

ENGLISH SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES OF U.S. IMMIGRANT ADULTS

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Taking the Next Step with PIAAC: A Research-to-Action Conference


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Today's Presentation

- Why focus on immigrant adults?
- Research questions
- Key findings
- Research needs & policy implications



Large Share of Total and Low-Skilled Adult Populations

Immigrant population

- From 9.6M in 1970 to 41.3M in 2013
- 15% of the total 16-65 population
- Second generation: 9% of the total 16-65 population
- Overrepresented among low-skilled* adults:
 - 33% of adults with low English literacy
 - 24% with low numeracy in English

* Low skills = Below level 2



Quick Definitions

- **English literacy and numeracy in English**
- **Skills**
 - Low proficiency = Below level 2
 - High proficiency = Level 3 or higher
- **Immigrants:** Born outside of the U.S.
- **Second generation:** U.S.-born children of immigrants

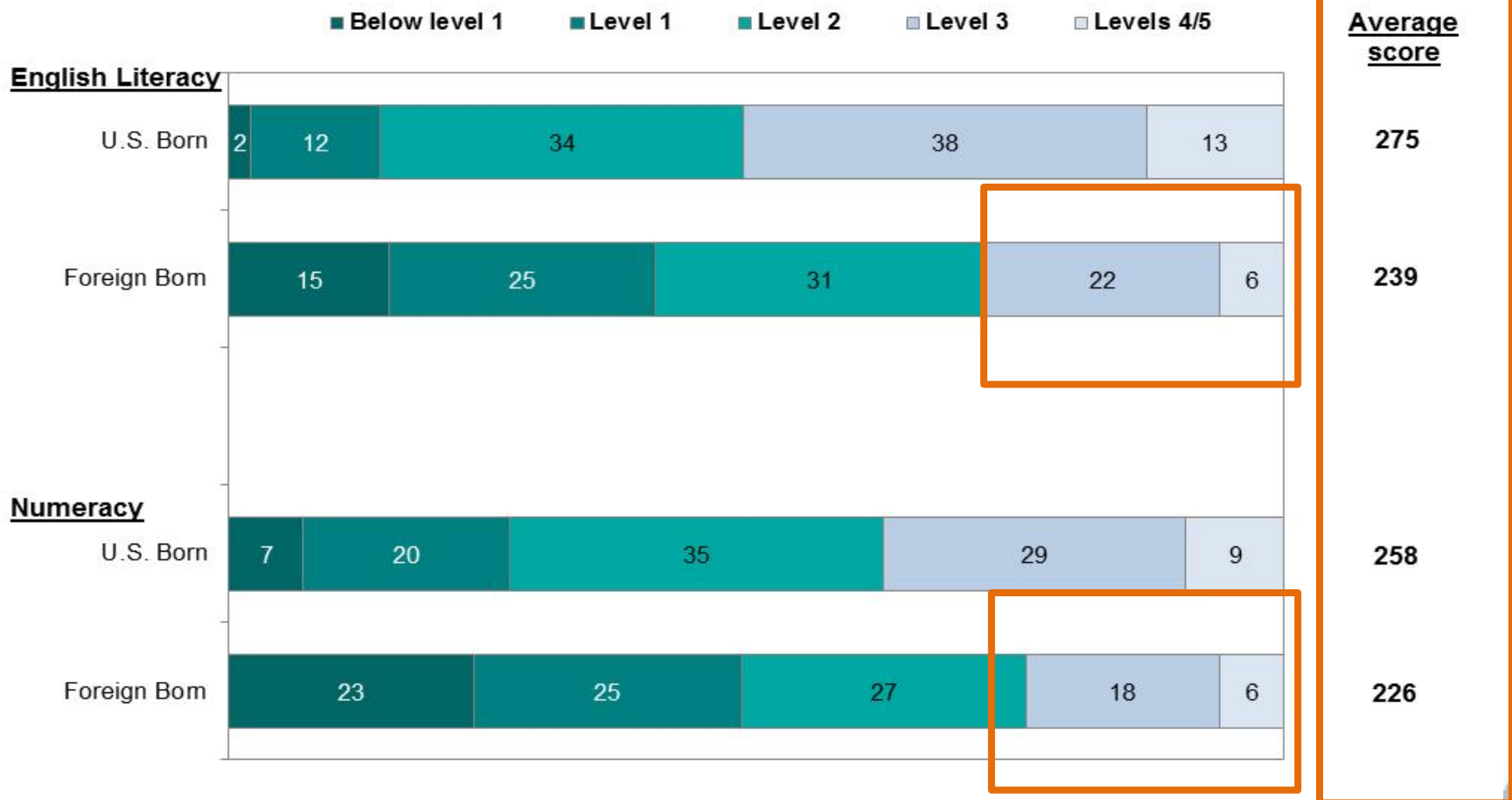


Research Questions

- How do the skills of immigrants compare to those of native born? How do skill levels change across generations?
- Are low overall U.S. scores attributable to immigrants?
- How do immigrants' skills vary by place of education and self-reported English proficiency?
- How are labor market access and incomes related to skill levels, and how do they differ by nativity?
- How representative is the PIAAC versus ACS/CPS?

English Literacy and Numeracy by Nativity

Percentage of Adults at Each Proficiency Level



Problem Solving by Nativity

Percentage of Adults at Each Proficiency Level





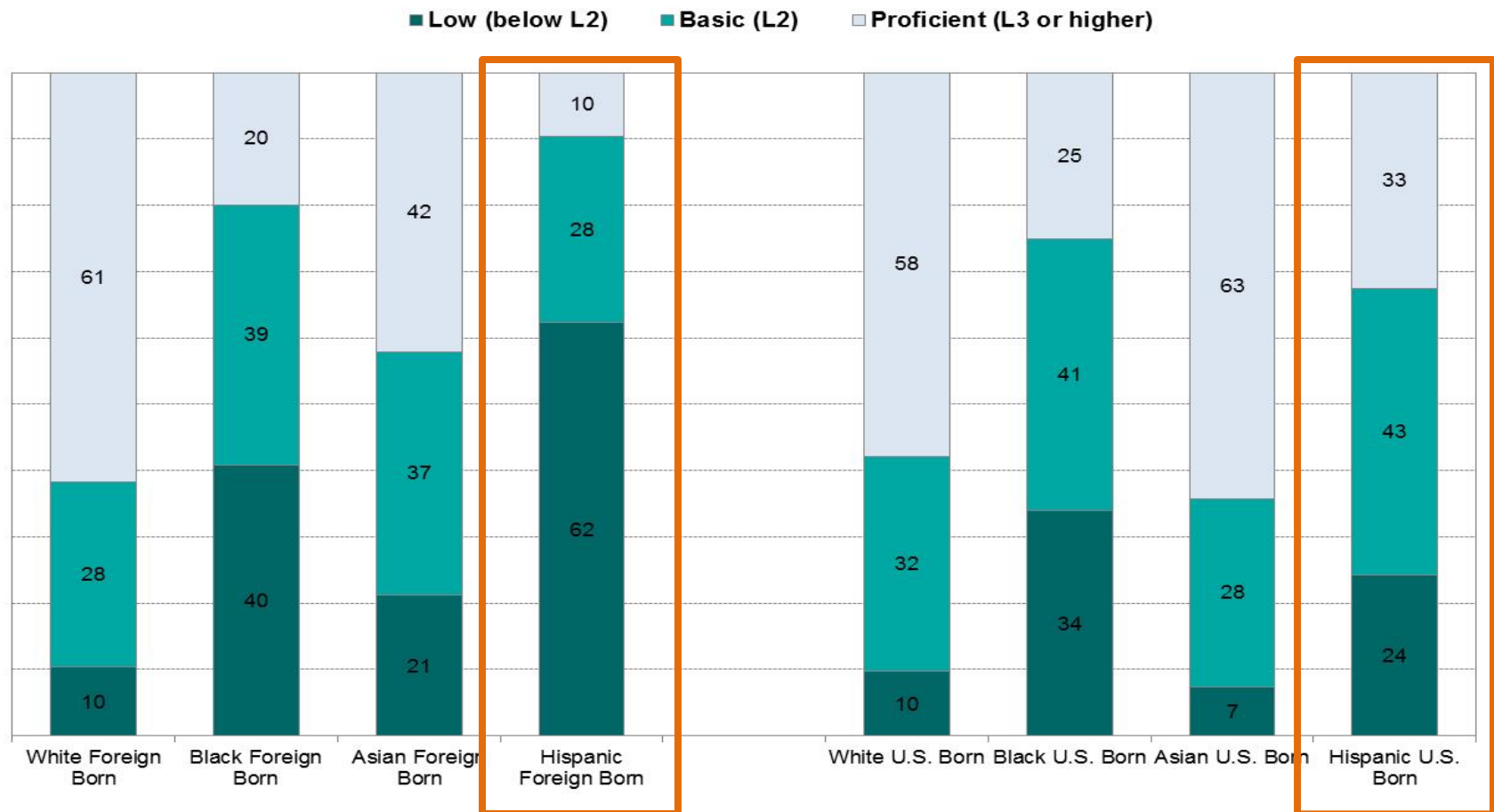
Impact of Immigrants' Skills on U.S. Overall Scores

