When Learning English is not Enough: Second Language Acquisition and Downward Assimilation

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I. Introduction

In the United States there is a tendency to glorify old, or turn of the century migration. People recount the stories of their ancestors who came to the country, worked hard, learned the language, assimilated and became proud Americans. “New” immigrants\(^1\) on the other hand, are perceived as inassimilable, as carrying excessive cultural baggage into the host country and as unwilling to learn the language. These fears, however, are ill founded considering the remarkable fact that the native languages of immigrants become nearly extinct as generations progress. A recent cross-country study, for example, shows that the United States is a country that shifts rapidly into monolingualism.\(^2\) Bilingualism in the United States is nonetheless attacked. People, who speak another language, even if they have knowledge of English, are perceived as inassimilable. English is therefore seen as a key element in the process of assimilating into “mainstream America.”\(^3\) But what happens when the opposite holds true? That is to say, when learning English leads to the rejection of mainstream American values and the incorporation into the underclass of American society? There is no doubt that learning the host society’s language is necessary in order to integrate, and most importantly to be incorporated into the primary labour market. However, current

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\(^1\) Or migrants that came to the United States after the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that abolished quota systems based on national origins.


\(^3\) “Mainstream America” can be defined as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.
methods of teaching English to immigrant children have a negative side effect: loss of native language. Consequently, the loss of native language can lead to downward assimilation. As this paper will show, retention of certain cultural characteristics, among them language, is sometimes essential for successful integration as it prevents young immigrants from falling into the lower echelons of society.

The ineffective method of bilingual education in the United States has been attacked, not only by the nativist and staunch nationalist, but also by progressive and pro-immigrant sectors of society who state that bilingual education prevents children from succeeding in society by denying them the key to success in America: English. Language is therefore seen as the ultimate and most necessary tool to successfully incorporate in a host society. Current educational policies see the immigrant’s language, or L1, as an impediment to learning English (L2). This “language as a handicap” perspective is guiding teachers and educators to push Limited English Proficient (LEP) students⁴ to learn English at the fastest pace possible without taking into consideration what this might do to the child’s knowledge of L1, a language that could indeed help the child incorporate in a more fruitful way into society.

How do current educational programs hinder the retention of immigrant’s mother tongue? How can becoming monolingual or a limited bilingual affect relations with parents and affect traditional family structures? How does this lead to downward

⁴ A LEP student is defined as a person: “age 3 to 21, enrolled in elementary or secondary education, often born outside the United States or speaking a language other than English in their homes, and not having sufficient mastery of English to meet state standards and excel in an English-language classroom.” Batalava, Jeanne, Fix, Michael and Murray, Julie (2007), “Measures of Change: The Demography and Literacy of Adolescents English Learners”, A Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, MPI, Washington.
assimilation? This paper will aim to show how the loss of the native language, through a model of bilingualism that pushes for English only, can lead to downward assimilation.

The paper will begin by setting out a theoretical framework of how migrants incorporate into a society. It will look at traditional models of assimilation, integration and acculturation and then look at more novel perspectives such as segmented assimilation, dissonant acculturation and downward assimilation. It will pay special attention to language, an element that is essential in order to incorporate into society, whether it be mainstream America or the underclass of society. In so doing the paper will argue that that retention of mother tongue language and other values could prevent young migrants from downward assimilation.

II. Theoretical Framework: Assimilation into what?

a) Assimilation

Given the large inflows of migrants at the turn of the century, it was inevitable that the social sciences would try to explain how these newcomers adapted to their new surroundings and what larger societal processes resulted from this influx of people. In 1921 Park and Burgess, two scholars from the University of Chicago, defined assimilation as a process consisting of fusion meaning that both groups, natives and newcomers, shared experiences, memories and sentiments and became one in a common cultural life. It was Milton Gordon, who left a more profound mark on the study of assimilation by describing a series of steps or processes in which an immigrant had to

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pass through in order to fully assimilate into the host society. All of Gordon’s stages, beginning with acculturation and ending in structural assimilation, where seen, for the most part, as a one-step process in which the migrants adapt to the core society. A valid criticism of Gordon’s work also comes from the fact that he only considered the relations between the migrants and the core society and not relations between migrants and other subgroups or relations between members of different ethnic minorities.

