The Unexpectedly Small Wage Return for English Fluency among Recent U.S. Refugees

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Previous studies have estimated that English fluency raises US immigrants' wages around 17-33 percent. This paper re-estimates that return for a sample of recent refugees, a group that has not had time to improve its fluency after arrival and is less likely to have been strongly selected on ability into the labor force. The new estimates indicate that these workers receive a much smaller return to English, suggesting that the returns to fluency estimated previously did not reflect language requirements of workers' jobs, but rather reflected unobserved skills, job-skill matching, or else arose through post-migration mechanisms like job-shopping or networking.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an important determinant of both immigrants' labor market performance and their social integration. Better language skills enhance labor productivity of immigrants and also facilitate immigrants' job search by increasing the range of jobs they might qualify. Studies that have measured the effect of English fluency on immigrants' wages, have generally found large effects on the order of 17- 33 percent (Chiswick and Miller 1995; Bleakley and Chin 2004).

Most work has not drawn a distinction between the effects of pre- and post-immigration language fluency, however this distinction is critical because it is not clear if the previously estimated effect truly reflects the immigrants' language ability on their actual productivity, or whether it reflects other effects that are correlated with or mediated through language ability. It thus also speaks to the relative merits of policies that might be used to expedite immigrants' assimilation into the labor market, such as using English fluency and/or job skills as criteria in immigrant admissions, providing or subsidizing English classes for new immigrants, promoting contacts between immigrants and employers, or educating immigrants about labor market institutions.

This article aims to shed new light on these issues by estimating the wage returns to language skills for refugees who recently arrived in the U.S. Unlike other immigrants who enter the U.S. through family or employment ties, refugees are individuals who have been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. As a result, the relationship between English and wages for refugees might differ from that of economic immigrants – the focus of the current literature – in at least two important ways. First, refugees are drawn more randomly from the source country population, and thus are not as strongly selected into migration. Refugees also do not arrive with a job in hand but are required to find employment quickly, and thus their initial jobs are often low-paying. On the other hand,

one advantage that refugees have is a much greater legal ability to search for new jobs, so it is plausible that their wages may rise more quickly than many economic immigrants' in later years.

The analysis uses individual-level data on the initial labor market outcomes of male refugees who were resettled in the U.S. between 2001 and 2005, as collected by a large refugee resettlement agency, the International Rescue Committee (IRC). None of the men in the sample had relatives in the U.S., so they were placed randomly by the agency in 16 cities across the country, and all were required by the terms of the resettlement program to find and accept jobs within a short period of time if possible. Consequently, the data represent a population that was not strongly selected into migration, whose geographic placement and labor force participation decisions are intended to be exogenous, and who have had little time to benefit from networking, other forms of job shopping, or post-immigration improvements in language skills or other investments in human capital. Therefore, a correlation between the English fluency and wages of refugee men from a given country more likely measures only the usefulness of language skills on the jobs that they were able to obtain relatively quickly.

Of all the specifications I estimate, the highest wage return for English fluency is around 5 percentage points. In contrast, the estimated return for newly-arrived non-refugee immigrants is 34 percent. Previous work on even broader groups of immigrants (i.e., not only including those who arrived recently) tends to find similar or even larger estimates, so our estimate for the recently-arrived refugees stands out as surprisingly small. It thus appears that the higher return estimated in previous studies of more established and more selected groups of immigrants may not have been caused only by the language requirements of their first jobs, but perhaps also by the benefits of English fluency for other mechanisms such as human capital investment or job shopping, or they may have reflected selection bias in the migration decisions of non-refugees.

In light of those potential explanations, it would seem worthwhile to explore the evolution of the biases mentioned above over the course of immigrants' time in their new country, but unfortunately it is not possible to do so using the data examined here because it includes only information on the first jobs of immigrants after they arrive. Nonetheless, the analysis below provides insight into the relationship between wages and language fluency for recently arrived refugees, and it is a rare opportunity to estimate the return to fluency for a group that is unlikely to benefit from several factors hypothesized to cause that premium.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 talks about the institutional background. Section 3 describes the data set and gives some descriptive statistics. Section 4 presents empirical results. Section 5 performs some robustness checks. Finally, section 6 discusses implications of the findings.