Average English Literacy Score

Total adult population	270
U.S.-born adults	275
Foreign-born adults	239
Second-generation adults	275

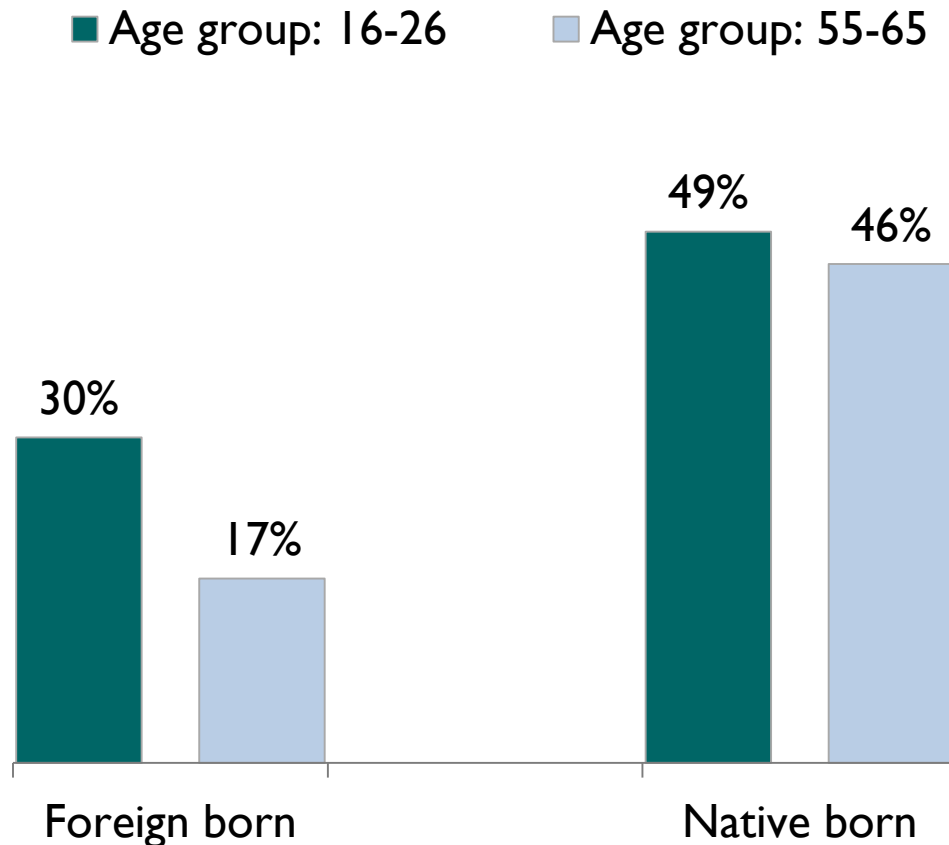
