

immigrants were not required to take a test at the end of them. But experts estimate it takes about 600 hours of instruction for someone to move from the bottom levels of English understanding to a conversational competence, which suggests 40 hours would not do much toward helping someone become fluent.

The Department of Education would have final say on which ESL classes are approved, but experts think it's possible it would approve online classes.

"I'm sure that if they go with a 40-hour seat time requirement that many people would try to come up with an online way for folks to fulfill that," said the Migration Policy Institute's McHugh. She added that the Department of Education would have to create "appropriate safeguards" to make sure the programs were high-quality.

Of course, the digital divide creates its own share of problems: Immigrants are far less likely than nonimmigrants in the U.S. to have access to a computer or Internet connection. (That wouldn't be an issue if students are provided with computers as they are in the Gates-funded programs.)

Some in the ESL field also cautioned that digital-language programs may make instruction better and more efficient, but it will not replace the need for a qualified teacher and classroom.

"When we use technology it's an enhancement, not a replacement," said Helene Rubenstein, the coordinator for ESL programs at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

Whatever the solution, McHugh said she hopes Congress does not scrimp on funding. Good English classes, she noted, are necessary "if we really expect people to succeed in integrating or improving their long-term prospects of joining their mainstream workforce and community."

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