

Enhancing Multilingual Capability Among Hispanics

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ABSTRACT

Hispanics are the country's largest and fastest growing minority, but they are not an easily identified racial or ethnic group (Pew Hispanic Center, Trends 2005). In 2000, the U.S. Census reported 32.8 million Hispanics or Latinos in the United States, representing 12% of the total population. By 2004, the Hispanic population was estimated to have grown to over 40 million, an increase of more than 23% in just four years. The largest increase in the Hispanic population is occurring in the southern United States (Pew Hispanic Center). Paralleling the growth of the Hispanic population, the Hispanic labor force will expand to nearly 10 million by 2020 (Pew Hispanic Center). Language barriers and cultural sensitivities need to be addressed for optimal inclusion of this force in the U.S. The dramatic expansion of the Latino population in the State of Louisiana emphasizes the importance of this group, both socially and culturally. At the same time it presents new challenges and demands a real approach for addressing the languages barriers and the cultural sensitivities inherent in such a socioeconomic shift.

Key words: Hispanics population, English as a Second Language

INTRODUCTION

*H*ispanics have become the largest and fastest-growing minority in the United States, rising from 12% of the population in 2000 to 14% of the total population in 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The Census Bureau Director estimates that about one third of all U.S. residents are members of some minority. One should realize that there are more members of ethnic minorities in the US today than there were people in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. The nation's minority population has reached 100.7 million (Census Press Release, May 2007).

Hispanics comprise the largest minority group in the United States, surpassing 44 million in 2006. While many in the U.S. identify Hispanics with Mexico, the reality is that Hispanics (or Latinos) come from many nations and many separate ethnicities (Radio BC, 2005). The Latino birth rate is twice that of non-Hispanics (Pew Hispanic Center). Paralleling the growing U.S. Hispanic population, the Hispanic population in Louisiana has seen significant growth. This growing Hispanic population in the New Orleans area as well as in the rest of Louisiana presents a unique and complex socio-economic-educational phenomenon. As new Hispanics come in large numbers to the state seeking work opportunities and a better life, they have needs, both cultural and language-based, that beg to be addressed. Among these needs, the ability to communicate in English can be considered of paramount importance.

BREACHING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER: THE IMPORTANCE OF ESL FOR HISPANICS

The dramatic expansion of the Latino population in the State of Louisiana recognizes the importance of this ethnic group, both socially and culturally. At the same time it demands new challenges and a real approach for addressing languages barriers given cultural sensitivities. Many questions are raised: Who will provide the language training necessary? How will they respond? What is the typical Hispanic attitude toward learning English, given Spanish as their first language?

While there has been improvement in educating the Hispanic population over the past decade, there is an indication that Latinos' educational accomplishments have not kept pace with their non-Hispanic counterparts. In general, participation in all levels of education is low. Retention rates are also low and drop out rates are high enough to worry many who struggle to improve the situation. Insufficient financial support and inadequate access to educational resources are among the challenges in improving the educational status of the Hispanic population (Kohler, 2007).

The need to improve language skills (English) has been recognized as an important factor in reaching the American dream. A large portion of Hispanics believe that immigrants have to speak English in order to be part of mainstream American society and believe even more so that English should be taught to the children (Pew Hispanic Center 2006). The Pew Hispanic Center probed attitudes toward the English language in a survey conducted in 2003-2004. A clear majority of Hispanics (57%) believe that they have to speak English to pursue better education and job opportunities. An overwhelming majority (92%) of Hispanics believe it is important that English be taught to children (Pew Hispanic Center 2006).

Given the preponderance of Hispanics among the English Language Learner (ELL) or English as a second language (ESL) student population, it not surprising the rapid growth of the ELL student population is being driven by Hispanic population growth. Similarly, educational results for ELL are intrinsically tied to the Hispanic student population. Approximately 79% of ELL students are Hispanic native Spanish-speakers (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, 2002). Also, 45% of all Hispanic children are ELL students in our nation's public schools. ELLs, represent 10.3% of public school enrollment and are concentrated in large, urban school districts. Unfortunately, educational achievements and ability gaps between Hispanics and other U.S. students remain wide. The gaps are even larger with respect to ELL students and their White and African-American counterparts (Lazarin 2006).

According to the 2000 U.S. Census there were 9,779,766 children – one of every six children of school age – who speak a language other than English at home. These children, known as language-minority children, are the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population. Approximately 70% of language-minority students in the U.S. come from Spanish-speaking households. Language-minority students may speak only their native language, be bilingual in both English and their native language, or may only speak some English. They may have been born in the United States or have come to this country as immigrants or refugees. Almost half of all language-minority students (or 4,747,763) do not yet have sufficient proficiency in English to be able to succeed academically in traditional all-English-medium classrooms. These students are known as limited English proficient (LEP) or English Language Learners (ELLs). Between the school years 1991-92 and 2001-02, the number of LEP children of school age increased by 95 percent while total U.S. school enrollment grew by only 12 percent (NCELA- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs, 2006).

