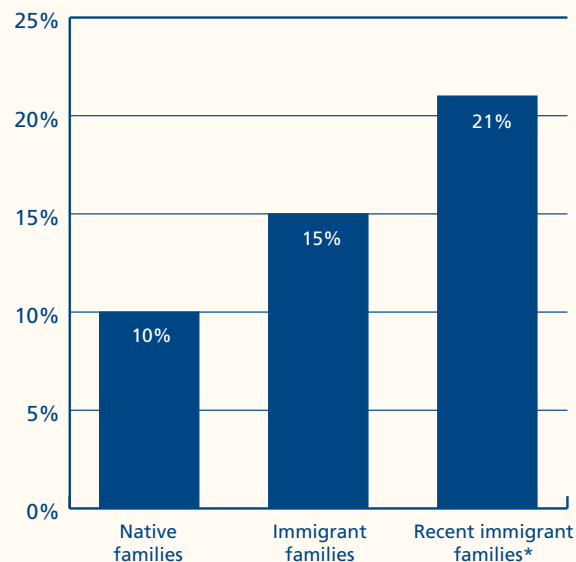
Sum, A., Fogg, N., & Harrington, P. (2002, August). *Immigrant workers and the great American job machine: The contributions of new foreign immigration to national and regional labor force growth in the 1990s*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University.

workforce. Immigrants are projected to account for *all* of the net growth in the 25- to 54-year-old workforce during this time period.

- **Many immigrants have arrived recently in the United States and are settling in different states than earlier immigrants, creating new workforce opportunities and challenges.** More immigrants came to the U.S. in the 1990s than in any other decade in our history. Immigrant populations are growing across the nation, even in states and localities that have not historically been immigrant destinations. To tap into this new labor force pool, employers in areas experiencing a growth in this population must be prepared to work with employees with limited English skills. Demand for certain types of services—particularly English language and job training services for individuals unfamiliar with the U.S. workplace—will also increase.
- **Recent arrivals tend to have lower English language skills than other immigrants, which limit their ability to find work and earn enough to support their families.** The 1990 Census showed that almost half of the immigrants who had arrived within the previous three years did not speak English, compared with one-quarter of all foreign-born residents. Spoken English appears to be an important component of economic stability and success in the U.S.—studies have shown a strong connection between language ability and employment and earnings.

FIGURE 3

Poverty Rate Among Native and Immigrant Families, 1999



\* Arrived in 1995 or later.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (Date unknown.) *Profile of the foreign-born population in the United States, 2000 (detailed tables for P23-206)*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/pp1-145.html> on September 23, 2002, Tables 19-2A & 19-2B.

- **Beyond their limited fluency in spoken English, immigrants often lack education credentials and written English skills critical to advancement in the labor market.** Studies have shown that immigrants have considerably lower English literacy rates and high school completion rates compared to natives. Lack of educational credentials likely limits the earnings potential of LEP adults, since workers without a college degree have had fewer job opportunities in recent decades than those with a degree.
- **Reflecting their low English literacy skills and limited credentials, immigrants are concentrated in low-wage work and many live in poverty.** Immigrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage jobs and their wages have fallen in relation to wages earned by native workers. Low earnings, combined with demographic characteristics such as large households, mean that immigrant families are more likely to be poor. (See figure 3.) Families headed by *recent* immigrants are more than twice as likely to be poor as natives.
- **Welfare reform eliminated some supports for immigrants, which may have worsened their economic condition.** Since the overhaul of the welfare system in 1996

(which created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] program), hardships for the children of immigrants have increased—they are more likely to be poor and more likely to suffer food insecurity than children of native parents. Studies have found that these changes are at least partially attributable to changes made in immigrants' eligibility for public assistance programs.

### Can English Language and Job Training Services Make a Difference for Labor Market Success?

Adults with limited English skills clearly need to improve their English language abilities and acquire specific job skills if they are to advance in the labor market. Unfortunately, little scientific research has been conducted on the most effective ways to deliver English language, literacy, and job training services to this population. At the moment, the best available data come from the extensive scientific research conducted on employment programs for other groups of low-skilled individuals, principally those receiving cash assistance or welfare—a group that includes immigrants and refugees with limited English skills as well as native-born Americans.

- **Two scientific evaluations of a training program serving primarily Hispanic immigrants found that integrating job training with English language, literacy, and math instruction increased employment and**

**earnings.** Among scientific studies of employment programs, the results of random assignment evaluations of programs operated by the Center for Employment and Training (CET) program in San Jose, California, are most relevant to the LEP population because most of CET's participants were Hispanic and many had limited English skills. The CET program produced large and lasting impacts on earnings in two separate studies. In addition to integrating job training and English language skills, training at CET was provided full-time, in a work-like environment, and staff had extensive knowledge of the local labor market.

