

Immigrants' Knowledge of German and Their Main Language of Usage

In the discussion over the revision of immigration policy, the question of how well immigrants to Germany can speak German is also under consideration.¹ A good knowledge of German and the use of it every day are regarded as necessary for social integration in the Federal Republic of Germany. Consequently the possibility of setting up language courses for newcomers is under discussion, but it is often overlooked that many of those who are already living here have an inadequate knowledge of the language as well. Even many immigrants of German origin (*Aussiedler*) – and especially members of their families – do not have a good command of the German language. In this article the DIW Berlin presents some basic statistics from its 'Socio-Economic Panel' survey.

The Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) is a survey that DIW Berlin has been holding at regular intervals since 1984. One of its main features is to include a 'random sample of foreigners' and a 'random sample of immigrants'.² In 1999 altogether more than 14 000 adults (over 16) were questioned, among them just under 1 800 foreigners and more than 600 *Aussiedler*. As the questionnaire has been translated into the five main 'guest worker languages' since the survey started, persons who cannot speak German can also be questioned.³ *Aussiedler* who do not themselves speak German generally live in a German-speaking *Aussiedler* household, so the SOEP interviewer can be assisted by a member of the household. Nevertheless, immigrants who have very lit-

tle knowledge of German will tend to be under-represented in SOEP, especially if they are not from the countries where 'guest workers' were originally recruited, or are *Aussiedler*.⁴

The language skills covered by the SOEP are not judged by standardised tests; the interviewees themselves make the assessment.⁵ They are asked whether they 'speak German' and whether they can 'write German'⁶ and which language they mostly use all day.⁷ The same questions are put to all foreigners and *Aussiedler*, independent of their country of birth.⁸ For the sake of simplicity they are all referred to as 'immigrants' here, although the group also includes persons who were born in Germany, that is, the second and third generation of immigrants from the Mediterranean recruitment countries.

Empirical Results

There are more than 8 million immigrants aged 16 and over in Germany, and about a third of them admit that they cannot speak German well; about half think they cannot write German well either (cf. table 1). Around 40% of foreign immigrants do not speak German well, and as many as one-quarter of the *Aussiedler* of German origin are in the same position.

In view of the high share of immigrants with insufficient knowledge of German it is not surprising that only 34% of the foreigners and only 62% of the *Aussiedler* speak German most of the time every day.

The highest percentage of those who speak German most of the time is in the age group of *Aussiedler* aged 61 and over, and none of these in the random sample gave the language of their country of origin as their everyday tongue (cf. table 2). Relatively few of the *Aussiedler* in the middle age groups said that German was their everyday language. Clearly German was no longer the everyday language for this age group in the Soviet Union; moreover, many in this group are spouses and family members who themselves did not have to meet the criteria in the regulations on *Aussiedler*. This middle

¹ For a summary see e.g. Don DeVoretz, Holger Hinte and Christiane Werner: Keine Integration ohne Sprachkenntnisse? Zuwanderung und Spracherwerb in Deutschland und Kanada, IZA Discussion Paper, Bonn 2001.

² Cf. SOEP-Gruppe 2001: The German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) after more than 15 years – Overview in: Vierteljahrshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung, Vol. 70 (2001), no. 1, pp. 7-14; in particular Jürgen Schupp and Gert Wagner: Die Zuwanderer-Stichprobe des Sozio-oekonomischen Panels (SOEP), in: Vierteljahrshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung, Vol. 64 (1995), no. 1, pp. 17-26 and Joachim Frick and Gert Wagner (1997): Zuwanderer in Westdeutschland, in: Statistisches Bundesamt (ed.): Datenreport 1997 – Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, pp. 565-578.

³ These foreign language versions of the SOEP questionnaire cover the countries of origin of the biggest groups of foreigners in Germany at the time the random sample was drawn: Italy, Greece, Spain, the former Yugoslavia and Turkey. There is also an English version, but it plays only a marginal role in the present context.

⁴ The households of illegal immigrants are also not covered.

⁵ Nor are the interviewers asked for their judgement.

⁶ The question is: 'In your own view how well can you speak/write German?' The choice of answers is: 'Very well', 'Well', 'All right', 'Not very well' and 'Not at all'.

⁷ The question is: 'Here in Germany do you usually speak a) German b) The language of your country of origin or c) Some of both?'

⁸ The *Aussiedler* group has only included immigrants since 1984. The random sample has only a few cases of *Aussiedler* and other returning German migrants who arrived before that date; they count as native Germans and are not asked about language.

Table 1

German Language Skills of Immigrants Aged 16 and Over in 1999

Their own assessment, shares in %

	Aussiedler		Foreigners ¹		Total	
	Speak	Write	Speak	Write	Speak	Write
Very well/well	76	61	65	49	68	51
All right	23	29	23	19	23	21
Not very well/not at all	1	10	12	32	9	28

¹ Including the 2nd and 3rd generations.

Sources: SOEP, DIW calculations

age group of *Aussiedler* (aged between 31 and 50) will live for a further 30 to 40 years in Germany and probably do need special language tuition if their knowledge of German is to be basically improved.⁹

Among the foreign immigrants (lower block of table 2) about one-fifth of the young adults (aged up to 40) mainly speak the language of their country of origin all day; for the older group (over 60) the share is around 45%. The share of those who mainly speak German is

⁹ Most recent *Aussiedler* have had to pass language tests before being allowed to come to Germany, but they are not yet in the random sample.

therefore noticeably higher among young people with a foreign passport than among the older immigrants (depending on the age group between 36% and 48%).

