

The New Immigrants: Hispanics Settling in Rural Communities

by

Max J. Pfeffer and Pilar A. Parra

What is the Issue?

As Mexican immigrants become a more important part of the workforce on U.S. farms, employers will face many challenges in training and retaining these workers. A first step in addressing this challenge is to identify workers' needs. Once these needs are identified, it is important to determine how employers might address these needs to help workers become productive members in the workplace and community. While this is a nation-wide issue, it is also one with particular relevance to New York State.

In recent years, you have been able to go to rural communities in any state and find a grocery store or restaurant that serves a largely Mexican clientele. Or you find an increasing number of Catholic churches in rural areas that offer masses in Spanish. If you attend one of these services you are likely to find the church full of Mexican families. Local schools have increasing numbers of Hispanic children attending year-round classes. Observations like this are consistent with findings from the U.S. Census of Population. Based on data from the census, the U.S.D.A. Economic Research Service reports that the Hispanic population is growing throughout the U.S., including rural, agricultural areas.

Increasing Likelihood that Mexican Farmworkers Will Stay in U.S.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that about 80 percent of the U.S. farm workforce is of Mexican origin, and there are

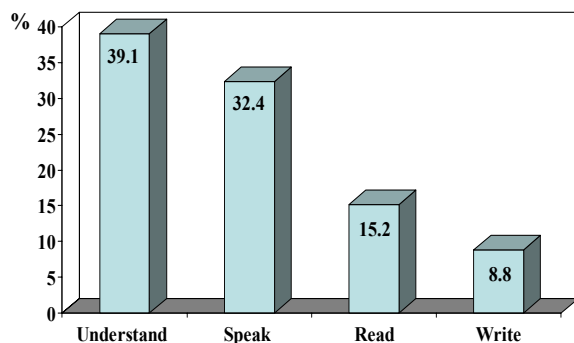
indications that an increasing proportion of these workers are staying in the U.S. A number of factors may account for this. While it may be more difficult to cross the border since 9/11/01, evidence indicates that settlement in the U.S. of Mexican farmworkers has been increasing for more than a decade. Certainly the worsening economic conditions in Mexico since the early 1990s made workers more inclined to settle in the U.S. Agricultural workers found favorable living and working conditions in the U.S., as well as important attractions such as good schools and health care provisions. Perhaps the most important factor influencing Mexican workers to settle with their families in the U.S. is being able to find year-round employment.

What do Farmworkers identify as a key need?

Our research offers some insights about the needs of workers. We completed a survey of 583 farmworkers employed in five New York communities. We asked the farmworkers what they needed most to work in the U.S. The need cited more than any other was to learn the English language. We also asked the farmworkers about their English language ability. Less than 40 percent reported that they understand English, and less than one third said that they can speak English. These results show that language ability is a serious limitation of a sizeable majority of the farmworkers we interviewed (see Fig.1).

Figure 1:

English Language Proficiency of Farmworkers,
Five New York Communities, 2003 (N=582)

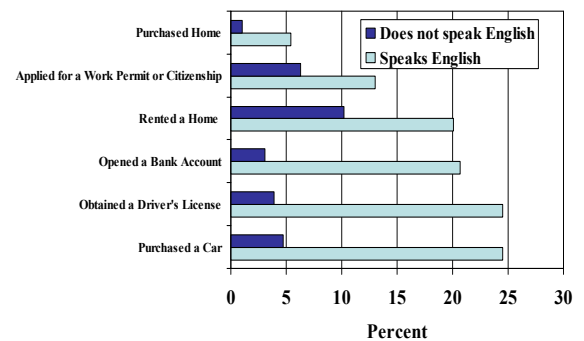


How does this affect Employers?

The communication challenges in the workplace are apparent to employers. The limitations associated with language also affect workers as they try to become members of the community they have settled in, ultimately affecting the employer's ability to retain valued workers. Workers who are unsatisfied with life in the community may decide to move on and try to find a better place. English language ability affects workers' abilities to obtain things they need to get settled (such as transportation, bank accounts, housing, legal residency) and become fully functional and integrated into a community. Farmworkers who speak English are five times more likely to have purchased a car or to have obtained a drivers license compared to those who do not speak English. Those who speak English are about five times more likely to have opened a bank account. Those who speak English are two to three times more likely to have purchased or rented a home. Finally those who speak English are more than twice as likely to have applied for legal residence in the U.S., an important factor becoming a more permanent community resident (see Fig.2).

Figure 2:

Things Farmworkers Have Accomplished by Ability
to Speak English, Five New York Communities,
2003 (N=582)



How can Employers Help?

There are a number of ways that employers can help workers learn English:

- Identify opportunities for English training – local agencies, schools, and churches often offer English classes;
- Facilitate access to classes – arrange for transportation to classes, arrange for classes on the farm, and provide time for classes and study;
- Provide economic support for English language training – examine options for payment of classes, e.g., cost sharing, scholarships, educational materials;
- Encourage local government or schools to allocate resources, to provide language training for newcomers. Language training is a clear need and an investment that will benefit workers, employers and the community.

Visit our website at
<http://rnyi.cornell.edu>