Another important perspective that lends itself to understand generational changes is that of Gans, who’s “straight-line assimilation” theory describes a process which takes place across generations with each new generation representing a new stage of adjustment to the host society and a step closer to more complete assimilation. After a series of criticisms the author revised his theory thus putting forth a new “bumpy-line theory of assimilation“ model, in which the generational dynamic towards assimilation is characterized by tangents and bumps in which young migrants are not able to fulfil the expectations of incorporating into mainstream America. All these theories have one thing in common; they see assimilation as a linear process, meaning as generations progress, so will assimilation into the host society.

However, more recent studies of assimilation and integration have revolved around a pivotal question: assimilation into what? It is a mistake to think that the United States is a homogenous society comprising of only one culture. Instead there are many sub-societies including the American underclass, which usually suffers from a series of

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7 Core society in the United States can be considered to be white, Anglo-Saxon and protestant.
pathologies associated with poverty such as teenage pregnancy, drug use, violent crime, underperformance in school and unemployment. The models put forward by contemporary sociologists who describe segmented assimilation, downward assimilation, and dissonant acculturation are therefore a more representative model of what actually happens to immigrants when they arrive in such a diverse society such as the United States.

**b) Segmented Assimilation**

The segmented assimilation theory, for example, describes a set of different results arising from migrant integration.

One of them replicates the time-honoured portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white-middle class; a second leads straight into the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass; still a third associates rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity.¹⁰

This theory, therefore, explains the different processes in which certain migrants experience social mobility while other migrants find themselves in the lower ends of society. An example of this is high human capital Asian migrants who are able to integrate into society while Mexican migrants, the majority of which are low-skilled migrants, have a tendency to find themselves on the other side of the stratification order.¹¹ The purpose of this particular theory is to try to explain what factors cause the divergent paths. Individual level factors, such as education, English language ability and

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place of birth are analyzed along side structural factors such as racial status, socioeconomic background and place of residence.\textsuperscript{12}

The theory of segmented assimilation is of special relevance when studying second generation and 1.5 generation migrants.\textsuperscript{13} There is little doubt among scholars that these young migrants will assimilate, the question is into what segment of American society will they assimilate. When a migrant assimilates but learns the ways of the underclass of society, it can be said that the person has undertaken a process of downward assimilation.\textsuperscript{14}

c) Acculturation

The way in which migrants acculturate could also explain the process of downward assimilation. Selective acculturation, that is when second generation and young migrants acculturate to the United States without abandoning their parents’ language and certain key elements of their culture, is associated with stronger parental control and support. Families whose younger members practice this type of acculturation tend to be more cohesive and stable. Another important characteristic of these young migrants and second-generation migrants is fluent bilingualism. On the other side of the spectrum is dissonant acculturation whereby young migrants forget their parents’ language and culture as they learn the ways of the host country. Although dissonant acculturation does not always lead to downward assimilation it does put

\textsuperscript{12} While older theories of assimilation also took into account these factors, segmented assimilation theory places less emphasis on the factors themselves and instead tries to analyze the interaction between individual factors and structural factors. See Zhou (1997), p. 984

\textsuperscript{13} This paper will take second generation migrants as those that where born in the host country but which have two foreign born parent as well as those that came to the United States before the age of 5. 1.5 generation migrants, are those migrants who arrive at the host country between the ages of 5 and 13. This classification is based on Rumbaut’s work. See Rumbaut (2007).

\textsuperscript{14} Portes, Alejandro and Rumbaut, Ruben, Op. Cit., p. 264.
children in a riskier position, as they do not have the family support necessary to face the threats presented by the host culture.\textsuperscript{15} This model of acculturation also places special emphasis on the role of language: “If the latter [parents] remain foreign monolinguals, the stage is set for the breakdown of intrafamily communication and the loss of parents’ control over their children.”\textsuperscript{16} The role of language in segmented assimilation, downward assimilation and dissonant acculturation will be analyzed with more detail in the body of this work.