Background

Refugees are immigrants who flee their country to seek asylum in other countries. Every year, the United States provides resettlement opportunities to thousands of refugees from around the world. In fact, United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acknowledges that U.S. refugee resettlement program is the most generous program, admitting more refugees than any other designated resettlement country in the world (UNHCR 2006). Refugee resettlement is a process that comprises several stages. Individuals first apply for a refugee status through the UNHCR while outside the U.S., and then they are interviewed by officers from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to determine their eligibility for resettlement. Once granted refugee status, they receive a travel allowance to the U.S. Refugees often enter the U.S. without income or assets to support themselves during their first few months in the country.

To assist newly arriving refugees, the Department of State (DOS) administers a program of initial resettlement known as the Reception and Placement Program. Under this program, volunteer agencies that maintain nationwide networks of local affiliates provide new refugees with resettlement services including placement of refugees and enrollment into resettlement programs that help them become self-sufficient as soon as possible.

While refugees who have relatives in the U.S. are more likely to be resettled with or near their families, the resettlement agency determines the location decisions of the remaining refugees. Only this

latter group of refugees appear in our data. There is little reason to suspect that their assigned locations are positively correlated with the size of ethnic networks: since the number of refugees who will be assigned to a given city is more or less fixed in advance, and since family reunification cases are given priority, there are on average fewer spots left for the remaining refugees in cities with larger ethnic networks. Therefore, to the extent that the refugees in our sample have weaker ethnic networks in their assigned locations, one might imagine that English fluency would be a more valuable skill for them than it is for refugees in family reunification cases. If so, our estimates of the fluency premium would be somewhat inflated, although this is not a serious concern in light of the small estimates I obtain.

The agencies also enroll qualified refugees into programs that will help them achieve self-sufficiency. A notable one is the Matching Grant (MG), which is a program designed to help refugees become self-sufficient within four to six months after arriving in the United States. Services provided to refugees through the MG program include case management, job placement and follow up, interim housing, and interim cash assistance. In order for a refugee case to be eligible for the MG program, at least one person in the refugee unit must be deemed employable. However, it is important to note that there are a number of people who were deemed employable even though they had little or no fluency in English as judged by their case worker. Later, I will use refugee enrollment into the Matching Grant program as an excluded variable for possible self-selection of refugees into the labor market.

Language ability is one of the important mechanisms for the economic and social assimilation of immigrants. Generally, immigrants with good language skills perform better in the labor market in terms of employment and wages compared to those who do not have those skills. Many studies have examined the correlation between immigrants' English fluency and their earnings, and even those that correct for possible endogeneity have found large effects on the order of 17- 33. For example, Chiswick and Miller (1995) find that immigrants in the U.S. who are fluent in English have wages about 17 percent (57 percent for instrument variable) higher than immigrants with limited English skills. Similarly, using the phenomenon that younger children learn languages more easily than older children to construct an instrumental variable for language fluency, Bleakley and Chin (2004) find that those who speak English earn 22.2 percent higher than non-English speakers (33.3 for IV). However, these estimates are obtained by combining diverse groups of immigrants, and they generally do not account for either the differences between refugees and other immigrants or for differences related to the amount of time since immigrants have arrived in the U.S. In other words, while impressively large, most estimates in the literature cannot be generalized to all immigrant groups in the U.S. On the other hand, the few studies that consider the effect of human capital skills on the earnings of refugees focus only specific groups of refugees mostly at the state or the city level. For example, investigating the labor market outcomes of refugees in Portland Maine, Mamgain (2003) finds that the return to English fluency for recently arrived refugees is roughly 5 percent.