It is actually to be expected that immigrants who want to remain in Germany will acquire a good knowledge of the language. It is all the more remarkable that language assimilation is low among Turkish immigrants, although 70% say they want to stay in Germany. Only 20% of the Turkish immigrants speak German most of the time all day (table 3).

A good knowledge of German is important, not only if native Germans and immigrants are to live together in

Table 2

Main Language Used by Immigrants to Germany by Age Group in 1999

Their own assessment, shares in %

Age group	16-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61 and over	Total
Aussiedler							
Mainly German	70	59	56	55	63	83	62
Mixed	28	32	41	31	31	17	31
Mainly native language	2	10	3	14	7	-	7
Foreigners ¹							
Mainly German	48	36	40	33	23	32	34
Mixed	29	46	43	32	34	22	36
Mainly native language	23	19	16	35	43	45	30

¹ Including the 2nd and 3rd generations.

Sources: SOEP; DIW calculations

Table 3
Knowledge of German and Main Language Spoken by Foreigners Aged 16 and Over¹ by Nationality in 1999

Their own assessment, shares in %

	Turkey	Former Yugo-slavia	EU
Speak German	56	71	70
Very well/well	25	19	23
All right	18	10	7
Not very well/not at all			
Write German			
Very well/well	45	40	52
All right	18	26	16
Not very well/not at all	38	34	32
Everyday usage			
Mainly German	20	26	44
Mixed	41	42	34
Mainly native language	39	32	22
Memo item:			
Intend to remain in Germany	70	49	62

¹ Including the 2nd and 3rd generations.
 Sources: SOEP; DIW calculations.

one society, but also if the immigrants are to be successful in working life. However, it must be remembered that language skills alone are not generally an advantage on the labour market if they are not combined with good occupational qualifications.¹⁰

The native German population in the group aged between 25 and 55 have on average 12 years' school and university education.¹¹ The *Aussiedler* differ only slightly from this at 11.7 years, but foreigners have noticeably less 'educational investment' at 10.5 years (table 4). Those foreigners who say they speak German 'very well' or 'well' differ very much less from the native population at 11.6 years. While gross earnings (as of the previous year) by the German reference group were just under DM 42 000, immigrants only earned DM 32 600 (*Aussiedler*) and DM 30 200 (foreigners). The figures are much higher for immigrants with a (very) good knowledge of German, at DM 35 000 and DM 39 600, respectively.

¹⁰ Cf. – also on the basis of the SOEP data – Christoph Schmidt: Immigrant Performance in Germany, in: Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance, Vol. 37, 1997, pp. 379-397, and Don DeVoretz et al. loc. cit., p. 62 ff.

¹¹ This figure is calculated from the number of years needed to achieve a final qualification. Years spent repeating classes in school or protracted periods of university study are not counted as positive years.

It is evident from the unemployment ratio that a good knowledge of German alone will not help on the labour market. A ratio of a good 6% for native 25- to 55-year-olds contrasts with 9% for *Aussiedler* and as much as 13% for foreigners. The ratio of foreigners with a good knowledge of German who are unemployed is not in fact lower but slightly higher.

Good integration into society in the Federal Republic of Germany will also help to ensure that the children and grandchildren of immigrants obtain better school and vocational qualifications. The children who attend school shortly after their parents arrive in particular have under-average educational prospects and suffer all their (working) lives from this.¹² If the parents have a better knowledge of German this is not a guarantee of better educational prospects for the children, but there is much to suggest that a good knowledge of German does help.

Table 4
Years in Education, Percentage in Work and Earned Income of Immigrants aged 25 to 55 in Germany in 1999

	Native population	<i>Aussiedler</i>	Foreigners ¹
Years in education	12.1	11.7	10.5
of which:			
With (very) good knowledge of written and spoken German	–	11.9	11.6
Gross earnings in previous year in DM	41 888	32 649	30 161
of which:			
With (very) good knowledge of written and spoken German	–	34 989	39 621
Registered unemployed in survey month 1999 (% of all 25- to 55-year olds)	6.2	8.7	13.0
of which:			
With (very) good knowledge of written and spoken German	–	7.5	13.6

¹ Including the 2nd and 3rd generations.
 Sources: SOEP; DIW calculations.

¹² Joachim R. Frick and Gert G. Wagner: Economic and Social Perspectives of Immigrant Children in Germany, IZA Discussion Paper No. 301, Bonn 2001.

Conclusion

The high percentages of immigrants who cannot speak or write German well and do not speak mainly German in their everyday lives show that language assimilation among immigrants cannot be taken for granted. However, a good knowledge of German is not enough in itself to help immigrants on the labour market; they also need a good vocational qualification. If the language skills of immigrants are to be fundamentally improved the measures must not be restricted to future immigrants.¹³ The figures from the SOEP show that support is needed to enable immigrants already living in Germany to improve their knowledge of the language and so integrate better, and the Federal Government plans to provide this. This applies not only to foreigners but also to *Aussiedler*, particularly those of middle age.

Joachim R. Frick and Gert G. Wagner

¹³ It is not necessary for highly skilled immigrants to speak German well when they arrive.