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Study: Mexican immigrants trail others in learning English

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CHICAGO — Nearly three out of every four Mexican immigrants speak English "just a little or not at all," the most among immigrant groups from Latin America, according to a study released Thursday.

By comparison, 35 percent of those born in Puerto Rico struggle with English, while 44 percent of those from South America do, according to the study by the Washington-based Pew Hispanic Center, which based its findings on a survey of 14,000 Latino adults nationwide.

Reasons for poor English skills among Mexican immigrants include lower education levels, less time in this country and more opportunities to speak Spanish at work, the study found.

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The struggles of Mexicans to integrate into the country's mainstream has fueled broader concerns over immigration.

A separate immigration study released Thursday by the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies found that the U.S. immigration population reached 30.7 million in 2007, the highest level since the 1920s, after growing by an estimated 10.3 million immigrants, both legal and illegal, the last seven years.

Critics worry that a split society of Spanish speakers and English speakers is developing, as new ethnic enclaves form in suburban and rural areas around the country.

But the study's authors also assert that language proficiency of those who arrived as children suggests that assimilation is taking place.

Nearly 70 percent of Mexicans who enter the U.S. before they reach 10 years of age said they speak English very well, said D'Vera Cohn, one of the study's authors. Although that figure is still slightly below the percentage for all Latinos in that age category, it shows that Mexicans and their offspring are following traditional immigration patterns, Cohn said.

Half of the Mexican immigrants surveyed in the Pew study said they speak mostly or only Spanish at work. Nearly a third of all Latino immigrants said they speak only Spanish at home.

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