There are a few reasons to believe that the return to fluency for refugees might differ substantially from that of economic immigrants. Refugees' migration decisions may be motivated mainly by persecution, whereas other immigrants may be driven mostly by their potential for success in the U.S. The difference between those decision processes may also create differences in the within-group correlations between English fluency and unobserved skills like intelligence or ambition: that correlation is likely high for non-refugees because highly-skilled potential immigrants who do not speak English would probably be better off staying in their homeland or moving somewhere else, whereas the correlation is likely to be much weaker for refugees because they typically had not planned to migrate far in advance (Chiswick 1999).

There may also be a high correlation between English fluency and quality of the initial jobs held by non-refugees because most could only migrate after having a job offer, which may be easier to obtain for an English speaker. In contrast, refugees generally do not arrive with a job and most likely experience occupational downgrade (Akresh (2008)), regardless of their fluency. After arriving in the U.S., refugees have much more legal latitude than most economic immigrants to look for new jobs, but this fact is not relevant for the present study since I observe refugees soon after arrival.

Data

The data I use to examine refugees comes from an administrative dataset collected by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The refugee men in this sample come from many countries, with the largest groups coming from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan. Since individuals in the sample did not have family already living in the U.S., the IRC placed them in 16 different cities (Abilene, TX, Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Charlottesville, Dallas, New York, New Jersey, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, San Diego, Seattle, Tucson, Washington DC, and Worcester, MA). Individuals are free to move whenever they like, and in the data 159 individuals had moved to new cities before the agency interview. I have dropped these people from the sample for the analyses that appear below, but I have verified that the results are not sensitive to their inclusion. The agency collected wages of the refugees through interviews intended to assess their level of self-sufficiency three months after they arrived in the U.S. Since there were no follow-up interviews, this data cannot be used to follow refugees over time or when they change jobs, but does enable us to examine the relationship between the refugees' language ability and their initial wages. Because the interview occurs shortly after the refugees resettled, that relationship would not be contaminated by post-immigration investments or employment dynamics that are plausibly correlated with refugees' level of fluency.

By the time of the interview, 68 percent of sample were employed, which is comparable to the 69 percent of refugees who were found to have been employed in other samples (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006) and is consistent with the U.S. Refugee Policy's expectation that refugees should be gainfully employed as soon as possible. However, a higher share of English-speakers are employed than the share among non-English speakers, raising a potentially important selection bias that will be addressed in Table 3 below.

The dependent variable I investigate is the refugees' hourly wages at the time of the interview, which almost certainly represents their initial wage in the U.S. labor market. The main explanatory variable of interest is the refugees' pre-immigration language fluency. It is important to note that his variable represents the opinion of the agency caseworker and not just the refugees' own evaluation, so it is expected to eliminate most of the measurement error that could arise when fluency is self-reported. The results reported in the following section consider a dummy variable for fluency that equals 1 if the person speaks English "very well," but I have also experimented with other definitions that include lower levels of fluency, and the results do not change substantially. The dataset also includes other demographic and human capital characteristics such as the highest level of education attained in the home country (the return to education for those who have a university degree or higher is about 6%), the country of origin, and age at arrival.

Table 1 presents the summary statistics. About 20 percent of the sample speaks English very well. The mean wage for the whole sample is 7.48, though the English speakers' mean wage is 26 cents higher than that of non-English speakers. More than 45% of the sample has finished high school, with little difference between the English speakers and the others.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY STATISTICS

A. **Refugees**

	Full Sample (N=1,662)		**English-Speakers (N=340)**		**Non-English Speakers (N=1,322)**	
Variables	**Mean**	**Std Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std Dev.**
Log Hourly wage (conditional on employment)	2.00	0.16	2.02	0.18	1.99	0.15
Employment	0.68	0.47	0.74	0.43	0.66	0.47
Age	33.98	11.04	31.74	10.03	34.3	10.86
Matching grant enrollment	0.64	0.47	0.65	0.47	0.63	0.48
Secondary education	0.46	0.49	0.49	0.50	0.45	0.49
University and above	0.20	0.40	0.32	0.46	0.17	0.37
Africa	0.49	0.50	0.85	0.35	0.40	0.49
Eastern Europe	0.10	0.30	0.01	0.10	0.13	0.33