- **In general, the most effective programs for moving low-income individuals into work provide an array of services, including job search, education, and job training.** The most successful employment programs are those that do not rely primarily on one kind of activity, but provide different services as needed, including job search activities but also education and training. One welfare-to-work program that used this approach—in Portland, Oregon—far outperformed most other evaluated welfare-to-work programs, producing large increases in employment, earnings, job quality, and employment stability. The Portland program emphasized participation in a range of activities, tailored services to individual needs, and stressed job quality. The CET and Portland programs performed far better than programs that were strongly focused on job search or on edu-

cation (which primarily provided basic education, not job training).

- **Job training and other postsecondary programs can substantially increase earnings and job quality.** There is a growing body of evidence pointing to the importance of both job training and other postsecondary education in producing financial gains, particularly for welfare recipients. Even those with low skills can benefit if basic education—including ESL classes—is closely linked to further skill upgrading. In one recent, non-experimental study, participants in basic education who went on to job training boosted their earnings 47 percent more in the year after attending the program than those who were in basic education only. (See figure 4.) While the payoff is significant, it can take a substantial amount of time to complete both basic education and job training—more than a year on average.

### Creating Quality Job Training Programs for Adults with Limited English

Most current education and training programs do not have the capacity to meet the needs of job seekers and workers who speak little English, have had few years of schooling, and may or may not be literate in their native language. In general, programs serving adult immigrants are severely underfunded relative to the need; English language services and job training are typically not linked; and rarely do programs provide the mix of ESL, literacy, job training, and

employment services found to be so effective in the research described above.

Recommendations for improving services for adults with limited proficiency in English are presented here for program design and operations and for national and state policy. Because little scientific research exists on such services, most of these recommendations are drawn from other, non-experimental research in the fields of adult ESL and training and from site visits and interviews with practitioners at promising ESL programs. (See full report for program profiles.)

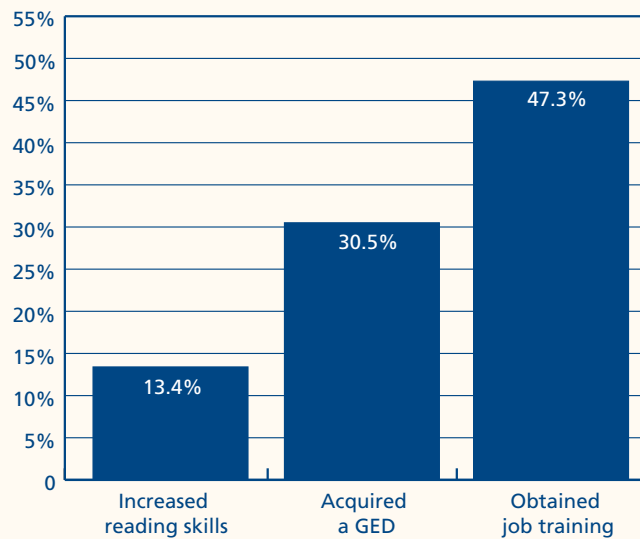
### Recommendations for Program Design and Operations

Conventional English language and job training approaches generally do not seem to have worked well for adults with limited English skills who are seeking to improve their long-term job prospects. To change this, new approaches must be tried, through creating new specialized programs for adults with limited English and by adapting existing programs to the needs of LEP individuals.

- Create programs that combine language and literacy services with job skills training.** To make this approach work for immigrants who speak little English, language instruction should be tied to training in particular occupations and incorporate key instructional elements, including general workplace communication skills, job-specific language needed for

FIGURE 4

#### Increase in Earnings for Adult Education Participants in Welfare-to-Work Programs, by Educational Outcome



Source: Bos, J., Scrivener, S., Snipes, J., & Hamilton, G. (2001). *Improving basic skills: The effects of adult education in welfare-to-work programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; and U.S. Department of Education. Available at [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).

training, certification, and testing, and soft skills to help navigate U.S. workplace culture.

- Adapt existing employment education and training programs to the needs of those with limited English skills.**

Use assessments appropriate for measuring language proficiency, not just basic skills; build on existing work experience and educational background; hire bilingual staff; and use hands-on training to make job training more accessible.

- Offer short-term bridge programs that transition participants to job training and higher education more**

**quickly.** Currently, LEP adults must typically follow a sequential path through education and training that starts with participation in a general language program (which may require the completion of several levels), moves to the acquisition of a GED, and then offers possible participation in a job training program or higher education. For most adults with little English and few resources, this path takes much too long. There is a tremendous need for programs that “bridge” the gap quickly between the skills LEP adults enter with and the skills necessary to succeed in a particu-

lar training or higher education program.

- **Create career pathways for adults with limited English skills.** Because wage advancement is critical to long-term success in the labor market, staff should work with participants to shift their focus from “getting a job” to “planning for a career.” Individuals need to be able to see, in very concrete terms, how they can move from an initial entry-level job along a pathway that eventually leads to a high-wage job.
- **Consider the merits of bilingual job training in areas where English is not necessary for job placement.** In communities where two languages are commonly spoken, some service providers have started delivering job skills training in the native language concurrently with ESL classes. Continued access to ESL services after the completion of the bilingual training program are important, however, to ensure that limited English skills do not hurt participants’ advancement prospects later on.