Skill Gaps Vary By Race and Ethnicity

Percentage of Adults at Each Proficiency Level in English Literacy



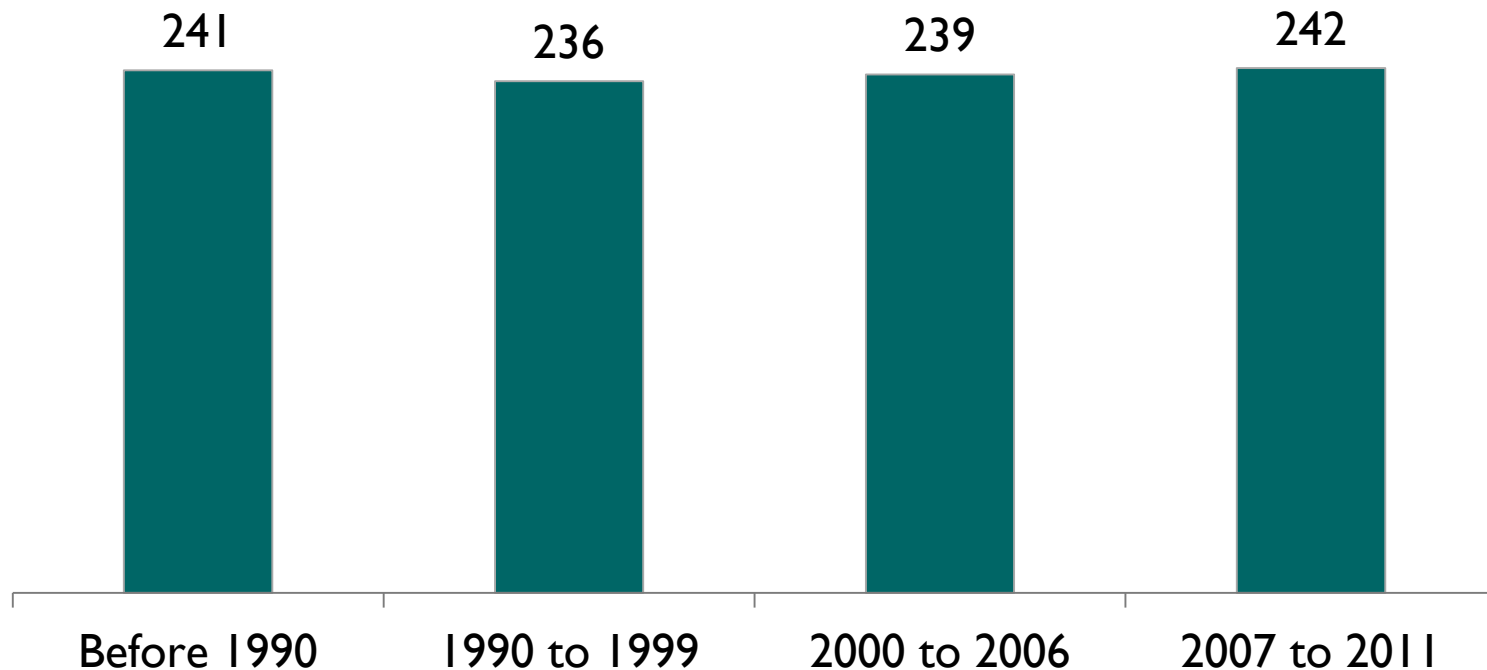
Younger Immigrants Had Stronger Skills than Older Immigrants

