

IS IT ENOUGH TO SAY YOU'RE BILINGUAL? Vetting Language Proficiency in Extension

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ABSTRACT

Language concordance occurs when the speaker and the receiver speak and understand the same language. Research shows that language concordance improves communication between patients and medical providers and is associated with improved adherence to doctor-recommended health behaviors and patient outcomes, which may also be applicable to health and nutrition education. Extension provides nutrition education through some of the largest federal nutrition programs serving low-income audiences, many of who are not native English speakers and have limited English proficiency (LEP). In order to better serve the community and ensure fair and meaningful access to federally funded education and resources, Extension should ensure its bilingual workforce is proficient in delivering information in languages other than English. This article seeks to raise awareness about the need to formally assess the foreign language proficiency of nutrition educators who teach in a foreign language.

IS IT ENOUGH TO SAY YOU'RE BILINGUAL? VETTING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY RESPONSIBLY IN EXTENSION

When hiring bilingual staff to provide concordant language education is justified, how are their abilities to speak a second language vetted? Is it enough for a prospective employee to say they are a native speaker of a foreign language? Being bilingual in English and a native foreign language in its own right does not guarantee that a person can skillfully interpret the spoken word or translate written educational materials. However, it does mean that the person knows two languages almost equally well, having learned at least the native language from birth.

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The U.S. Office of Management and Budget defines "Hispanic or Latino" as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Many people use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably. However, they are different in that Hispanic refers to a person that speaks Spanish or is a descendant of a Spanish speaker. Latino refers to a person from a Latin American country (Cole, 2019). As this article focuses on language proficiency, the term Hispanic will be used to refer to Spanish speakers.

BACKGROUND

According to the Oxford dictionary, the term Limited English Proficiency (LEP) is used to describe an individual who does not speak English very well. In the United States, LEP populations have poverty rates nearly twice that of English-proficient (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Many low-income families and individuals receiving Extension provided nutrition education are from diverse populations with an increasing amount coming from refugee and immigrant populations. For example, 72% of those reached in 2021 by the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) were people of color (United States Department of Agriculture, 2022). The EFNEP is a federal nutrition education program that operates through Extension. The American Community Survey (ACS) defines limited English-speaking

households as those in which all members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty with English. The 2021 ACS estimates that 22.4% of U.S. households speak a primary language other than English, and 4.2% of the nation's households are classified as limited English speaking (United

Table 1

Limited English Speaking Households, 2021 American Community Survey Estimates

	United States		Limited English Speaking	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
All Households	127,544,730		5,312,317	4.2
Households speaking --				
Spanish	16,323,914	12.8%	3,125,459	19.1%
Other Indo-European	5,787,131	4.5%	828,614	14.3%
Asian and Pacific Island	4,876,358	3.8%	1,119,070	22.9%
Other	1,675,278	1.3%	239,174	14.3%

Note. Data from United States Census Bureau (2021). S1602: Limited English Speaking Households. American Community Survey.

States Census Bureau, 2021). As shown in Table 1, the majority of households across the United States described as having limited English proficiency are from Spanish-speaking households. The concentration of limited English speaking households can vary depending on location within the United States.

Language concordance occurs when the speaker and the receiver speak the same language and understand each other. In contrast, language discordance occurs when there is limited proficiency in the same language used between the speaker and receiver (Hsueh et al., 2019).

Several research articles have demonstrated that language concordance improves patient compliance, quality of care, interpersonal processes of care, and health outcomes (Hsueh et al., 2019). Conversely, a systematic review of 15 research studies comparing provider and patient language concordant care with discordant care showed that patients fared worse health outcomes such as diabetes care and control when language discordance existed between patient and provider (Cano-Ibáñez et al., 2021).

Patient-provider language concordance helps improve communication and patient health outcomes, but it is important to assess the language skills or proficiency of those providers. Among providers of nutrition education, the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly referred to as WIC, is a federal nutrition program that provides many services, including information on healthy eating. A study of the Texas WIC program assessed educator-client concordance and other factors to determine how best to work with their LEP clients. Researchers found that 40% of educators who taught LEP clients were “somewhat” or “not comfortable” providing services in another language. Although 72% of the directors at local agencies stated that Spanish language skills were preferred in new hires, only 7% used testing to certify their proficiency. Instead, they relied on self-report or an existing Spanish-speaking employee to screen the language abilities of prospective hires. The authors concluded that nutrition education needed to be delivered in a culturally and linguistically competent fashion and cited the need for leadership to update how it manages and trains its workforce to meet the needs of its LEP clients (Greenberg et al., 2015). This study showed how relying on self-report of foreign language proficiency can have a potential negative effect on the delivery of nutrition education.

PURPOSE

This article aims to increase awareness of the need to ensure Extension nutrition educators are proficient in Spanish to help increase concordance with limited English proficiency Spanish speakers. This article primarily refers to Spanish speakers, but its call to action may be more broadly applied to help improve communication with limited English proficiency populations of other cultures.