B. **Non-Refugees**

	Full Sample (N= 4,820)		**English-Speakers (N= 2,325)**		**Non-English Speakers (N= 2,495)**	
Variables	**Mean**	**Std Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std Dev.**
Log Hourly wage (conditional on employment)	2.41	0.89	275	0.95	2.11	0.71
Employment	0.88	0.32	0.90	0.29	0.87	0.33
Age	31.1	11.0	28.64	12.36	30.09	14.47
Secondary education	0.35	0.48	0.54	0.49	0.29	0.45
University and above	0.32	0.48	0.56	0.49	0.10	0.30
Africa	0.02	0.16	0.05	0.21	0.01	0.09
Eastern Europe	0.04	0.19	0.04	0.20	0.03	0.17

Since I want to compare these refugees to other immigrants, I have also created extract of recently arrived non-refugees (i.e. those who were in the U.S. a year or less) who came to the United States between 2001 and 2005 from the corresponding annual waves of the American Community Survey (ACS). These individuals come from all over the world, though relatively few come from the countries that sent refugees during those years.[1] The ACS data do not report the type of visa used by a particular immigrant to enter the country, so I follow the methodology used by Borjas (2002), and Cortes (2004), wherein they identify refugees by country of origin and year of immigration.

Results

The econometric model tests the relationship between pre-immigration language ability and the initial wages of male refugees using the standard human capital earnings function in labor economics. I initially use pooled cross-sectional ordinary least squares (OLS) and country fixed effects (FE) regressions to estimate the relationship between English language fluency and wages. The log of reported hourly wages[2] is the dependent variable, and English speaking ability serves as the main independent variable.
The assumption here is that there is a log-linear relationship between wages and language skills:

$$Log\omega_{ijt} = \alpha_{jt} + \beta D_i + \gamma X_i + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

Log ω denotes log hourly wages, *i* is an index for individuals, *j* is an index for the city in which they were placed, and *t* is an index for the year. *D* is the focal explanatory variable, a dummy for English fluency. *X* is a set of demographic controls mentioned above, and ε_{ijt} represents the error term. The city-year[3] fixed effects α_{jt} capture the geographic and temporal effects of the local economies in which the refugees work. Most specification will also control for refugees' countries or regions of origin in order to control for international heterogeneity in the skills valued in home-country labor markets (some of which are more similar to those valued in the U.S. (Mamgain and Vaishali, 2003)), as well as for possible differences in discrimination across nationalities. The hypothesis is that even in a short window of time English should be useful in job performance: $\beta>0$.

Refugees

Table 2 reports the results of this exercise. I first discuss the results of different specifications for the refugees. The third line of Table 2 reports the OLS estimate of β when using the full sample. It shows that English fluency has a positive and statistically significant relationship with hourly wages, but the effect is small: a good command of English is associated with a wage advantage of 2.6 percentage points.

The remaining lines of Table 2 and Table 3 investigate a series of potential biases and caveats. The second line of Table 2 addresses the concern that OLS estimates could understate the true return to English fluency if refugees from countries with more English speakers had lower levels of unobserved skills. The reported regression now includes fixed effects for the refugees' countries of origin, so it estimates β only from within-country variation. The new estimate is only slightly larger than before: 4 percent. The following two lines of Table 2 then show that results are similar if the sample is restricted to refugees from countries where English is not the dominant language: 4.5 for OLS and 4.8 with country fixed effects.

The result is also robust to including controls for the refugees' occupations: 2.9 percent. This is not surprising since refugees do not have a job ready for them when they come to the U.S. and many work at jobs that are not commensurate with their skills or qualifications.