Percentage of Adults Who Scored “Proficient” on English Literacy



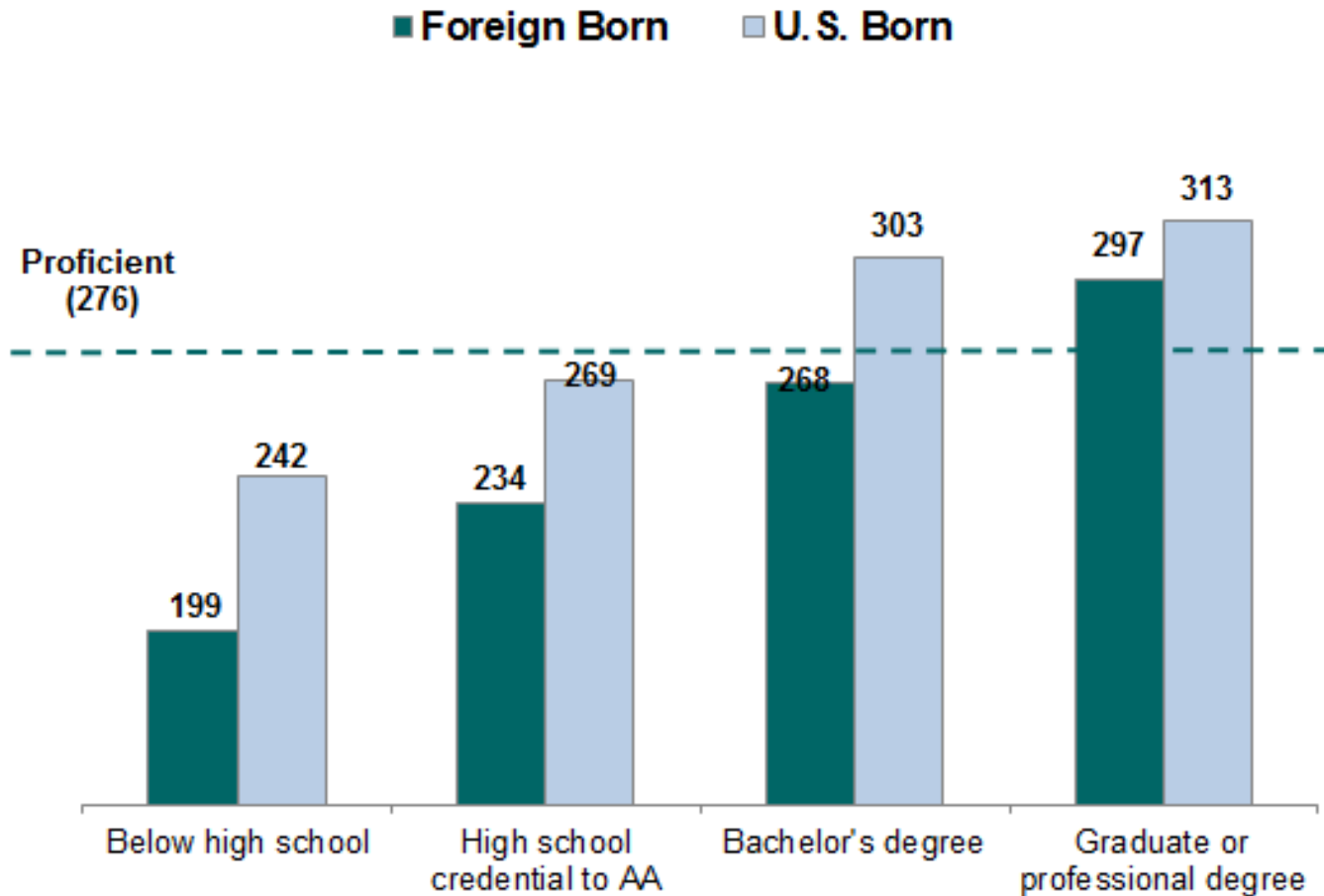
Recent Immigrants' Skills Were Similar to Those of Earlier Arrivals

