

English Literacy

**Sustainable Educational Programs and Research
documentation for the community of Rancho al Medio,
Dominican Republic**

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Abstract

Health in Action has been continually involved in modules that are designed to provide health education and supplemental education to children and adolescents in Rancho al Medio. In the past, these modules have been focused on Spanish literacy or mathematics lessons. These literacy initiatives have been successful in past years and the English literacy module was designed to build on the past achievements of Health in Action programs. Over the past years, there has been an expressed desire by community members to have an English literacy module. Health in Action members decided to develop an English literacy program this year in response to the clear demand for English lessons in the community in an effort to improve overall trust and solidarity between Rancho al Medio and Health in Action. The English Literacy module had the goals of improving community trust by responding to their requests, improving English language knowledge to provide a foundation for later English education, and inspiring students to continue in their overall education and in the English language specifically. The English Literacy modules were designed to be flexible in both content and structure and often adapted according to the size or knowledge level of the audience gathered. Due to the noticeable decrease in adult participation and presence in the community, the lessons were almost completely directed towards a very enthusiastic young audience. The English lessons enjoyed continually high levels of attendance throughout the week and those children that consistently attended lessons had mastered almost all of the core vocabulary that was covered. The sustainability and long term benefits of the English module on English language knowledge in the community may be somewhat limited, yet the lessons did succeed in instilling confidence and motivation in young students to seek further English language education.

Introduction

Rancho el Medio is a small rural village of 1400 outside of the capital in the Dominican Republic. The population of Rancho al Medio consists largely of women, children and the elderly, as many men travel to the capital for work. Additionally, 85% and 90% of men and women, respectively, are unable to read, and many homes lack running water and electricity. Health in Action has been working with this community for the past 4 years to promote sustainable change for more positive health outcomes, aiming to bring its members tailored health education and literacy programs that are applicable to their lives.

In cooperation with Manos a Tiempo and Health in Action, Rancho al Medio has been able to establish a consistent elementary school for children in the community. In past years there have been difficulties with sustaining consistent classes at the school due to lack of government funding to properly pay teachers for the school. This problem was solved and the school in Rancho al Medio now runs five days a week with a morning session from 8-11 and an afternoon session from 1-4. Most of the community children seem to attend one of these two class times any given day. School attendance was not very consistent with the children, yet most children seem to attend one of the school

sessions daily. All observations of attendance should be considered with the possibility that our group's presence could have served to disrupt the regular attendance levels.

The school in Rancho al Medio primarily serves children from the ages of 5 to 12. It seems that if the children desire further education, they must attend the school at la Playa, which is about an hour walk away by one student's estimation. The school at Rancho al Medio consists of a cluster of three buildings which serve as the different classrooms. English is one of the subjects taught at the school, and the teacher showed very much interest in our English lessons by taking notes and attending the formal English classes. One thing we noticed with the classrooms was a lack of teaching materials and we prepared a package of educational materials to help the teachers continue with the English topics we had introduced the children to (vocabulary lists, dictionaries, books, English and math flashcards, writing transparencies, etc...).

Upon entering the community we observed widely varied levels of English literacy. Although the teacher and the young students stated that English was a covered subject at the school, there weren't very many young students that had any level of English mastery. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some of the students that had attended school at la Playa already had a good grasp of simple conversational English and were beginning to learn verbs and grammar. Not many of the adults in the community seemed to have previous understanding of English or a great desire to learn English. In contrast almost all the children showed interest in learning English and consistently attended the lessons throughout the week. This interest gap between the adults in the children was possibly exaggerated by our focus that we placed upon the children. We were so busy teaching the children, that there was never a concerted effort to pull together an adult class. An adult English language class could be attempted in future years, but due to the great enthusiasm of the children, all English lessons were directed towards the children this year.

The majority of the English lessons took place on the porch of the green house (Adele's house) across from Rancho al Medio's school. These lessons were usually taught to a group of 5 to 10 children who were hanging around the town center. During the week, when school was running, the teacher asked us on several occasions to come into the classroom and teach formal English lessons. This seemed to be preferable to the teacher so that she could have a break and also so she could take notes on the English presentation being given. Both of these teaching situations were successful, but also presented their own set of challenges, which will be later discussed with the modules results.

Methods

- A. Focusing on community member generated opinions on the benefits of learning English.
- B. Incorporating the idea of “content-based ESL” methodology into curriculum.
- C. Teaching in a variety of formats: formal classroom instruction, small group discussion, and one-on-one tutoring.
- D. Designing lessons to be interactive and applicable to people of all literacy levels.
- E. Involving community members in development of the content of lessons.
- F. Encouraging community members to “teach back” and take active mentorship roles.
- G. Working in collaboration with Rancho al Medio’s teachers and leaving them with educational materials for a new media center (such as dictionaries, flash cards, books, and our lesson materials) so that educational efforts may continue.

