

## HEALTH EDUCATION FOR NONREADERS: TRANSLATING ACROSS CULTURES

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### ABSTRACT

The Latino Health Literacy Project reaches and educates people with different cultural backgrounds, who also have limited reading skills. This project develops, translates, and distributes health educational material for low-income, poor readers in its Latino community.

The United States is a country with people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds where 47% of U.S. adults read at or below the 8th-grade reading level. However, most educational materials in English and Spanish continue to be developed or translated for persons reading at a 10th-grade level, with little attention to different cultural values. This workshop shares strategies we have learned from adult educators and health educators. Through experiential exercises, participants gain a sense of what it is like to not understand. They learn effective methods of written materials assessment, development, and translation, and they participate in materials revision.

### ASSESSING THE TARGET POPULATION

Do not translate just any existing materials available in English. Try to determine who your target populations are and what some of their special educational needs are. Needs assessment, focus groups, and advisory groups will help you find out about your target population and their educational needs.

Try to find out what types of educational efforts have worked in the past and which have failed and why.

### MAKING MATERIALS CULTURALLY RELEVANT

People who feel connected to their cultural heritage and identity are often better able to accept new information and to use this motivational information to make changes. If the material does not attract or does not appeal to the target population, chances are they will not read it, or, even worse, they will not pick it up.

To make materials culturally appropriate you must:

- Get community input when designing new materials. Sometimes it helps to have a group of people writing the content of the material.
- Incorporate cultural values, beliefs, and practices into your material. But do not forget that some of these beliefs could also be misconceptions, and you must discourage them by including the facts or the right information.
- Include messages that are locally and regionally relevant. Ask people how to say or what to call things in your area.
- Use community people to tell positive stories and/or testimonials. This method will increase credibility and interest in the topic and enhance personal involvement and relevance.

### WRITING MATERIALS IN THE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

You must write the material in the language that the target group speaks; however, it is important to pay attention to the differences in vocabulary among cultural subgroups. For example, the majority of Latinos speak Spanish; however, some subgroups use different words to name the same things. On the other hand, sometimes the same words have different meanings among subgroups. (In fact, some of these words can have very unpleasant meanings.)

Therefore, when writing or translating materials:

- Use the specific words and phrases that are used by the target population.
- Be as explicit and direct as the culture will tolerate. Ask people what is acceptable and what is not.
- Direct your text to a specific subgroup.

There are cultural differences among some subgroups, for example, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Central American, especially when it comes to food.

For example, because there are several subgroups among Latinos, it is important to:

- Adapt the text to a universal, more neutral and simple Spanish that can be understood by all subgroups.
- Adapt the text to a specific subgroup making it more culturally sensitive, direct, and effective.
- Do not forget to name your target audience in your title or on your cover page, for example, "Guía para Puertorriqueños" (Puerto Rican Guide).

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSLATING

##### THE CONTENT

- **Avoid direct or literal translation from English to other languages.** Other languages cannot be matched word for word with English. Literal translation can result in stiff phrases that do not flow with the richness of the other languages.
- **Idiomatic expressions cannot be translated.** Idiomatic expressions have meaning only in the language in which they were created. Try to translate the meaning of the expression. You can also look for a similar expression in the language in which you are writing.
- **Translate materials that are written in English in their final version only, not in the draft form.** Translating materials that still need revisions in English will be time-consuming because new translations will have to be made for the edited English version.

#### WRITING MATERIALS AT THE APPROPRIATE

##### READING LEVEL

Because literacy is also a problem among communities of other cultural groups, remember to develop educational materials that are not only culturally sensitive but are also easy to read. Keep written materials brief by using the same principles you would use in developing low-literacy materials in English.

To evaluate the reading level of materials try to find a readability formula in the language you are working with. The Fry Graph can be adapted to evaluate the reading level of Spanish materials.

Also, materials that are technical and are written at a reading level higher than 10th grade may not need translation. People who read at that reading level in their own language are more likely to learn English at some time. Eventually they will be able to read these materials in English, making translations unnecessary.

#### ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Unfortunately, not everyone who belongs to the target group is a good translator. It is important that the person doing the translation be familiar with both the language and the culture of the target population. In addition, the translator should not only know English well, and be able to interpret it, but should also be able to write in the native language extremely well. A native person who is bilingual will be the most appropriate. If you do not have an appropriate staff member, hire one or hire a consultant to translate. When hiring a translator, it is helpful to ask an advisory group to review samples of the candidate's translated material.

#### CHANGING THE FORMAT

Sometimes, when translating from one language to another, the format changes. For example, the Spanish language uses more words than English to say the same thing; therefore, you will need more space on the page. Also, making materials culturally sensitive may change the layout of the material.

#### CHANGING ILLUSTRATIONS

In order to attract the target audience, the material must include pictures or illustrations showing people who resemble the target population. This will motivate people to read it.

#### PROOFREADING

The document must be checked for spelling, grammar, and accuracy of translation. Word processing programs in Spanish can help you with spelling and with some of the accents. Always give the material to others for review. Back translation is a method that will ensure that the translation is appropriate. Here, the translator writes the material in Spanish, trying to retain the main idea of the general content rather than the exact wording. Then another translator must translate this back into English to ensure that the material still has the original intent and message.

#### FIELD TESTING

Always test your materials with the target population using the same principles of field testing.

**LIST OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE LATINO HEALTH LITERACY PROJECT**

The Latino Health Literacy Project, now in its fifth year, is offering the following services on a consultation basis:

**Translations**

Do you have materials written in English and want good-quality translation into Spanish?

- > We can translate English materials that are already written at a sixth-grade reading level or lower.

**Simplifications**

Are the materials you want to have translated written at a reading level higher than sixth grade?

- > We can simplify these materials in English before translating them into Spanish..

**Review, Evaluation, and Revision of Spanish Translations**

Do you wonder if the Spanish materials you already have are accurate and culturally appropriate?

- > We can review and/or revise materials for cultural sensitivity and for accuracy of content, spelling, and grammar.

**Materials Development in Spanish**

Do you have an idea or a health message but are unsure about how to produce materials that are easy to read and culturally effective?

- > We can guide you in the development of your pamphlet, brochure, booklet, etc., from start to finish, or we can develop the materials for you.

**Field Testing of Materials**

Are you concerned about the educational message of your materials being clear or persuasive enough for your target audience?

- > We obtain valuable feedback from your target audience on content, graphics, cultural appeal, and attractiveness. This cost-saving evaluation step will enable you to make important revisions before you reproduce and distribute your material in its final form.

**Professional Training**

Do you need your staff (English or Spanish speakers) trained to be able to develop or translate materials into Spanish?

- > Ask for our presentation or training "Translating Across Cultures."

Do you feel you need to learn aspects of the Latino culture to improve services and/or to provide more services that are well received?

- > We can help you learn how to provide more culturally sensitive services to Latinos by evaluating existing services and providing you with advice and recommendations for improvement and/or changes.

**> Program Development**

Do you need to develop a culturally appropriate and effective health education program for Latinos?

- > We can help you from beginning to end by conducting one or all of the following steps in program development:

- Identifying the educational needs of your target audience by conducting focus groups or surveys.
- Developing a curriculum and/or a manual that is culturally targeted and that uses the principles of adult learning.
- Training your staff to implement the program and to conduct health education in a dynamic and interactive way.
- Conducting program evaluation for further revisions and updating.

Call us for a consultation!

**For more information on consultations, developing easy-to-read materials, field testing, workshops, and/or a catalogue of easy-to-read materials in Spanish or English, write or call:**

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