

Is English gaining ground among Hispanics—especially online?

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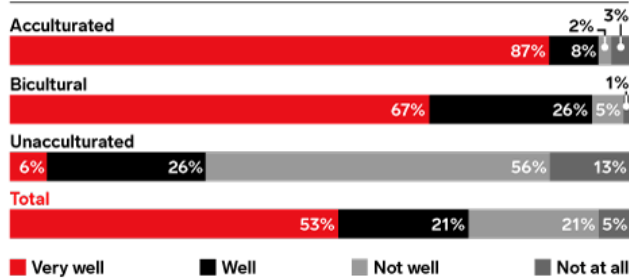
Mark Dolliver

Proficiency in English is increasingly the norm among US Hispanics, as more and more of the population is US-born. But Spanish isn't going away.

Analyzing federal data gathered in 2018, a September 2020 Pew report said 71% of Hispanics ages 5 and older were proficient in English—up 12 percentage points since 2000. Looking at the matter in more detail, a January 2020 survey of Hispanics ages 13 to 85 by the Collage Group found about three-quarters saying they speak English either “very well” (53%) or “well” (21%). Even among those classified as “unacculturated” (based on language usage in various contexts and degrees of self-identification as American versus Hispanic), about one-third reported speaking English at least “well.”

English Proficiency Level of US Hispanic People, by Acculturation Level, Jan 2020

% of respondents



Note: numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding
Source: Collage Group, "Hispanic Acculturation 2020," June 1, 2020

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But being proficient in English does not mean speaking it exclusively. March 2020 polling by 9thWonder and ThinkNow among Hispanics ages 18 to 64 examined language usage at home. In that venue, those normally speaking Spanish only (12%) or Spanish mostly (23%) outnumbered those speaking English only (13%) or English mostly (17%), with the rest (35%) saying they speak the two languages equally.

The picture shifts when it's a matter of using the internet. In the 9thWonder/ThinkNow polling, about half the respondents reported consuming English-only or mostly English content, while few reported consuming content solely or mostly in Spanish.

Language Used by US Hispanic Adults for Consuming Select Content, March 2020

% of respondents

	Internet	TV	Radio	Print
Spanish & English equally	36%	42%	41%	34%
English only	27%	20%	23%	26%
English mostly	24%	23%	19%	22%
Spanish mostly	8%	10%	12%	11%
Spanish only	5%	5%	5%	6%

Source: 9thWonder and ThinkNow, "The 2020 Guide to Hispanic Digital Purchase Behavior," June 10, 2020

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An H Code survey in fall 2019 addressed the narrower question of Hispanics' language preferences when they search for information online. For that function, 63% of respondents said they preferred English, while 21% were bilingual and 16% preferred using Spanish.

Sometimes a search is conducted on behalf of a family member who is not fluent or comfortable in English. The 9thWonder/ThinkNow polling found about half the searches performed for a family member were conducted mostly in English or on English-language websites.

Podcasts have gained a sizable Hispanic audience, and language comes into play in distinctive ways in that medium. Edison Research polling among Hispanics in May 2020 queried those who listen to podcasts at least monthly. Within this group, 48% said half or more of the podcasts they listen to are in Spanish. Nearly all of those who said they listen to Spanish-language podcasts have heard some in an accent other than their own—one more sign of the Hispanic population's diversity. Reaction was largely positive, with 42% saying they find it "more interesting" to hear a different accent and the same number saying it makes no difference. Still, 16% said it bothers them.

It's not just a matter of Spanish-dominant Hispanics preferring Spanish-language podcasts. Rather, it's a venue where some English-dominant Hispanics experiment with their grasp of Spanish, according to Gabriel Soto, director of research at Edison Research. "Even those who might not be fluent or have an advanced level of Spanish-speaking ability are willing to try it out," he said.

Whatever the medium, matching the right language to the right audience is a must for marketers. "Messaging in Spanish that is targeted to Spanish-preferred audiences can generate a response rate four to five times higher than the same message in English, so it is critical to understand your Hispanic audience and their preferences," said Ron Cohen, vice president of product strategy at Claritas.

To learn more about what's true and what's not in finances, acculturation, and digital usage among Hispanics, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our recent report:

Report by Mark Dolliver Dec 23, 2020

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