Average English Literacy Scores by Period of Immigration



Education Matters

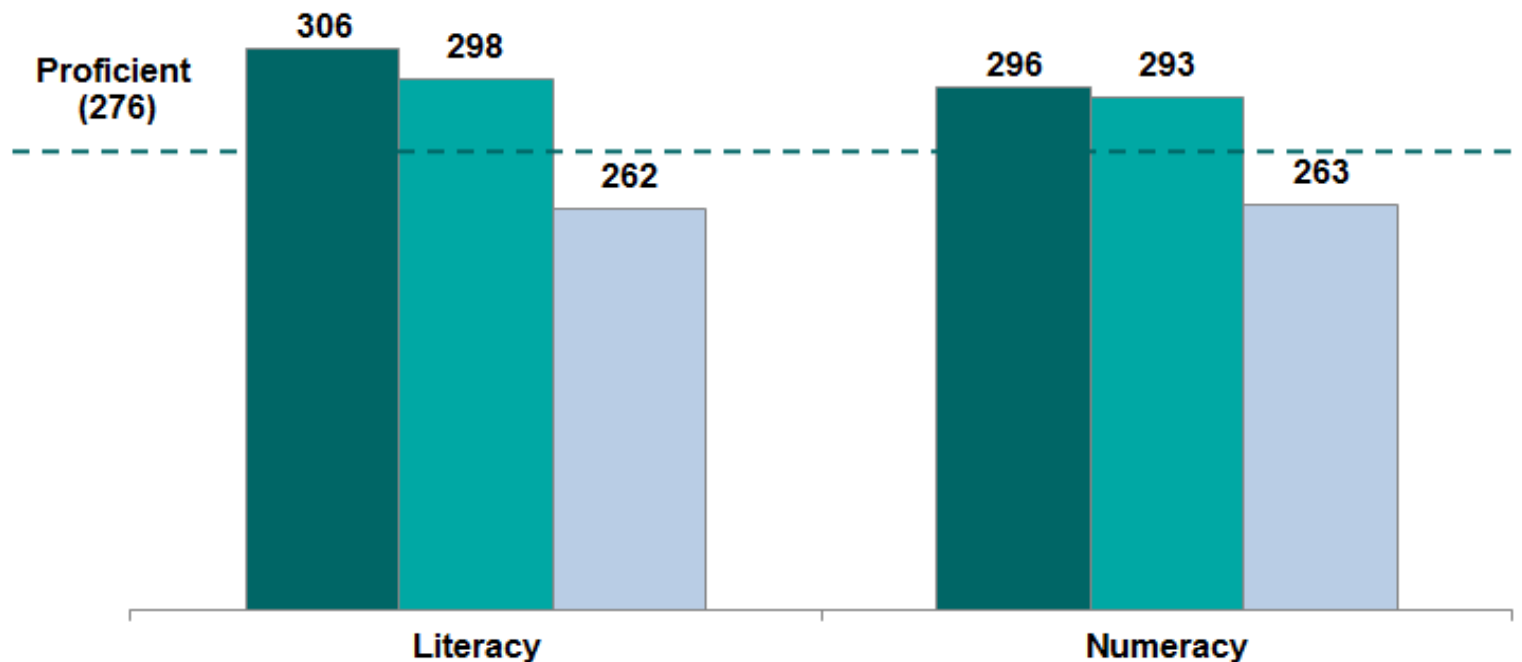
Average English Literacy Scores