In a study by the Hispanic Students Demographics (Hispanic Education Coalition-HEC) reported:

- Hispanics constitute the largest and fastest-growing ethnic minority group in American public Schools. Nearly one in five K-12 students in the U.S. is Hispanic.
- Hispanic students drop out of school at four times the rate of white Americans
- In 2000, only 22% of Latinos aged 18-24 were enrolled in a college/university.
- Latinos comprised only 10% of the total enrollment in colleges or universities
- As of 2000, 31% of Latino children in the U.S. were English Language Learners

In the Impact of Content-Based Instruction by McDonald (1997), the following reasons were proffered as to why adults wanted to study ESL:

- 23% of students enrolled in a family ESL program to get a job,
- 29% for college or self-improvement, and
- 34% to help their children.
- 58% of students enrolled in a vocational ESL program to get a job,

- 31% for college or self-improvement, and
- 8% to help their children.
- 38% of students enrolled in a communicative ESL program to get a job,
- 36% for college or self-improvement, and
- 13% to help their children.

English is not the most widely spoken language in the world in terms of the number of native speakers--there are many more Chinese speakers than native English speakers--but Chinese is spoken little outside of Chinese communities. As a result, English is the most widespread language in the world. It is difficult to estimate exactly how many English speakers there are, but according to one estimate there are more than 350,000,000 native English speakers and more than 400,000,000 speakers of English as a second language or foreign language (Kitao, 2000).

INTRODUCTION TO ESL

What is ESL instruction? ESL instruction is a special method for developing English proficiency for social and academic purposes. ESL and many bilingual programs offer special resources and services to school staffs in meeting the needs of limited English proficient students; however, every educator in a U.S. school system has a responsibility to assure that students with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have a positive educational experience while in school. Full proficiency in English must be the over-arching goal of an ESL program if the limited English proficient student is to realize long-term personal, social, and economic success in an English-speaking society, now and into the future. Not only is English the official language of the United States, but it is also the international language of business, diplomacy, and science. An effective ESL program cannot be developed in isolation as its impact permeates so much of modern life and bears so much on success and happiness. Planning effective language instruction must be a part of a system-wide comprehensive and challenging academic program. The cultural, linguistic, and cognitive competencies limited English proficient (LEP) students bring to the classroom should form the basis for an effective ESL program. (Department of Education; Richmond, Virginia, 1999).

In an interview, Martin Gutierrez, director of the Hispanic Apostolate of the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, emphasized the importance for Hispanics in Louisiana and in the US to become fluent in English. Not being able to communicate properly can result in isolation, frustration and potentially resentment among both Hispanics and non-Hispanics. On the other hand, people who speak English fluently potentially have more opportunities in which their abilities can propel them forward in a socio-economic sense.

In recent times, there have been attempts at both state and national levels that have proposed rules and/or laws that would make it mandatory to learn English for a variety of purposes. For instance, there are those who believe that in order to acquire a "green card" one would need to know English.

A reality check is in order. Currently, there are not enough ESL programs to help all who desire to learn the English language, especially in suburban and rural areas. Too often, programs are inadequately supported resulting in class schedule times that are inconvenient to working Hispanics or offered in locations that may be inaccessible to many. ESL Programs should take into consideration the needs of each community, such as time, location, educational level of the people, childcare, and the teachers' ability to create a good learning environment given the needs of the area and the resources of the program.

Theresa Clement, Immigration Outreach Specialist for Migration and Refugee Services, Catholic Charities agency of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, recognizes that the rapid growth of the Latino population in Louisiana is due in large part to the rebuilding efforts attributed to Hurricane Katrina. "Due to Katrina, many Hispanics came to assist in the rebuilding of New Orleans. With this in mind, many found Louisiana a place they would like to call "home." In addition, she believes that ESL is not an end-all answer to the needs of this population - most definitely not. "They need to learn the culture here as well. While ESL programs are offered, and we at Catholic Charities have a program in place, I feel that there are other obstacles that hinder the ability of those desiring to move forward. Many do not have transportation making it difficult to travel to classes. Normally classes are offered in the Southern

Area of Louisiana in the evenings, which also is a bit difficult for them to be able to attend. As it is well known that, they work very long hours for small amounts of money and many work close to 18 hours a day.” Catholic Charities has found that 80% of those attending ESL classes are of Latin descent, but Clement mentions there are many non-Hispanics arriving on a daily basis and they too need assistance in learning the English Language as well. Clement in her interview emphasized that ESL is necessary but that there are other needs that require addressing: health issues, being a major one.

CONCLUSION

The Hispanic community and especially Hispanic students present a significant educational challenge to those whose are dedicated to educating and advancing the achievement levels of all members of society. A major impediment to furthering educational achievements among Hispanics is breaching the language barrier. Breaching the language barrier is achievable, as untold millions have proven. The early acquisition of an acceptable proficiency in English language is at the base of socioeconomic achievement and must be addressed. Resources must be brought to bear. In addition to the many challenges posed by a non-English speaking populace, are a variety of other issues, health care and transportation among them. A comprehensive program to facilitate the Hispanic population’s acquisition of better English proficiency must be organized, and be available to all Hispanics living in the U.S. In Louisiana especially, because there are resource limitations in a state concerned with recovering after the worst natural and man-made disasters in history, Hispanics themselves are needed to support such efforts. In Louisiana, there are many Hispanics who have achieved the highest levels of socioeconomic success and as the saying goes, “to those who have been given much, much is expected.” These individuals can and should take the lead in efforts and proposals to support such initiatives. At the least, generating a volunteer/networking program capable of providing for the most urgent needs of underprivileged Hispanics who are helping in the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast is needed. Such an idea is actually in its planning/design stages and has as one of its main goals providing English education for as many Hispanics as possible in the target geographical area, using a well structured and efficient program. It should be pointed out, that many Hispanics are already working for such initiatives. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is just one of the business-oriented groups giving resources and support for advancing the needs of the Hispanic population.

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