### Recommendations for National and State Policies

While education and training services for LEP adults are provided at the local level, national and state partners play a critical role in providing funding and guidance on program structure and practices. This section addresses specific actions federal and state policymakers can take to improve labor market outcomes for individuals with limited English.

- **Make combined language, literacy, and job training services to LEP adults a key focus of federal programs under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).**

In **Title I of WIA (employment and training)**, Congress should require states to describe how they will meet the service needs of LEP adults; allow states to make grants to create or expand combined ESL and job training services; and make initial assessments of English proficiency a part of core services. One-stops should be allowed to provide the full range of services at any point in time based on an individual’s needs. Finally, training performance measures should count English proficiency and literacy gains, as well as credential attainment, when coupled with job placement.

In **Title II of WIA (adult education)**, Congress should include increasing English proficiency for immigrants and preparing individuals for postsecondary education or training among the purposes of the program and require states to describe how they will achieve this. In addition, the list of criteria to be used by states in awarding grants to local service providers should be simplified and more sharply focused, with an overall emphasis on increasing quality, such as hours of instruction and number of full-time teachers, and with particular attention to increasing English proficiency and to preparing individuals to enter job training and other postsecondary education. Finally, vocational ESL and vocational adult education should be added to the

list of categories for required local activities.

In **both Title I and Title II**, Congress should allow national research and demonstration funds to be used to create or expand, and evaluate, employment programs for LEP individuals that combine job training, ESL, and literacy services. Programs that combine job training, ESL, and adult education, and receive both Title I and Title II funding under WIA, should be allowed to report on just one set of performance measures, either those of Title I or Title II, but not both as is currently required.

- **Give states the flexibility under TANF to provide low-income LEP parents with services designed to increase their skills and thus their earning potential.**

Adults with limited English skills need time in education and training programs to gain the English language and job skills that allow them to obtain work to support their families, which typically requires a recognized occupational certificate at minimum and possibly a degree. The current 12-month limit on full-time education and training is often not enough time to allow them to complete a program. Congress should extend the allowable training period to 24 months and allow states the option of aiding a small number of low-income parents over a longer period so they can obtain bachelor’s degrees. In addition, more capacity is needed at the local level to provide training that is linked to employers and is

accessible to those with limited English. The Business Linkage grants proposed in the Senate would help increase this capacity and should be included in TANF.

- **Allow states to provide TANF benefits and services to legal immigrants regardless of their dates of entry.**

Most legal immigrants entering the U.S. after the enactment of welfare reform on August 22, 1996, are barred from receiving TANF benefits and services for five years. As a result, low-income immigrant parents may be unable to receive services, such as job training or ESL classes funded through TANF, that would allow them to improve their employment prospects. The TANF statute should be modified to bar discrimination against legal immigrants in the provision of TANF benefits and services. TANF cash assistance, child care, related health care, and employment and training services could make a substantial difference in enabling legal immigrants to enter and retain employment.

- **Address the needs of low-income LEP adults in federal higher education policies.**

Congress should revise the Higher Education Act to better meet the needs of low-income, LEP adults. Changes in how financial need is

calculated could improve the ability of student aid programs to support low-wage workers with limited English who are combining work and school. In addition, colleges should be given the option of allowing students who lack formal high school credentials to demonstrate their ability to succeed in school not through an “ability-to-benefit test” but through actual academic performance during a trial period.

- **Fund scientifically based research on “what works” in training and education for adults with limited proficiency in English.**

The education community would greatly benefit from research and development efforts that investigate what it takes to combine English instruction and job training and what results will be if such models are implemented with various population groups. Studies are needed that use rigorous research techniques to examine the relationship between different kinds of training practices and participant outcomes.

- **Assist states and localities with new and growing immigrant populations to create an infrastructure of workforce development services for them.**

Such an infrastructure should include systems for training teach-

ers, providing resources on effective models and structures for disseminating research, linking research to practice, and setting up collaborations that allow organizations that provide English training to work together to develop education and training paths that are not dependent on individuals first completing ESL and GED programs.

#### Contact Information:

**Julie Strawn**  
jstrawn@clasp.org

**Elise Richer**  
ericher@clasp.org

**For an annotated version of this policy brief, including full reference citations, e-mail gbennett@clasp.org.**

## Conclusion

If federal and state governments and local programs adopted the kinds of changes described here, and those changes were accompanied by substantially increased funding, many more LEP adults could improve their employment prospects. And increasing the economic well-being of our country’s large and growing immigrant population would pay important dividends not only for these adults and their families, but also for our nation as a whole.

## Workforce Development Series

August 2003  
Brief No. 2

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on

issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

CLASP focuses on helping low-income families succeed in the workforce by promoting

policies that improve job retention and advancement through access to high-quality job training, to other post-secondary education, and to work supports.

CLASP POLICY BRIEF

Workforce Development Series, No. 2

1015 15th Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005  
202.906.8000 main  
202.842.2885 fax  
www.clasp.org

CLASP