Group CIP Research Report: Language

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AGR 201

For Dr. Pamela Morris & Brandon Allen

**Introduction**

There are multiple barriers to integration that are present in the modern United States. While many of these barriers, such as race and religion, have been closing since we’ve dedicated ourselves to human rights, language remains a constant barrier. Unlike race or religion, which are cultural phenomena which can be understood and acknowledged, language by its very nature is difficult to accommodate for and overcome for those who may be from a different linguistic background from the United States.

Our group hopes, through our Cultural Immersion Project, to show the impact that language has on the Latin-American community in the United States.Our research aims to show that language barriers have a negative impact on the process of integration and result in more difficult socioeconomic conditions for those who struggle with English.

**Purpose/Objective**

To do research about the effects that language barriers have had on people in America in history, we watched the 1997 film *Amistad* which followed the story of the Mende people who were illegally captured for the slave trade. While the Mende overcame their captors before reaching America, the language barrier between the Mende and Americans prevented the Americans from understanding the Mende’s stories, so the Spanish captors’ word was taken to be truth at first. An American lawyer was hired to represent the Mende, who was viewed as more trustworthy than the Mende people, even through a translator, due to many factors, especially the language barrier. The Mende were used as a political pawn throughout the trial; President Van Buren tried to hire a judge who would rule against the Mende to appease Southern voters and increase his chance of being re-elected while abolitionists used the case as a symbol of the anti-slavery movement. The courts eventually ruled in the Mende’s favor and they were freed to return to Africa.

After watching this film, we learned about the various effects of a language barrier on the population that does not speak the language of the mainstream culture. They have fewer opportunities and freedoms because they are dependent on others to communicate for them. They are viewed as less intelligent because they do not know the language and thus are unable to understand others and then communicate their ideas. Today, a major barrier that non-English speakers face is economic. Most jobs in the United States require English proficiency and if they do not, they are typically not very high-paying jobs. Even if qualified people who speak English as a second language apply for jobs that require English, they may be rejected before receiving an opportunity to interview because their applications may have minor grammatical errors. As such, the objective of our project was to help these people gain better proficiency in the English language so that they can secure better jobs and become more financially stable.

**Methods**

During the execution of our project, we approached various resources in our community who are familiar with the issues that language barriers cause in people’s lives. The first was Cecilia Tenorio, a continuing lecturer at Purdue University for the Spanish Language department who specializes in Spanish translation and interpretation. Ms. Tenorio has decades of experience translating documents and interpreting conversations in the legal, medical, and educational settings in order to help those who are not proficient in English perform activities that we as fluent English speakers take for granted. In addition, Ms. Tenorio trains students in Spanish translation and interpretation skills so that these students can help Spanish speakers navigate life in a country made up primarily of English speakers, whether they pursue a career in translation and interpretation or they find a moment to be a good Samaritan. In interviewing Ms. Tenorio, she discussed ways in which we can be mindful of Latino culture in order to best help our conversation partners learn English and interact with them without causing unintended offense (Tenorio, personal communication, 2018).

Ms. Tenorio’s first example of how Latino cultural values are integrated into the Spanish language was that of the difference of grammar rules for talking to and about elders versus peers. As Latino culture values and respects elders in the community, there is a special conjugation of verbs used when talking to someone older or of higher status. This nuance taught us that we should be mindful of how respectfully we treated our conversation partners, especially those older than us. Another grammatical example given to us by Ms. Tenorio had to do with the different verb tenses in the Spanish language. Latino culture has a more flexible view of time than mainstream American culture does, so they have ways to conjugate verbs to convey that the action occurred once in the past versus repeatedly in the past as well as ways to talk about actions that will definitely occur in the future, actions that one hopes will occur in the future, and actions that one planned to occur but never did. This taught us to keep an open mind about how our conversation partners viewed and valued their time and our time together.

Ms. Tenorio also told us that when we are talking to our conversation partners, it is likely that they are translating the words we say from English to Spanish and then thinking about their response in Spanish before translating it into English. While translation is more than replacing one word with a word in a different language, that is exactly what happens until one becomes more familiar with the English language. As such, our conversation partners may not be totally familiar with the cultural values intertwined with the English language, so certain concepts or phrases may not be translatable directly, so we were advised to try to avoid slang and idioms at first and be patient in explaining them when our partners had questions. Additionally, while some idioms might be able to be translated word for word, because of the differences in cultural values, some symbols might have different meanings between Latino and mainstream American culture and, when used in conversation may cause offense. For example, in mainstream American culture, an ox is seen as a strong and powerful animal, but in Latino culture the same creature is dumb and dull, so comparing someone to an ox might seem like a compliment on their strength, but might come off as insulting their intelligence. As such, Ms. Tenorio advised us to think about the meaning behind different symbols in our culture and how they might be perceived in Latino culture during the execution of our project.

The next person we talked to was Sergio Pasadas a herd manager for a large dairy in southern Indiana. He is latino and is ahead of the workers and trades being on call with two of the sons. He also helps with work schedules and communicates with all the employees. Now Sergio explain that now there is not a language barrier after roughly fifteen plus years of being in America. Now the other thing about this dairy is just the diversity of culture with having heavy European descent so having the different accents also have an effect.

