Hablemos: the language barrier and its impact on blue-collar jobs

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the obstacles imposed by the language barrier in the working conditions of blue-collar Hispanic workers in Queens, NY.

Even though the United States does not have an official language, English is predominantly spoken in the workplace inevitably having an impact on Hispanic workers who are learning English and especially in those who have no proficiency at all

Participants, recruited from a local adult literacy program, will be presented with surveys with questions to reflect on their working experience as Spanish speakers in the American worksite.

Research Question

How does the language barrier between English and Spanish affect the possibility of male Hispanic immigrants, between the ages of 30 to 40, of obtaining proper compensation for the development of blue-collar jobs in Queens, NYC?

Context

"·The U.S. Hispanic population reached a record 59.9 million in 2018, up 1.2 million over the previous year and up from 47.8 million in 2008" (Flores, et al, 2019)

·Already faced by many obstacles, should laws like the ones the communities who seek to create obstacles for immigrants pass, they would have a harder time even finding a job, never mind thriving in a new workplace (Holeywell, 2012). The RAISE Act, for example, favored by President Donald Trump sought to define immigrants' abilities in part by their English language proficiency (Saboeiro, 2017).

·Queens is the nation's most diverse large county, with the highest rate of racial and ethnic variety (Algar, 2019). in the 2.34 million inhabitants of the borough, the probability of picking two random individuals from two different backgrounds is an impressive number of 72.6% (Algar, 2019).

·As a matter of fact, studies have concluded that there at least 138 languages are spoken in the borough (Koyfman, 2017).

·The United States does not have a defined national or official language. While English is the most commonly used language, it is nowhere stated neither in the constitution nor in federal law that English is the country's official language.

Definitions

Language Barrier: a difficulty for people communicating because they speak different languages (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2021)

Blue-Collar Jobs: of, relating to or constituting the class of wage earners whose duties call for the wearing of work clothes or protective clothing (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2021)

Official Language: the language or one of the languages that is accepted by a country's government, is taught in schools, used in the courts of law, etc (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021)

National Language: a national language is a matter of identity, based mainly on the cultural and historical majority and used for symbolic purpose (Shameem, 2019)

Literature Review

·Through their data analysis of the Matched Employer-employee Data Set, Hellerstein and Neumark identified that there is, in fact, considerable segregation between Hispanic workers by their ethnicity and English proficiency level. "The evidence points to substantial wage penalties for Hispanics when they are segregated into workplaces with high shares of Hispanics with poor English language proficiency" (Hellerstein et Neumark, 2003, p. 53).

