

and with repetition—if it were given today. That means about 4 million to 5 million people could simultaneously need instruction under the immigration reform law.

Politicians want to add a stricter English requirement in the reform bill in part to make sure undocumented immigrants are integrating and able to succeed economically. Immigrants who speak English well earn on average between 10 and 24 percent more than immigrants who don't, according to several studies, which means providing effective English courses could have a huge economic impact for the country as a whole and immigrants themselves. (Legal immigrants to the U.S. are not required to learn English to gain a green card, but must pass an English test in order to become citizens.)

But the current system in place for teaching English to the nations' immigrants—state- and federally-funded classes provided by a patchwork of community colleges, public libraries and other community organizations—has been hit hard by state budget cuts since the recession began. Nationwide, 1.1 million people were enrolled in ESL courses in the 2006-2007 year, compared with just 730,000 people last academic year due to those cuts.

States may end up shouldering hefty costs associated with immigration reform if lawmakers don't explicitly reimburse them in a bill. In 1986, Congress promised to reimburse state and local governments \$4 billion in costs associated with the amnesty program, including providing adult ESL classes.

But even if the money's there, existing ESL classes on average have not proven to be all that effective at teaching its students English, in part because many immigrants don't have the time to attend classes frequently enough to make a difference.

Some techies as well as immigrant advocates, however, are hoping new language-learning software and online courses could help solve some of the issues, softening the blow to the ESL system if immigration reform passes.

"We need to get out there that there has to be a different way for people to learn English fast and with digital skills," said Ada Williams Prince, the policy director for OneAmerica, a nonprofit immigration advocacy group. "It's not enough to sit people in an ESL class."

A handful of colleges and community organizations are already experimenting with lower-cost digital ESL classes that use free online language programs instead of costly textbooks. They also allow teachers to have larger classes or, in at least one case, remove the need for ESL-trained teachers altogether.

A Gates Foundation-funded pilot program in Washington state—with the help of OneAmerica—taught 250 immigrants English in a 13-week program last year using free language-learning software provided by Livemocha, a Rosetta Stone-like online tool. Students were each given a laptop with a permanent Internet connection and worked in class with the help of a tech coach, but no formally trained ESL teacher. They also spent hours of their own time using Livemocha at home, with the goal of learning both digital and English skills at once.

This fall, another online ESL pilot program funded with \$3.5 million by the Gates Foundation will begin in 10 community colleges, also in Washington. The colleges, partnering with Livemocha, will create an interactive curriculum including video and text chatting with native English speakers as a way to improve conversational skills. Each student will be given a laptop or tablet, but this time they'll be assisted by trained ESL teachers and tech coaches in classrooms.

The colleges hope the program will eventually be cheaper than traditional ESL classes, despite the costs of computers. They also hope the digital approach will be more effective than their previous textbook-based ESL classes, which have had a dismal track record of moving students to higher levels of English.

"We don't believe it is more expensive to put technology in the hands of students than it is to put really not very exciting books in the hands of students," Kathy Cooper, a policy associate at the Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, said.

These types of online language programs weren't available 25 years ago when Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which required the 2.7 million undocumented immigrants who were legalized under that law to enroll in at least 40 hours of English courses before obtaining green cards. No one knows how effective these courses were, because