\textbf{III. Bilingualism in the United States.}

In the 1960’s bilingualism became a part of the civil rights movement in the United States. The right to linguistic diversity is present in legislation and court decisions, most important among them the Bilingual Education Act of 1968\textsuperscript{17} and \textit{Lau v Nichols} Supreme Court Case of 1974, which resulted in a ruling that required schools to give limited-English proficient students access to the same education other children received.\textsuperscript{18} These government decisions led to the realization for the need for bilingual education in the United States. The so-called \textit{Lau} remedies for example:

[R]edirected school districts to provide strong versions of bilingual education for language- minority students to enable them to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. School districts were now required to provide evidence that they had

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 267.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{17} Carlos J. Ovando states that the enactment of this Act represented the first time in American educational history in which the government sought to build upon student’s home cultures and language in such a way that they could start learning without having to be proficient in English. See Ovando (2003) p. 7.
effective programs to meet the academic, linguistic, and sociocultural needs of language-minority students.¹⁹

During the Reagan and George H. Bush administrations (1981-1993), there was a backlash against bilingual education. The Reagan administration, for example, ignored the Carter administration advances and recommendations on *Lau* remedies.²⁰ Civil society followed suit with the creation of the English Only, English U.S. and English First movements, which sought to make English the official language of the United States. The pinnacle of the anti-bilingual movement came in June 1998 with the passage of Preposition 227 in the state of California. Supporters of this bill believed bilingual education in the United States had failed miserably and therefore a new strategy should be adopted.²¹ Preposition 227 stated that: “All children in California public schools shall be thought English by being taught in English.” ²² The strategy to follow was to place LEP students in sheltered English immersion classes for a period not exceeding one year.²³ The consequences of this law are far reaching due to the fact that California is one of the largest immigrant receiving states in the nation. The California debate has also set the stage for other states²⁴ to reanalyze their bilingual education policy especially under an increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric.

²¹ Supporters for bilingual education argued that figures where misinterpreted and because of lack of funds, most students where never able to access bilingual education. In fact only 30% of the estimated 1.4 million English language learners in California at the time were enrolled in bilingual programs therefore the criticism on this pedagogical method was faulty in its logic. For more on this debate see Gandara (2003), p. 222 and Ovando (2003), p. 13.
²³ Sheltered English immersion or structured English immersion means an English language acquisition process for young children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language. [http://www.onenation.org/fulltext.html](http://www.onenation.org/fulltext.html). Accessed on 21 April, 2008.
²⁴ Among them Arizona, Colorado, Washington, and Massachusetts.
More recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has also attacked bilingual education in that it sees English attainment as the ultimate goal for LEP students and not academic achievement. As the NCLB states:

This statement bears witness to the fact that policy makers see a causal relationship between preserving the native language and learning English; one is seen as an impediment of the other. In this scenario the student’s L1 is clearly seen as an impediment to academic advancement. This reflects the philosophy behind earlier policies that saw the student’s native language as a problem to be dealt with. These policies of transitioning students to English as quickly and efficiently as possible distract attention from what should be the main goal: academic achievement.

The “speed” factor is perhaps what causes the worse results in terms of L1 retention and the social implications that this could bring along with it. Over the past decade programs to shift L1 speakers into L2 have been implemented in preschools around the country. The program is guided by the philosophy that the younger the child the faster he or she will acquire the necessary English language skills to be able to perform well in elementary school. When children attend these programs they realize that the language they know serves no purpose in their new surroundings, and that, in fact, it is an impediment in their socialization process. The results are exactly what the promoters of the programs hope for: the children learn English; unfortunately, they also forget their native tongue in the process. The No-Cost Study on Families survey\textsuperscript{25}, which examined the effects of these preschool programs, came to the following conclusion:

\textsuperscript{25} As congress was ready to pass legislation that would expand funding for these programs researchers meeting at the 1990 National Association for Bilingual Education conference called for an ‘emergency’ survey. As they did not have enough time to gather funds they proceeded with trained volunteers, the survey was therefore called the “No-Cost Study”
As immigrant children learn English, the patterns of language use change in their homes, and the younger they are when they learn English, the greater the effect. The evidence would suggest that these children are losing their primary languages as they learn English.26

The academic and, especially the social, consequences of these types of policies have been negative for LEP students and their families. According to recent reports, one in five children, enrolled in kindergarten through high school, are children of immigrants. By 2010 this figure is expected to represent 25 percent of K-12 students.27 The vast numbers are even more reason to take the effects of bilingual education into consideration.