Place of Education Matters

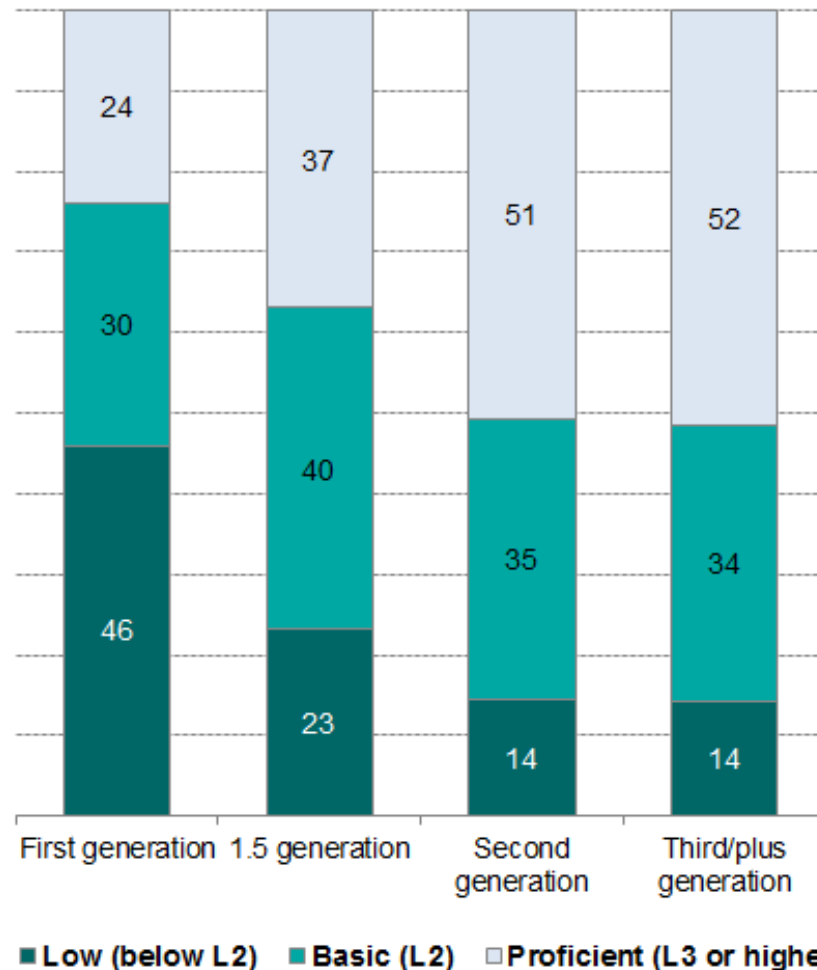
Average Scores of College-Educated Adults, 25 and Older

