

**English Spoken Here:
Language Skills Foster
Immigrant's Success**
Trends
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I owe a lot to Jack Armstrong, the Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet and the Shadow. These radio characters taught me English. I realized how well they did it when a high school friend recently asked me if it was true that I was an immigrant to the United States. I have never tried to hide that I am a German Jew who came to this country only a few months shy of my seventh birthday. But I have found the road to opportunity is paved by the fact that you can't tell by listening to me speak. The suggestion by some leaders of the Latin American community that immigrants should be encouraged to sing a Spanish version of the "Star Spangled Banner" suggests they don't understand that the key to unlocking many opportunities is a good command of the English language.

My parents and I got off the boat in New York before taking a train to Cincinnati. As is true today for many immigrants, money was in very short supply, and both of my parents worked at low-paying jobs. My father packed boxes at a uniform factory for \$14 per week. We rented an apartment with extra rooms so my mother could sublet them to other immigrants, who paid us a small stipend for room and board. Both of my parents quickly enrolled in English classes and never spoke German at home, unless our boarders insisted. My parents very much wanted to be Americans and spoke English at home not only for their own practice but to encourage me to learn "proper English." No one in my first grade class spoke German, which forced me to use English right away. I did not do well at it and wound up in more than my share of fights as a result of teasing and misunderstandings. My teachers let me know that I had failed first grade and would be re-enrolled at that level the next year.

The inauspicious start of my social and academic careers led me to spend a lot of time in the apartment that summer. Our living room, which was also my bedroom, had a radio. My big break was that there were no German language programs on the radio. This forced me to become acquainted with the adventures of Jack Armstrong, "The All American Boy," the Lone Ranger and his faithful Indian companion Tonto; the justice-seeking Shadow, who could make himself invisible; and the playboy millionaire with a fast car who fought crime as the Green Hornet. By fall I had begun to venture out and meet some of the neighborhood kids whom, once I could speak English, I found fun. I am also glad to report that, the second time around, the proper English I had absorbed from the radio made it possible to pass the first grade. Even more significantly, I came to feel myself an American and tune in easily to what the sociologists call the dominant culture. After a few years, so did my parents. They never lost their German accents, but their successful assimilation into American ways enabled them to own and grow a small business, which added value and jobs to the economy and a middle-class standard of living to the family.

My experience suggests that learning English provides more than the ability to communicate well. It also opens a vista to the business and social concepts critical to the success of new immigrants and their children. Unless the large number of poorly educated immigrants who recently crossed our southern borders are expected to learn English, I do not believe it is valid to assume they will be as successful as the waves of past immigrants who have landed on U.S. shores.

What is good for immigrants is also good for the U.S. economy, which will gain much more from well educated, skilled workers than uneducated but cheap workers. The economy can better afford to raise the prices paid for the

food sold at grocery stores and served at restaurants and fast food venues than it can afford to slow the pace of innovation and productivity gains that only can come from the output of motivated, skilled workers with strong technical and conceptual skills. Immigrants who don't come to the United States with high levels of education and experience can benefit from a solid foundation of English to get the technical skills and social insights necessary to climb the ladder to success.

In the April 27, 2006 *New York Review of Books* article about Henry Hitchings' *The Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary*, Andrew O'Hagan wrote: "In a time when England was taking over the world, he sent language out like a flotilla of wormy ships, their Union Jacks snapping in the breeze." If the United States' ship of economy and state is to steam ahead on the sea of globalization, the "Star Spangled Banner" must continue to be sung in its original English version.



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