·The economist, Maude Toussaint-Comeau, developed a study where using evidence from panel data, she aimed to understand how the human capital of Hispanic immigrants in relation to language allows them to assimilate, or not, into the US. Toussaint-Corneau's findings established that language does not put such a significant weight on human capital as occupational segregation and the dual labor market allow individuals to be employed through processes completely in Spanish (Toussaint-Corneu, 2006, p.23). However, the study did find that "a lack of English ability is detrimental to their (Hispanics) occupational status" (Toussaint-Corneu, 2006, p.23).
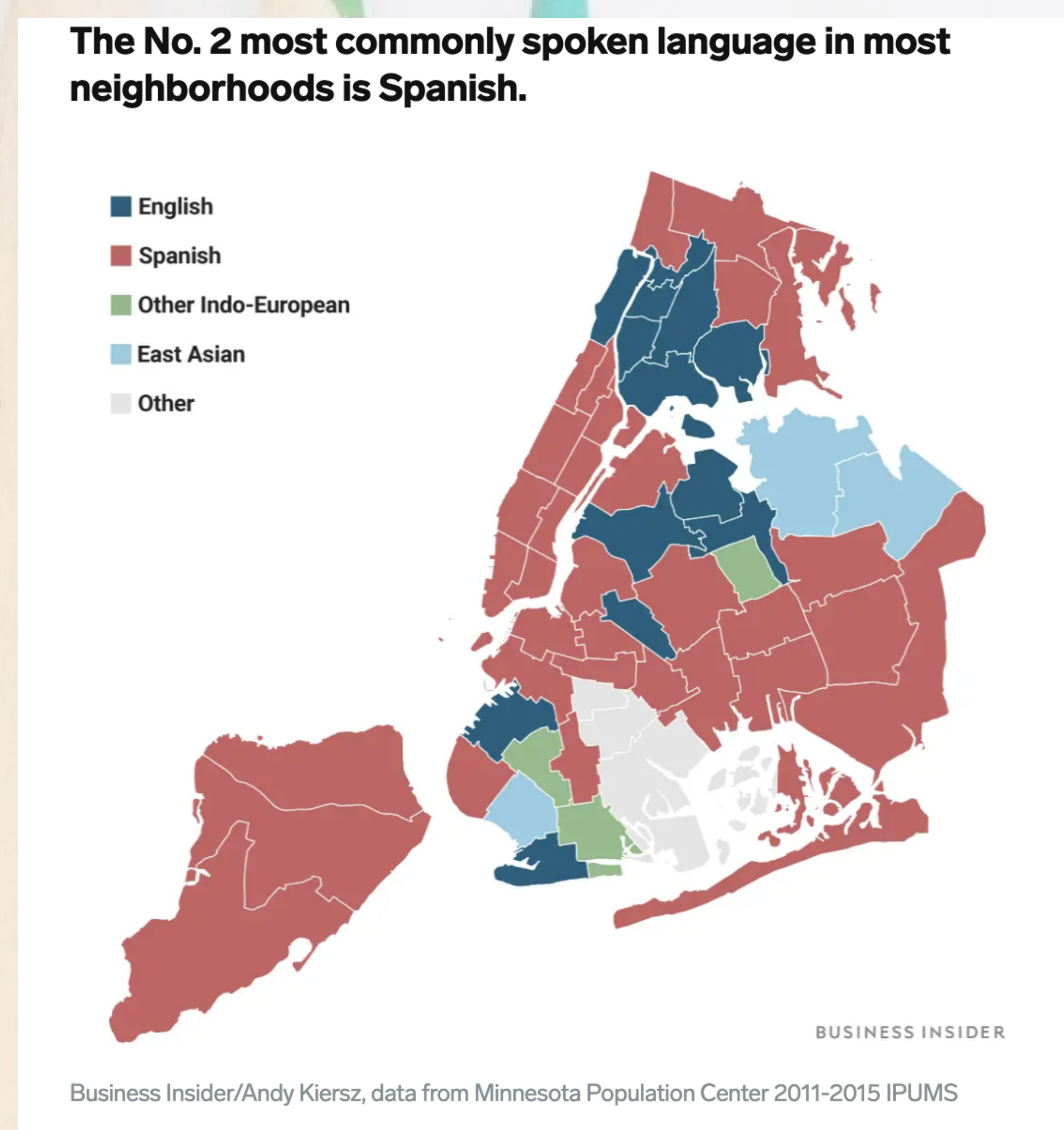
· In wage-gap-based studies, most authors have established that Hispanic men do, indeed, make less money than white men. Some consider this the result of a combination of various factors, but in general, most recognize the lack of English proficiency is a significant factor in this gap. Grenier, for example, concluded that language affects the integration of Hispanic men into information networks and productivity. These two elements, according to Grenier, make Hispanics whose mother tongue is Spanish have lower wages (Grenier, 1984).

·Professor Elizabeth Hayes, from Syracuse University, studied the barrier to participation of Hispanic adults in ESL programs. According to Hayes, the factors that most commonly deter these adults from participating in ESL programs are the lack of time and prioritization of work over education. Therefore, if employers do not provide the proper conditions for Hispanic men to educate themselves, language barriers will continue to impact their employment.

Methodology

Participants, recruited from an adult literacy program, are given a survey in which they will indicate different elements of their working experience related to the language barrier as well as their English proficiency. The survey will be completely anonymous and data will be saved and collected in a personal USB drive accessed exclusively by the researcher. Examples of the survey can be found below.:

Have there been any scenarios in which you had a problem at work but could not communicate it because of the language?
a. Yes
b. No

If yes, what kind of problem?
a. Job related
b. Salary related
c. Coworkers related
d. Other_____

When signing an employment contract, did the employer offered you a copy in Spanish
a. Yes
b. No

If no, how did you manage to understand the employment conditions in the contract?
a. The boss tried to explain them
b. I used a translator app on my phone
c. One of the bilingual coworkers explained it
d. I signed blindly

The No. 2 most commonly spoken language in most neighborhoods is Spanish.

- English
- Spanish
- Other Indo-European
- East Asian
- Other

BUSINESS INSIDER

Business Insider/Andy Kiersz, data from Minnesota Population Center 2011-2015 IPUMS

Results

It is expected that as participants respond to the surveys a clear pattern of obstacles will be defined correlated to the participant's fluency levels. This correlation could be indicative of the impact the language barrier has in the employment of Hispanic workers, especially in aspects such as remuneration. This correlation could be determined as having to do with a lack of interest of employers in adapting working conditions for Spanish-speaking workers and an impossibility of employer-employee communication.

Discussion and Capstone Recommendation

Given the projected nature of the results, it is proposed that an appropriate capstone project would include reducing the impact of the language barrier by proposing an immediate solution while Spanish employees manage to increase their proficiency levels. A possible capstone project is a series of easy-accessible resources in a commonly used social media platform that would facilitate employer-employee communication on the spot. While Hispanic workers can use these resources in their free time to learn, they will also be able to access them in a situation in the workplace where they would be struggling to communicate.

Aknowledgement and References

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