ISSUE

Extension serves rural and urban residents by providing non-formal education and activities that improve lives. Health and nutrition programs are specifically created to meet community needs by influencing behavior changes to improve health outcomes. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture describes the hallmarks of the Extension program, in general, to be “openness, accessibility, and service” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). These hallmarks can also be seen as characteristics of Extension professionals, especially those that serve limited English proficiency audiences.

According to the LEP.gov website, all federal programs and activities are required to provide meaningful access to individuals who are limited English proficient in accordance with Executive Order (EO) 13166 (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). The Cooperative Extension System receives federal funding and is the largest provider of federally funded nutrition programs, including the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed). Extension systems make significant efforts to meet their community's unique language-related needs, not only to improve health and well being, but also to comply with EO 13166. For example, North Carolina Cooperative Extension has a robust set of web pages devoted to Limited English Proficiency (LEP) which outline its LEP Policy and Language Access Plan and offer resources to help Extension Educators assess their community's language needs, data, and training for its staff (North Carolina Cooperative Extension, n.d.). Despite efforts like these, clear guidance and implementation of language proficiency testing for Extension staff is lacking.

IMPLICATION FOR EXTENSION

While options exist such as professional translation services or contracts to translate nutrition education materials from English to other foreign languages, these solutions do not extend to direct education situations where an instructor teaches students and exchange communication. Bilingual staff, however, can help meet the need for delivering direct nutrition education in another language, such as Spanish. The United States Department of Justice LEP Federal Coordination and Compliance Section recommends verifying language qualifications, adding the importance of avoiding reliance on self-identified multilingual staff (United States Department of Justice, 2014). Thus, language certification of bilingual staff is recommended.

Many agencies and organizations go beyond an employee's bilingual self-declaration and employ testing to certify that their employees possess the language skills needed to support their role. When a federal government position requires a second language, it requires testing indicating skill levels ranging from no proficiency (score of 0) to functionally native proficiency (score of 5). Depending on the function, testing may be accomplished in four different domains of reading, speaking, listening, and writing, and are graded according to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Language Proficiency Scale (Herzog, 1980). A few companies in the U.S. provide language testing using ILR Scale measures; for example, one company administers tests in over 120 languages. This company can proctor remotely using a computer or telephone with an average cost of under \$150 per test, depending on the assessment options and test format (Language Testing International, 2021).

However, beyond the assessment of foreign language proficiency, another consideration is the time and effort burden placed on bilingual employees. The delegation of translation requests may be unfairly placed on bilingual employees

without appropriate compensation, recognition, or as an addition to their existing job duties. When an employee is needed to provide ongoing bilingual education, services, or translation and creation of written materials, that employee should be given a bilingual pay premium. For example, an employee that provides bilingual services for at least 10% of their work time as a state of Nevada employee is eligible to receive a premium equal to 5% of their regular pay (Chapter 284 - State Personnel System, 2019). Some work sites require that the employee certify time spent providing these services every pay period, while others do not. In order to receive recognition for their efforts, bilingual duties and the amount of the worker's time devoted to carrying them out should be explicitly stated under job duties in the employee's work performance standards. Doing this will also justify professional development associated with sharpening their bilingual skills, such as learning medical or industry-specific terminology.

When time or funding constraints make working with an external translation service challenging, most employees know who the go-to translator is in their workplace. Sometimes, a list of people with certified foreign language proficiency will be made available to all employees as a reference. However, it is essential for supervisors and bilingual employees to set boundaries together on the amount of time spent providing these services and for what purpose, and this can be outlined in their work performance standards. Additionally, a program employee with certified bilingual skills could be designated a certain amount of their work time to support others with similar needs in their unit.

There are other factors to consider when establishing plans to improve reach for those in the community with limited English proficiency (LEP). One of these factors is institutional commitment, which may be demonstrated with a formal policy and language access plan that operationalizes these efforts. The LEP.gov website has resources to help develop such plans, and several state Extension websites show they have developed LEP plans and resources. Another factor is cultural competence; the Texas WIC study cited the relevance of not only having certified bilingual staff, but the need to possess cultural competence to better connect to their clients (Greenberg et al., 2015). Cultural competence would recognize, for example, that not all Hispanics are the same. The PEW Research Center lists 23 different origins among the U.S. Hispanic population (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2021). Language, commonly consumed foods, and cultural practices can differ widely among these groups. So, even a highly proficient native Spanish speaker may feel inadequately prepared to address Hispanics with different origins; thus, the need for additional training and professional development to enhance cultural and linguistic competence.

CALL TO ACTION

In order to better serve the community and ensure fair access to federally funded education and resources, Extension must ensure its workforce is adequately equipped. When a needs assessment indicates a justifiable need for services tailored to meet the unique needs of limited English proficiency individuals, a starting point for building a competent workforce should include (1) language proficiency testing, (2) bilingual pay premiums, and (3) work performance standards that include a description of bilingual duties and the amount of time spent doing them. Extensions should invest in the effort to properly vet and compensate their bilingual staff in order to better serve their communities as well as comply with federal LEP mandates.



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