The United States’s perception of English-language instruction and bilingual programs are designed under faulty logic. Bilingual education in the United States is mostly seen as transitional; teachers might engage students in their L1 but the purpose of this is to transition students, as soon as possible, into English language proficiency. Once students are able to perform well academically in English it is concluded that no instruction in the L1 is needed. This is the “language as a problem” model where the “children’s non-English language is something to be dispensed with, and transitioned out of, as quickly as possible.”28 The opposite view is the “language as a resource” model that builds on the language capabilities of the students and sees these competencies as ways in which students can strengthen their academic achievement.29

b) Rejection of Bilingualism in American Education

29 Ibid
One of the notions behind this American attitude towards monolingual education can be identified when assessing the meaning of language for the American identity. It is important to note that language is a key aspect of American national identity. As Portes clearly states:

In a country lacking centuries-old traditions and culture and simultaneously receiving millions of foreigners from the most diverse lands, language homogeneity came to be seen as the bedrock of nationhood and collective identity. Immigrants were compelled not only to speak English but to speak only English as the prerequisite of social acceptance and integration.30

Fears that the country is being overrun by foreign language speaking migrants, and that English is going to be replaced by the immigrant’s language, has been voiced by not only journalists but also by respected intellectuals as well. Such is the case of Harvard scholar Samuel Huntington who believes American national identity is being eroded by the mass influx of migrants, most of them coming from Latin America, and who bring with them values and a language, Spanish, that according to him, is not dying down as was the case with the languages which characterized older migration flows.31

These fears and misinterpretations of facts have been reflected in educational policy. Nativist and fervent nationalist do not comprehend how foreign speaking children can be thought in anything but English and even more pro-immigrant and progressive sectors of society have come to see bilingual education as cop-put and as a way to prevent children from learning the key to success in the United States: English. Even though studies point towards the positive consequences of bilingualism in terms of

intellectual abilities, nativists may oppose the idea of a multilingual society based on arguments of national identity. These fears are ill founded since, as scores of studies show, the United States is nowhere close to becoming a multilingual, or even bilingual, nation.

Paradoxically, the American anti-bilingual rhetoric is not equal for all; some segments of the population are encouraged and even expected to be bilingual while others are pushed towards English monolingualism. The factor that decides if language is something positive or negative is social class. Elites are expected to learn a foreign language and mainstream America enrols at an ever-increasing pace in foreign-language classes and purchases “how-to” language books. On the other hand immigrants who come to the country with knowledge of their native tongue and will more than likely learn English because of the strength of assimilationist forces, are pushed towards English monolingualism. The push to learn another language on part of the elites is perceived positively because these people already know the dominant language, and are trying to learn a L2. The same holds true for certain immigrant groups in which retention of the mother tongue is seen positively and associated with high social class. This leads Lopez to conclude that there is a difference between “elite” and “folk” bilingualism. Why is the use of two languages encouraged and even expected from some and looked upon with disdain on others? Those who come to the United States with another language will more than likely acquire English language skills, as

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34 An example of which are Cubans. For more on this perspective and how bilingualism is criticized by society when the students speak a minority language see Genesse (2002), p. 25.
studies point out. But they are already ahead in that they know another tongue. Policies should therefore be focused on keeping this language and building, additionally, on the basis of that language, as opposed to erasing it completely from a person’s “hard drive”.

This is where Lambert’s vision of additive bilingualism, as opposed to subtractive bilingualism, can prove to be helpful.

In additive bilingualism, the native language is secure, and the second language serves as an enrichment. In subtractive bilingualism, the native language is less robust; society assumes that it will be used only temporarily until replaced by the dominant language as the group assimilates.36

It can be concluded that the educational model in the US is geared towards language as a problem, reflecting subtractive bilingualism and folk bilingualism, at least for the majority of immigrants. In order to promote bilingualism, it is essential to promote the maintenance of students’ L1; that is, bilingualism must aim for an additive approach.

