

All roads lead to exposure

Identifying a pathway to encouraging second-language uptake

- Hispanic communities provide a lifeline for Spanish-speaking immigrants to the US. However, learning English is their passport to full integration.
- Dr Amelia Lambelet at the HEP VD, Switzerland, and Dr Virginia Valian at the City University of New York are interested why children learn English more efficiently than their parents.
- The team studied a group of recent immigrant parent-child families, and what they found challenges traditional beliefs about the limitations imposed by age on learning a new language.

Recent immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries to the United States must enter an unaccustomed space where children seem more adept – learning a second language. While physical relocation to the US might be a fundamental first step for immigrants, they face multiple challenges unless they can speak English. Understanding the language enables them to navigate daily life; proficiency significantly improves their employment prospects by allowing them to access a broader range of job opportunities, understand workplace culture, and communicate effectively

with colleagues. It is also vital for further education. For new immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries to the US, learning English is their passport to proper integration. It is here where children rise to the occasion. This anomaly is nothing new.

One proximal factor

Research worldwide has shown that children seem to have certain advantages over adults when it comes to second-language acquisition. The question is, why? Are younger minds more adaptive? Do adults develop psychological or emotional barriers

to language learning? Is there a critical period for learning a second language? Studies suggest multiple factors, including cognitive, motivational, and social forces, can affect proficiency in second-language learning. Research by Dr Amelia Lambelet and Dr Virginia Valian draws attention to one proximal factor.

Lambelet and Valian come from different but associated academic backgrounds to approach the differences in second-language learning in adults and children. Lambelet is a Swiss linguist and specialist in

multilingualism. Valian is a psychologist who is particularly interested in determining what innate information – if any – learners have about language and how they use the speech around them to acquire their first or second language. In a year-long study of 51 parent-child pairs of Spanish-speaking immigrants in New York City, the team measured English proficiency development through tests and

questionnaires repeated after six and twelve months. Their focus was not on ultimate attainment but on the rate of acquisition.

As hypothesised, the children developed lexical diversity and verbal fluency in their new language quicker than their parents. Typically, after a year, the children progressed from producing 56% of their verbs correctly

– for example, adding -ed to form the past tense – to producing 74% correctly. In comparison, the adults only improved from 33% to 37%. To get a clearer idea of why, the researchers needed to analyse the data and isolate the most meaningful predictors. What they learned rattled established wisdom.

Age is not a predictor

Using backward elimination models, Lambelet and Valian started with all possible predictors for second-language comprehension and production, such as age, length of residence in the US, aptitude,

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working memory, anxiety in speaking English, and exposure to the language, and systematically removed the least significant predictors one by one. It became clear that age (child versus parent), surprisingly, was *not* significant. What stood out was exposure to English.

The data showed that, as a group, children were exposed to more English than their parents, much of it at school or through encouragement via the school. Children usually had more English-speaking friends than their parents and consumed more English media and cultural content such as TV and music. While the children used English between 75% and 80% of their school day, parents only used English between 33% and 50% of their workday. The only place where both adults and children spoke almost no English was at church.

What Lambelet and Valian discovered suggests that while Spanish-speaking immigrant adults typically lead lives without venturing too far from New York's supportive Hispanic community, where they feel more at home, their children actively venture beyond it. It is here where they are probably exposed to more English and encouraged to embrace it, experiment with its nuances, and feel comfortable using it.

All roads lead to exposure

Moving to a new country with an unfamiliar language comes with challenges and emotional upheaval; having a supportive community that speaks your language can help in that regard. The community provides practical information and know-how, as well as friends who understand what they are going through. However, learning a new language is, to a large degree, a personal journey.

Authorities can help guide them by finding opportunities to promote English uptake in supportive and encouraging environments – and now, we have a crucial area to focus on. By sifting through various potential influences on language learning to pinpoint what truly matters, Lambelet and Valian have challenged traditional beliefs about the limitations imposed by age on learning a new language and demonstrated that in encouraging immigrant adults and their children to learn English, all roads lead to exposure.

Personal response

How would you like to see other researchers in your field develop what you've learned?

In applied linguistics, more research needs to be done with immigrants and underserved populations, or people who don't come from WEIRD societies (WEIRD being an acronym for Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic). Research shows that 'WEIRD' populations differ from other populations in many ways, but they are still over-represented in research, and their scores on various tests over-generalised. It is only by taking into account other populations that we will be able to get one step further to understanding general mechanism of language learning, such as the differences between adults and children for example.

How will you develop what you've learned further?

In our next research projects, we want to involve our participants more in each part of the process. We are very grateful to the Spanish-speaking immigrant community in New York to have opened their doors (literally) to our research but are also aware of the fact that we could not answer all their questions and be useful for their language development. Involving participants and communities in research, especially in second-language acquisition

research, is an important step towards bridging the gap between science and society.

How can authorities help by finding opportunities to promote English uptake in supportive and encouraging environments?

By understanding that the difficulties experienced by (adult) immigrants to learn English are not due to 'laziness' or 'lack of will to integrate' but often by cognitive overload and lack of exposure to the language itself. Research in other countries has for instance shown the effect of post-traumatic stress on language learning and on executive functions in refugees and recent immigrants (see for instance HP Søndergaard, 2017).

What can Hispanic communities in the US do to encourage adult immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries to develop their command of English?

Immigrants often lack information on the resources that are available to them. Many non-profits do a great job trying to inform and educate recent immigrants, especially on legal/health rights, but many immigrants still are too busy navigating their new system to get the information and help they critically need.

Details



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Bio

Dr Amelia Lambelet is a full professor at the HEP VD (Switzerland). Her current research focuses on individual differences in language learning and language development among members of underserved and minority populations. She is also committed to popularising research findings and bringing research closer to society.

Dr Virginia Valian is Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York. Her language research focuses on very early syntax acquisition and the role (or lack thereof) of bilingualism in higher cognitive processing. Her gender research focuses on why so few women are in positions of power and prestige.

Further reading

Lambelet, A, (2023) [Testing language aptitude for recently arrived parent-child immigrant dyads](#). In Wen, E, Skehan, P, Sparks, R, (eds) *Language aptitude theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lambelet, A, Valian, V, (2023) [Exposure is the proximal influence on second language acquisition](#). *Brain and Language*, 246.

Lambelet, A, (2021) [Lexical diversity development in newly arrived parent-child immigrant pairs: Aptitude, age, exposure, and anxiety](#). *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 41, 76–94.

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