Now Sergio also explained that when he first started learning english it was difficult and there was frustration but over time and with some hard work he has overcome the barriers. Since he was able to do so he believes that is a big part of why he is where he is today along with some hard work of course. Sergio really did not get in the true details besides that some slang and phrases can still trip him up just not being use to them a hundred percent, but has settle really well into the community. Now the next person That was interviewed has a little different story.

Nicked name Franky he is a farm hand for Ag Production a large row crop and swine operation Frank works on with the hogs. Franky still has somewhat of a language barrier as he is in a crew of all Mexicans so they are able to speak their native language. It also helps even the Americans that work with the hogs speak some spanish to well some of them. This creates a very unique atmosphere because the group can speak both spanish and english jargon.

Franky currently has started a family and his comment lines a lot with what Tenorio talked about having to translate to spanish and translate back like just plugging words. This was a huge part of how he has learned to speak english when he goes out but then again with Franky working in the group that he does it did take him much longer to get over the barriers not having to speak it everyday. Overall the people we interviewed really help us further understand some of the barriers that we did not see at LAR.

So the last thing we did was at the Lafayette Adult Learning Center we volunteered for a class for English as a second language. We participated in two of their classes. The first class we mainly observed and helped where needed. The second class we had more of an opportunity to talk and really see the barrier and talk to some of the students about what they do for work and other things in there daily lives.

**Results and Findings**

Over the course of our research, we examined the many areas of our society where the language barrier may be hindering the social integration of the Latino community. The main sectors in which we discovered these negative impacts were workplace safety, health care, and education. While these may seem unrelated, they revealed to us a separation in opportunities for people in the Latino community because of the language barrier. This barrier creates problems for people in the Latino community especially when these social sectors do not put in effort to create opportunities for non-native English speakers.

Throughout our research, there were several general agencies that displayed a lack of focus on overcoming language barriers, however, we found that workplace agencies, especially within the Agriculture and Forestry sectors, have not kept up with their changing workforce demographics (Arcury, 2010). Instead of working to develop systems for integrating Latino workers speaking Spanish into their organizations’ safety policies, some cut corners and overlooked the problems that would arise from failing to develop the appropriate systems. The research that we found addressed ways to create profitable methods that ethically integrate Latinos into workplace safety (Arcury, 2010). However, the current imbalance in safety training skills creates a lack of general safety knowledge that is a hindrance to the overall community. This training imbalance created a decline in an overall culture of safety in workplace communities, prompting needed action to address this negative result of the language barrier.

The impact of lack workplace safety, while important, may not be as pressing of an issue as the impacts of the language barrier in the health care system. We discovered that there is significant evidence proposing that a language barrier may be a contributing factor in identifying adverse outcomes for Latino patients (Timmins, 2010). Even though roughly 13 percent of the United States population speaks Spanish, the current healthcare system is not prepared to serve this social group well because of the language barriers that result in increased levels of risk for Latino patients. A clear lack in medical interpreters creates problems as confusion when diagnosing injuries have led to misdiagnoses that threaten the confidence of the Latino community. Our research efforts show that a lack of confidence in traditional healthcare systems may lead to fewer follow-up appointments, a reduced quality of care, and in some cases life-threatening health problems (Flores, 2006).

The final aspect of our research into linguistic barriers preventing efficient integration into society came through the educational sector. Our research showed that while educational programs such as “No Child Left Behind” have impacted many students, those results may be skewed based on demographics. Over the past several years, Hispanic students have been put at a disadvantage by instructors because they are viewed as “linguistically handicapped...or culturally and linguistically deprived” (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). These views unfortunately initiated an achievement gap that keeps widening and students continue to struggle as a result. Our research discovered a high level of frustration from bilingual teachers who are underappreciated and upset parents who believe that teachers need to “speak the child’s language” to optimize their learning experience in school (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). This research indicated that the problem created by linguistic barriers is very present today and are impacting some of the most basic and important levels of society.

**Summary and Conclusions**

The purpose of this project was to show the barriers to socioeconomic success that is present due to the language barriers present in the Latino-American community. We have shown through conversation with Ms. Cecilia Tenorio, Sergio Pasadas, and Franky as well as through immersion in the Lafayette Adult Resource Academy, that there exists many challenges in regards to language for Spanish speaking peoples. Though English can be learned, it is difficult to do so after childhood. Furthermore, Latin-Americans differ in many cultural concepts from the majority of Americans. Such differences in culture manifest through different associations of symbols, relationships between friends and family, as well as temporal viewpoints. These differences greatly contribute not only to the language barrier on a superficial level but the difficulty in mitigating the language barrier. In many cases, it is not enough to simply translate word for word the Spanish into English or vice versa. As the symbolism is lost, it is necessary to immerse yourself in Latin-American culture and Spanish culture in order to better understand how to mitigate these values.

Throughout this research paper, we have shown how the language barrier largely contributes to economic and social disadvantages for Spanish speaking people in the United States. It is essential to both public policy as well as social interaction to understand the barriers to success that bilingual or Spanish-speaking people face due to the language barrier present. The language barrier is not merely a barrier in regards to conversation but a difficulty in transmission of information as the differences in symbolism and culture behind the language greatly contribute to the language barrier. In order to overcome this language barrier, it is essential that people understand and are aware of the different facets of the language barrier and work to understand them such that bilingual and Spanish-speaking people are not disenfranchised from partaking in society and market exchange.

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