■ U.S. Born ■ U.S.-Educated Immigrants ■ Foreign-Educated Immigrants

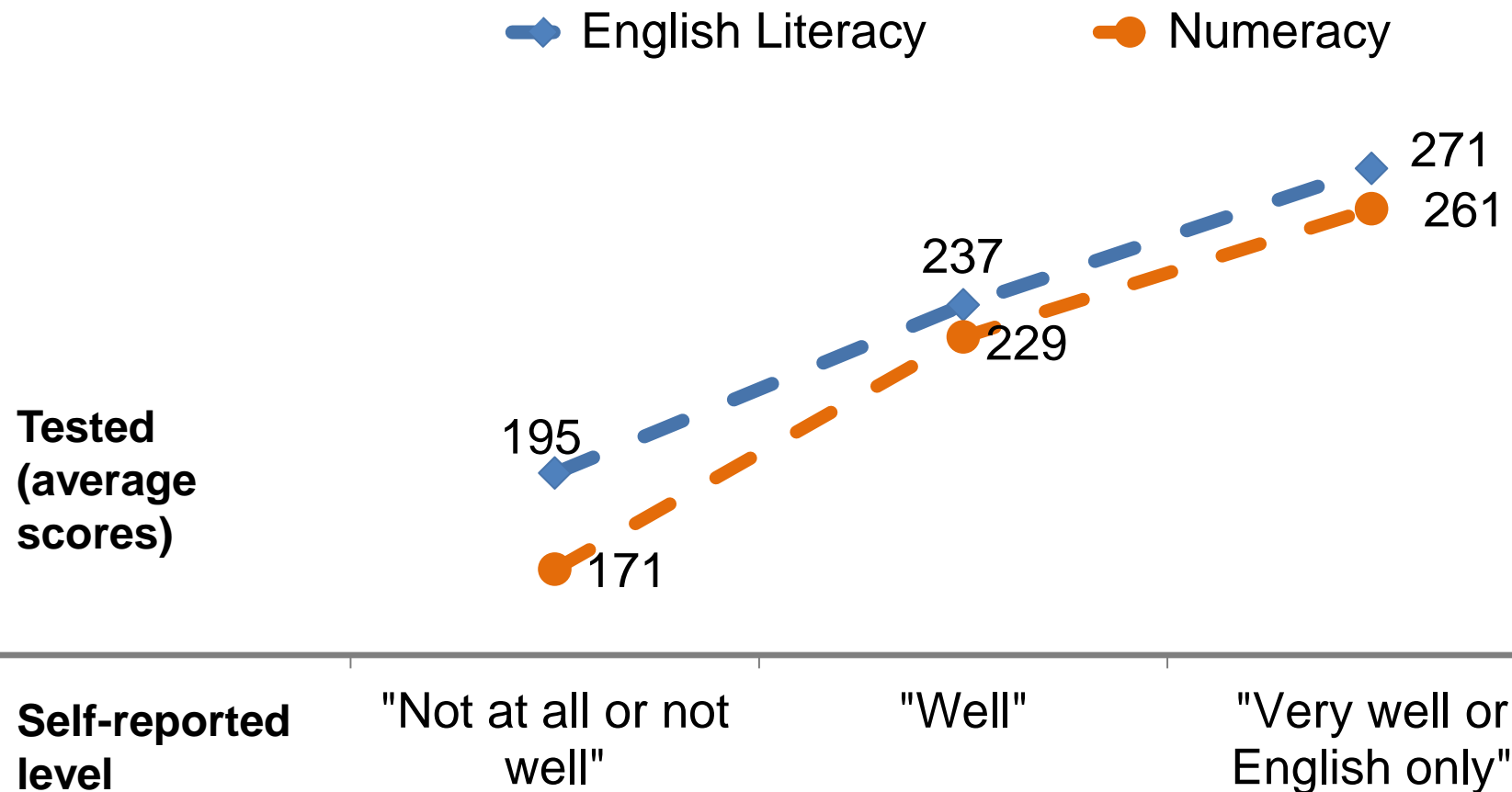


Generational Progress, Albeit to Relatively Low Levels

Percentage of Adults at Each Proficiency Level in English Literacy



Self-Reported Spoken English Is Correlated to Tested Skills





Skills and Economic Outcomes

- Higher literacy and numeracy meant higher employment for natives but *not* immigrants.
- Higher literacy and numeracy skills meant higher incomes for *both* immigrants and natives.
- Immigrants needed higher levels of English competencies to be paid well and on a par with natives.



PIAAC versus ACS/CPS

- Distribution of adults by age, gender, and race/ethnicity is similar; but
 - PIAAC participants:
 - Less likely to be “foreign born” and “arrive since 2000”
 - More likely to have graduate degree and be “employed”
- ➔ Likely overstates skill levels of the U.S. immigrant adult population.



Key Takeaways

- Immigrants' scores are lower than those of natives; scores improve across immigrant generation.
- Immigrants were overrepresented among the low-skilled adults; but depress the U.S. only marginally.
- Younger immigrants had stronger skills than older immigrants.



Key Takeaways Cont'd

- Little variation in scores by period of arrival
- Skills rise with education; place of education matters
- Self-reported English abilities correlate with tested skills; those with moderate English proficiency differ from those with very limited English proficiency.
- Immigrants can find jobs regardless their skill level, but need higher skills to earn on par with natives.



Policy Implications

- Leverage high levels of workforce participation to obtain training and improve skills
- Provide language support at all educational levels
- PIAAC results: Relevant for the White House Task Force on New Americans



Future Research Questions

- How do skills of the U.S. second-generation young adults vary by race/ethnicity, gender, parent education, and education?
- How do the skills of the second generation compare to those of the first generation in Canada, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States?
- Do the members of the second generation in the four study countries also achieve parity with the third generation, as it is the case in the United States?



For More Information

Find data, reports, and other analysis
by state and for the nation at

www.migrationpolicy.org

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