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Reporter's Notebook: Helping new immigrants

By [Chad Halcom](#)

Lydia Gutierrez knows that for much of Southeast Michigan's Latino workforce, it's a large step from mere legal eligibility to work in the United States to fully adapting to a new community and labor market.

Since September, the owner and president of **Hacienda Mexican Foods** in southwest Detroit has hosted an instructor from the **University of Detroit-Mercy** to teach on-site classes in English as a second language. About 16 to 20 of her 100 employees participate in classes twice a week for one hour, when morning and afternoon shift workers can attend together

"It's a chance for them to be more self-reliant, be better employees and have more self-esteem," she said.

The state's foreign-born population has grown by numbers and share every year since 1990, according to **U.S. Census Bureau** data, and local employers have found communication in the workplace an increasing challenge.

But Hacienda, which makes tortillas and other products for retailers and restaurants and where Gutierrez believes a majority of the workforce speaks some Spanish, is an atypical scenario in Southeast Michigan compared with the nation as a whole.

The **Bureau of Labor Statistics** estimates that 24 million U.S. employees in 2007 were foreign-born, of which about 50 percent were Hispanic. But Latin America barely places in the top five areas of origin among Southeast Michigan's 378,304 foreign-born residents, according to Census data.

"In recent years, local immigration is dominated by India, Iraq and the Middle East, as well as China and Eastern Europe," said Kurt Metzger, research director for the **United Way for Southeastern Michigan**.

"In Michigan, we've seen tremendous numbers of what you could call 'out-migration' among the native-born population, particularly those with college degrees. But the immigration populations coming in have high rates of college graduation as well."

The result, among local employers, is a highly trained and skilled workforce of multicultural

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origin, where some foreign-born employees feel that difficulty in communication holds them back, said Judy Ravin, president of the **Accent Reduction Institute** in Ann Arbor.

"What we teach and focus on is how to process and pronounce the sounds (in English) that don't tend to occur within the speaker's own language, and get them comfortable... And we find the employees we work with are generally eager to be part of a program like this and get past that frustration in communicating."

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