

ENGLISH AS A GATEWAY.

OVERVIEW

New Americans want to learn English, evidenced by wait lists for English as Second Language (ESL) programs around the country demonstrate this interest among immigrants and refugees. Yet half of immigrants over five years old in the U.S. have limited English proficiency, or speak English less than well.¹ English is a prerequisite for full social and economic participation in U.S. society. English is also critical for immigrants to become citizens or pursue pathways to legal status under current reform proposals. English is a gateway for immigrants to be a part of our society and for our society to benefit fully from immigrant contributions.

Any immigrant integration policy must include a significant expansion of public investment in English language instruction. We should support New Americans in pursuit of English language proficiency by:

- Guaranteeing all New Americans 300 hours of ESL instruction
- Investing in technologies and programs to innovate ESL instruction

BACKGROUND

Learning English is a pre-requisite for immigrants' success integrating into the United States. Anti-immigrant public opinion often asserts that immigrants and refugees don't want to learn English. This sentiment is wrong.

New Americans want to learn English. Foreign born individuals who have limited English language abilities should not be punished but rather provided the opportunity to improve their English language skills, aiding their integration into American society. English can increase productivity, boost wages, and improve access to higher quality jobs and continued education.

Many New Americans are parents to American-born children who are fluent English language speakers. It is in their interest, in the interest of their children, and in the interest of our society and the success of all New Americans. For example, NPNA is a key partner in a national project with OneAmerica and the Learning Games Network called English Innovations, which is sparking creative new approaches to language learning using new curricular models integrated with digital literacy and self-paced learning, that promise the potential to reach significant scale. English Innovations and similar programs that are grounded in community-engagement, adaptable to the experiences of immigrants and that can be contextualized (workplace, schools, community, etc.) can lead the way toward a more robust and effective national ESOL strategy.

Many state and local governments have already invested resources to serve people with limited English language abilities. They have made efforts to comply to with both the letter and spirit of the law. Even so, the diversity of languages spoken by immigrant and refugee communities continues to grow. The complexity and expense of providing language access services, especially for languages that are not the most common, is a major challenge.

¹ Zong, Jie and Batalova, Jeanne. Migration Policy Institute. *The Limited English Proficient Population in the United States*. July 8, 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Guarantee all New Americans 300 hours of ESL instruction

- The federal government must support linguistic integration in a way that will work for New Americans. The federal government is already invested in ESL, but too often ESL instruction does not meet New Americans' needs. Namely, ESL instruction does not guarantee someone a level of mastery to pass the English test to become a citizen. Moreover, ESL classes are often difficult to get to and hard to schedule around work and child care
- The federal government should double Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II Adult Education and Literacy funding to provide expanded English language training (and other adult basic education services)
- English learning should include support for digital literacy, with contextualized content leading to employment opportunities and improved access to continuing education. Quality and access should both be prioritized, with opportunities for diverse learners in a variety of settings. Support for workplace, community-based, and community college instruction is essential
- Older New Americans and people lacking literacy in their own languages will require specialized approaches and a longer period of instruction to become fully integrated. We must support their diverse learning needs

Invest in technologies and programs to innovate ESL instruction

- The federal government can help to accelerate development and adoption of cost-saving technologies or lead efforts to aggregate service demand within or across service systems
- We should invest in tools that blend English learning with digital and other forms of literacy in context, like on the job, as these have better outcomes than other types of ESL programs, and can directly address our workforce needs