TABLE 2
REGRESSIONS OF LOG HOURLY WAGES

Sample	Method	N	Est. English premium (x100)	Std. Error (x100)	
Non-refugees	OLS	3,552	34.0	5.0	***
	Region FEs	3,552	30.0	3.25	***
All refugees	OLS	1,110	2.60	1.07	***
	Country FEs	1,110	4.07	1.20	***
Non-English dominant countries	OLS	979	4.47	1.43	***
	Country FEs	979	4.79	1.46	***
African countries only	OLS	551	2.67	1.03	***
	Country FEs	551	2.83	1.12	**

Regressions also include city/state-year fixed effects, and controls such as age, marital status, race, and education. The countries which sent refugees in those years are: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Ukraine, and Vietnam. To correct for possible heteroscedasticity, I cluster the standard errors on country-city level.
***, **, * indicate significance at 1 percent, 5 percent, and 10 percent levels.

Non-refugees

The first and second lines of Table 2 reports the OLS and country fixed effects estimate of β for non-refugees. The premium for recently arrived non-refugee immigrants is about 33.7 percent and 27.6 percent, respectively. These results are in line with what other studies have found for more general samples that include persons who immigrated many years before the survey, but they are still around the lower end of such estimates – and they are clearly much larger than the estimates I saw for newly-arrived refugees.

Robustness Test: Potential Endogeneity of English fluency

Another possible concern is that OLS estimates of the English fluency premium could be biased due to selection in terms of who is able to find a job before the interview, or in terms of who learned English before immigrating.

Selection on Who Is Employed

There are several reasons to expect that most refugees will seek to be employed: they arrive in the U.S. with full employment privileges, resettlement agencies are expected to refer refugee clients for employment as early as possible, it is the goal of the State Department that refugees find employment within six months of their arrival, and many refugees also have personal financial constraints that motivate a high level (and low elasticity) of labor supply. Even so, about 1/3 of the refugees in the sample

have not found a job by the interview date, and one might be concerned that those who do are more likely to speak English. If so, I should be concerned that English speakers with relatively low levels of unobserved skills are more likely to find jobs than are similar refugees who are not fluent in English, since this would suggest that the estimated fluency premium is biased downward.

I address this using Heckman's well-known two step procedure (Heckman 1979). I use a dummy variable for whether the refugee was enrolled into the Matching Grant program as the excluded variable that influences the selection equation, but which has no other effect on the wage equation. Although one might have expected that this variable is correlated with unobserved skills, there is little evidence of that in the data. For one thing, a relatively large share (64 percent) of all refugees are enrolled in the Matching Grant program, so the program is less exclusive than one might have imagined. More importantly, the matching grant dummy variable has no power to explain wages beyond the explanatory variables in wage equation (1). In other words, if I add the matching grant dummy to the right-hand side of equation (1), the OLS estimates of the coefficient on that dummy variable are very small (estimate=0.0015) and statistically insignificant (p=0.89).

Estimates from the Heckman two-step procedure continue to indicate a small English fluency premium (2.6 percent). This is not because the matching grant dummy creates little variation in employment; the probit for the employment equation indicates that matching grant recipients are 9.7 percent (SE=2.5 percent) more likely to be employed. Even so, the estimated fluency premium does not change much from the OLS estimate because there appears to be surprisingly little selection into employment on the basis of unobservables. The estimated correlation between the error terms of the wage and employment equations is just 0.04 (SE=0.27), implying that the refugees obtain employment nearly randomly. This is consistent with the earlier findings, perhaps because most refugees simply cannot afford not to work (Swedberg 2010).

Selection on Who Learns English

I also consider the possibility that fluency in English may be correlated with unobserved ability. This could cause an upward bias in the least-squares estimates if more productive and capable individuals were most likely to achieve English fluency before leaving the home country. However, it is also possible that time spent learning English may have crowded out other forms of human capital investments. Although this may seem less plausible, it may be the more relevant fear in light of the results above because it would cause OLS estimates above to be biased downward, rather than upward.