Lesson Content

The content that was covered during the week long English module was partially prepared prior to the trip and partially generated from input from children being taught. While preparing materials and content for the trip, the English literacy group focused on topical vocabulary and conversational English. The specific vocabulary topics covered were animals, numbers, letters, days of the week, months, family members, and colors. The primary conversation vocabulary taught covered saying hello and goodbye, introducing oneself, and other simple phrases.

These were the main topics covered by the English literacy module, although there were many additional vocabulary lists prepared which were not often utilized during the week. This content was taught daily and we tried to continually informally quiz the children with games to check retention of the material. We tried to limit the range of topics covered in the English literacy module and focus on helping the students get a good understanding of the few topics we did cover. In future English language modules, there should be an attempt to review the content which this year began with in order to gauge improvements and retention on a long term basis.

Although the topics previously listed were the topics which most of the children focus on, there were a couple of more advanced students who wanted more in depth instruction. One boy, who was about 12 years old, was able to learn verb conjugations, pronouns and was forming full sentences on his own. Cases such as his are good examples of why there should be flexible formats for instruction, a wide range of prepared content, and as many Health in Action members working with the literacy group as possible. The more motivated and advanced students require more advanced content and often will excel if extra individual attention is provided for them.

Overall, the most important goal of the English literacy group was to build interest and confidence levels of community members in English language education. Due to our limited time, we tried to focus on a small and manageable curriculum which the students could see actual success with in only a few days. Yet, it was important that we still had prepared a broad range of materials and curriculum content in order to have the resources to change the content according to their interests and varying competency levels if necessary.

Results

The community children showed immediate and enthusiastic interest in the English literacy lessons. They seem to have a great desire for education in general, and although we noticed some student that weren't attending class, for the most part, the children all try to attend classes daily. The development of a consistent school for the community is a huge step in the long term progress of Rancho al Medio and any way Health in Action can further encourage students to take their schooling seriously will help move the community forward. The English literacy group was very successful accomplishing the simple and realistic goals we set for ourselves, yet the whole of the literacy group's success really is dependent upon the enthusiasm and participation of the children, which may be the most important challenge for future groups. We had several different methods by which we tried to implement our program, and each had their strengths and challenges. The overall approach we took was a flexible one that tried to respond to the interests and demands of the community members.

Most of the initial English literacy lessons took place informally at either Ricardo's store or the green house across from the school. Gathering a group of children for a lesson was easy, especially if it was presented to them enthusiastically. These informal porch lessons were repeated to the children throughout the day, often reviewing the same content with different groups of students. Most of the lessons were kept to 15 minutes to keep the children's attention. A great way to encourage interest in the lessons and continual attendance was to spend all the time in between lessons playing games and letting them choose the activity for a while. This method of play-teach-play allowed the children to control some of the activities and built a sense of mutual efficacy and friendship.

Most of the school days in Rancho al Medio, we were invited to teach English in the school house while afternoon school was in session. In the first of these classroom sessions the teacher exited the classroom and two Health in Action team members found themselves with over 35 children in a small room. This was a very poor teaching situation and in future formal classroom classes we tried to keep the teachers in the classroom with us to help control the students. It would be helpful for future literacy groups to anticipate these formal teaching situations, and have some extra HIA member to assist with the children. The smaller groups you can do learning exercises in, usually the better. The teachers at the school were very helpful and happy to work with us. Further collaboration with the teachers could be a great way to build sustainability with our literacy support in Rancho al Medio. They were very thankful for the materials we left behind, and one disappointment for our module this year was lack of in depth

dialogue with the teachers about the curriculum and how we could best supplement it with our week of service in the community.

Future Plans

In the future, we undoubtedly recommend continuing English lessons in Rancho al Medio, especially with the child. Their level of enthusiasm and hunger for knowledge was inspiring, and many of them had a strong talent for learning a second language. As previously stated, we recommend that future English lesson teacher review concepts and vocabulary that were taught this year; in addition, new vocabulary and even more complex lessons (such as verbs, nouns, sentences) should be prepared for those whose English is at a moderate to high level. We also recommend a more concerted effort to involve adults in the English lessons; perhaps one group could focus on children, and the other on adults. Lastly, we found the teachers to be highly appreciative of our giving them our materials at the end of the week, and would suggest that future members do the same. Involving the teachers as much as possible (especially in the formal lessons in the school house) proved to be rewarding and keeping in line with our goal of sustainability.

Conclusions

Our experience in working with the children on English language proficiency was overwhelmingly positive. We would recommend to any member of HIA to become involved in this project, and hope that a larger number of members will be involved in this in the following years. Many children learned a good deal of English in only a week, and, more importantly, many of them seemed very inspired to learn more. They all recognized the benefits of learning some English (mostly in getting better jobs), and we felt we were addressing a real need while we were there. If you would like any more information about this program, the community of Rancho al Medio, or anything else HIA-related, please don't hesitate to contact us! Thank you
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