The benefits of these programs could be far reaching. As Genesee mentions, programmes that aim for additive bilingualism create supportive learning environments in which students acquire L2. Programmes that focus on the students’ second language to the detriment of their L1 create subtractive learning environments. Such programmes create pedagogical double binds for young learners. There is a large body of research that shows that programmes that include the students’ L1 are more successful at promoting competence in an L2 than programmes that do not.37 Against that background, it is also important to assess the impact of the loss of L1 on the American society in term of sociological integration, which will be illustrated in the following.

IV. The Need To Revalue Bilingual Education

Policies that see language as a handicap run opposite to a series of studies that show the academic and psychological benefits of being fluent in two languages. Among these studies are those of Pearl and Lambert who, in 1962, overturned all popular and scientific perceptions of the intellectual consequences of being multilingual. While in the turn of the century, speaking more than one language was perceived as a mental and intellectual handicap, the pioneering study showed that controlling for socioeconomic status, bilinguals performed significantly better than monolingual on a range of verbal and nonverbal test.38 This led the researchers to conclude that bilinguals

become emancipated from linguistic symbols – from the concreteness, arbitrariness, and ‘tyranny’ of words – developing analytical abilities to focus on essentials and to think in terms of more abstract concepts and relations, independent of actual words.39

Ludi echoes this perspective by stating that under the right conditions plurilingual children are more creative and socially aware than monolingual children.40 The relevant research is conclusively showing that language is not a handicap but an asset. Why then is multilingualism or bilingualism not more readily embraced in the United States?

As mentioned above educational policies that push kids into English monolingualism have a negative impact on the academic development of a child. The social consequences of these policies can be quite dire as well. A study by Rumbaut, for example, shows that only 17.7 per cent of 1.0 generation migrants prefer to speak

39 Ibid.
English only, while 60.7 per cent of 1.5 generation migrants and 73.4 per cent of 2.0 generation migrants prefer to speak English only. This begs the following question: how are immigrant parents communicating with their children? The conclusion of many scholars is that they are not. As Portes mentions “immigrant families where often transformed into two linguistic sub-groups segregated along generational lines” 41 This undermines the importance of positive parental influence on the social development of a child. Research shows how parental control and strong family ties can help prevent youth from being immersed in a cycle of social pathologies such as drug use, teenage pregnancy and academic underachievement. In the case of immigrants this also extends to ethnic communities who provide a protective shell of the “harmful” effects of the host society. It is strong families and cohesive communities that support parental aspiration and prevent children from falling into social practices that are not conducive to progress. 42 This is especially the case when lack of social and human capital forces immigrant families to live in crime infested inner cities. Under this scenario migrants might come into contact with underprivileged youth, who are more than eager to disperse their discourse on the pointlessness of education in a stratified and racially unjust society. Moreover, certain attitudes, such as achieving well in school, are portrayed as antithetical to ethnic solidarity. 43 This scenario is exemplified by a study undertaken by Portes and Zhou of a central California high school. While newly arrived Mexican immigrants and “Mexican-oriented students” 44 performed extremely well

44 Those who speak Spanish at home and have strong bicultural ties with both the United States and Mexico.
academically, *Chicano* students, which identified with their in-group and rejected white society, did poorly in school and were identified as disrespectful and irresponsible by their teachers. *Chicano* students were therefore perceived as having assimilated into the underclass of society. This leads the researchers to conclude: “The principal protection of *Mexicanos* against this type of assimilation lies in their strong identification with home-country language and values, which brings them closer to their parents’ cultural stance.”46 This is a strong example of how parents play such a crucial role on the lives of their children, especially when the latter are exposed to negative influences from socially deviant youth.

But how is a family supposed to trespass family values that might prevent children from falling into downward assimilation if they are not able to communicate effectively with their children?