To address this issue, I use the linguistic distance between the refugees' mother tongue and English as an instrument for their fluency in English. Chiswick and Miller (2005) show empirically that immigrants in the U.S. and Canada whose mother tongue is more linguistically distant from English are less likely to be fluent in English, all else equal. This instrument resolves the potential problem with ability bias because it treats all individuals with the same home country and mother tongue the same way when predicting their English fluency.

I implement this idea on a subsample of African countries, the continent from which most refugees with "good" or "fair" English fluency originate (Allen 2006). While most African countries share similar economic and demographic characteristics, some do have English as their predominant language because of being British colonies. So, I create a dummy variable for the countries where English is an official or predominant language (Anglophone African countries) and use it as an instrument for English fluency; 75 percent of those from Anglophone countries speak good English, versus 27 percent of other African refugees. The first-stage IV regression is

$$D_{ij} = \delta N_{ij} + \phi X_i + u_{ij} \quad (2)$$

where N_{ij} denotes the binary instrument. This first-stage regression has a partial R^2 of 0.165 and an F-statistic of 127, easily exceeding Stock and Yogo's (2002) guideline for strong instruments.

Estimates from the African sample are similar to those for the full sample, regardless of the model specified. OLS and fixed-effect estimates are similar to those estimated earlier (2.92 and 2.74 percent,

respectively), and the two-stage least squares estimate, which accounts for the above-mentioned controls, except the country fixed-effects is -0.05 percent (SE=2.97 percent).

TABLE 3
HECKMAN AND 2SLS RESULTS

Sample	Method	N	Est. English premium (x100)	Std. Error (x100)	
All refugees (unconditional on employment)	Heckman (1979)	1,662	2.66	1.13	***
African countries only	2SLS	551	-0.05	2.97	

Regressions also include city/state-year fixed effects, and controls such as age, marital status, and education. To correct for possible heteroscedasticity, I cluster the standard errors on country-city level.
***, **, * indicate significance at 1 percent, 5 percent, and 10 percent levels.

Discussion

I have thus found no evidence that English ability is a major determinant of the wages of recently-arrived refugees, even though there does appear to be a large return to fluency for newly arrived economic immigrants (5 percent vs 34 percent). The findings of non-refugee immigrants are consistent with previous work, which has found that fluency is a major determinant of other immigrants' wages. The contrast thus confirms the suggestion that there is something special about refugees, such as the countries or the continents they come from, the selection process, or the initial labor market participation decision. For example, the lower return for refugee's fluency could be due to the relatively weak correlation between their language ability and their unobserved skills. Another possibility is that refugees can only find low-wage paying jobs at first due to the fact that they are required to accept the first job available to them, which accounts for much of the occupational downgrade that refugees face after arrival (Akresh, 2008).

Without considering other data sets, it is impossible to determine how the discrepancy between the groups evolves over time, and whether refugees eventually receive a substantial fluency premium, since our data only include recently arrived immigrants. However, it is hoped that these results stimulate a new line of research that explains the difference, and hopefully in the process identifies some factors that promoteeconomic assimilation.

For example, one strategy might involve examining the growth rates of the fluency return among both groups of immigrants in the years after they arrive in the U.S. If English fluency return for refugees grow over time, then time must be an important factor. English fluency might then be associated with human capital investment or its correlation with unobserved skills, or even gains from networking or job-shopping. A relevant policy implication might then involve connecting refugees to employers that demand their skills or increasing their knowledge on how labor market institutions work. Of course, such discussion must wait until the further analysis is complete.

ENDNOTES

1. The countries which sent refugees in those years are: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Ukraine, and Vietnam.
2. I construct the hourly wages of non-refugees by dividing the annual earnings by the product of weeks and usual hours individuals worked last year. I also windorize the wages for non-refugees by dropping from the sample the observations in the bottom and upper 1% tails of the distribution to account for any potential outliers, but the results are quite similar.
3. To mitigate the concern that there might be not be enough variation if we include 16x5 city-year dummies, I use city and year dummies instead, but results are very similar.

Compliance with Ethical Standards:
The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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