The mother tongue is a vital link with the norms of the immigrant homeland, and an inadequate mastery of it represents a disruption of relationships with the original culture and parents. Accordingly, Rumbaut’s survey of immigrant children revealed that children’s preference for English and poor command of their parents’ native language were positively associated with high levels of parent-child conflict.47

Lily Wong Fillmore underlines this point by mentioning, “findings suggest that the loss of a primary language, particularly when it is the only language spoken by the parents, can be very costly to the children, their families, and to a society as a whole.”48 Even though both parent and child might become limited bilinguals, albeit each in different languages, this is hardly enough to help families to effectively communicate when it

45 Second or third generation Mexicans who have lost touch with their Mexican roots.
comes to certain issues. When discussing values, beliefs and cultural traits, language
nuances, some of which can be missed by a limited bilingual, are essential.
Consequences of loosing a language, therefore, can be far-reaching. This also points to
the difference between generational consonance and generational dissonance.
Generational consonance occurs when both parents and children lack acculturation, or
acculturate at the same rate, while generational dissonance occurs when the rate of
acculturation of parent and child is different, usually with the children leading the way,
leading to role reversal and in many cases parent-child conflict. 49

What is lost is no less than the means by which parents socialize their children: When parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings, or wisdom about how to cope with their experiences. They cannot teach them about the meaning of work, or about personal responsibility, or what it means to be a moral or ethical person in a world with too many choices and too few guideposts to follow. What is lost are the bits of advice, the consejos parents should be able to offer their children; It is how parents impart their cultures to their children and enable them to become the kind of men and women they want them to be. When parents lose the means for socializing and influencing their children, rifts develop and families lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understandings. 50

It is no coincidence then that The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)
shows that teenagers who are fluent bilinguals have better family relations and a better ability to adjust psychologically and socially than English monolinguals 1.5 or second-
generation migrants. 51

Quantitative data, such as the CILS study, might not be sufficient in order show the generational tensions caused by the shift in language skills. These studies might show that young migrants or second-generation migrants are bilingual but it is hard to measure through this type of data the degree of their bilingualism; therefore, qualitative

data might prove to be more helpful in showing how families can fall apart and children miss out on the opportunities their parents work so hard to provide them with. In detailed interviews, scholars are able to perceive how language influences, to which segment of society the young migrant will integrate. They look at parents who are desperate for their children to succeed in the United States but who see their children drop out of school or fall into gangs. Likewise, the study demonstrates that parents who want to be more restrictive with their kids but can’t because the child acculturated quicker into the United States and roles are reversed. Or lastly, parents who want to pass on their values and beliefs but can’t because the children simply don’t understand the language of their parents. Lily Wong Fillmore describes some of the negative consequences of loosing L1, through the example of Southeast Asian refugee families who left everything behind to come to the United States. All they have is their family and they believed it would remain intact especially because Khmer, Lao or Vietnamese was spoken at home. However, as children learn English and parents remain L1 monolinguals the channels of communication are cut off. By the time the parents realize that the fast acquisition of English is the problem it is too late to do anything. For these families the breakdown of the family can mean the loss of everything.\footnote{Fillmore, Lily Wong, Op. Cit., p. 305.}

V. Conclusion

Even given the importance of being able to communicate with parents who are often foreign language monolinguals, language is one of the elements that are first lost when a migrant acculturates into the host society. The loss of language is usually parallel with generational changes as most third generation migrants are English
monolinguals. If language is such an essential part of parent-child communication why don’t parents’ make a stronger effort so their children could maintain the L1? The reality is that even if parents make the necessary efforts, structural factors, among them education, do not allow for a mother tongue to survive in most instances. This paper illustrated that education for non-native speakers in the United States revolves around one main objective, acquisition of the English language. L1 is seen as a serious impediment to this goal therefore it is not embraced. It suggested that a possible reason why there are no proactive methods to try to preserve the L1 of second and 1.5 generation migrants is the perception of multilingualism as threat to the American identity. The paper depicted that this could have dire consequences on the development of the child or the young adult and could lead the young immigrant to assimilate into the segments of society that hold values that are at odds with parent’s culture, values and beliefs. Overall, the paper therefore argues that the retention of L1 is a crucial tool against downward assimilation and that the American lack of appreciation for additive folk bilingualism has severe consequences on the integration of migrants.

Bibliography


Web links

One Nation. Org

No Child Left Behind