

Chapter 64

Literacy Level and Vocational Training for Substance-Using Hispanic Adults

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ABSTRACT

The Hispanic population has become the largest ethnic minority group in the United States. To successfully incorporate this population in adult vocational training, social service, and health programs, it is essential that programs design and implement materials at a reading level appropriate for the population served. This study determines the reading level in a population of Hispanic adult substance users receiving HIV prevention services in Long Beach, California. One hundred seven Spanish speakers were administered the Spanish Reading Comprehension Test. Spanish reading ability was determined to be at the third grade level for this sample. Results suggest that substance-using subpopulations of Spanish speakers in the Southwest United States face considerable language and literacy barriers. Findings have implications for adult vocational training as well as social service and health programs that include Hispanic subpopulations, and highlight the importance of designing materials that do not exceed the reading abilities of target populations.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Hispanic population in the United States has grown rapidly compared to other minority ethnic groups, increasing by 57.9%,

from 22.4 million in 1990, to 35.3 million in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). By contrast, the U.S. population as a whole increased by only 13.2% during the same time period. In 2002, more than one in eight people in the United States were of Hispanic origin (Ramirez & Cruz, 2003). In 2009, the number of U.S. Hispanics increased

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to 48.4 million, constituting the nation's largest ethnic minority group at 16% of the nation's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Moreover, it is estimated that during the next 40 years, Hispanics will contribute more people to the overall U.S. population than any other racial/ethnic group, increasing to 25% of the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996). Of the 35.3 million Hispanics living in the United States at the turn of the Century, 4.2 million lived in Los Angeles County, California—the largest county in the nation (Guzman, 2001). Since July 2008, Los Angeles County has had the greatest numerical increase in Hispanic residents (78,000) nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 2009, the number of Hispanics living in Los Angeles County reached 4.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These demographic trends have important implications for adult vocation, social service, and health programs serving members of this expanding population.

Low literacy is a substantial and understudied problem in the U.S. (Miller, McCardle, & Hernandez, 2010). In 2003, the National Assessment for Adult Literacy (NAAL) assessed English literacy in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) and found that 30 million Americans were assessed at a “Below Basic” level for prose literacy, indicating “no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills” (Kutner, Greenberg, & Baer, 2005). An additional 11 million were assessed as “non-literate.” Hispanics were overrepresented among those with poor prose literacy, with 36% of all Hispanics, and 61% of those Hispanics who spoke only Spanish before beginning school, scoring in the “Below Basic” group (Kutner et al., 2005).

Nationwide, Los Angeles County has the highest percentage of individuals with low literacy. Half (53%) of the county's working age population has low literacy skills (The United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2004). Of these, approximately 2.3 million are categorized at literacy level 1, the lowest of five literacy levels measured. People at this level typically are unable to locate an inter-

section on a street map. The city of Long Beach, which is part of Los Angeles County, ranks second highest out of five other southern California cities having the largest low literacy numbers (Los Angeles, Long Beach, Pomona, Glendale and El Monte), with 166,000 individuals who fall into literacy levels one and two. Limited education and minimal English language skills are major contributing factors. In Los Angeles County, 31% of the working age population has limited English skills, including more than 360,000 who report not speaking English at all (The United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2004). More than half of the Hispanic population in the southwest United States lack basic English-language skills.

The level of education attained by a substantial number of Hispanics in the U.S. educational system is quite limited. A 2002 report by the U.S. Department of Commerce (Ramirez & Cruz, 2003) found that Hispanics aged 25 years and older were less likely to have graduated from high school than were their non-Hispanic White counterparts. In addition, about 27% of Hispanics had less than a ninth-grade education (Ramirez & Cruz, 2003). The report also found that in 2002, 40.2% of the U.S. Hispanic population was foreign born. This figure is noteworthy because a large portion of the foreign-born population may be proficient only in their native language, Spanish. Thus, literacy rates in both English and Spanish are a concern for this population.

Literacy performance influences a number of life skills, including access to and comprehension of adult vocational training, as well as social and health services (Berkman et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Educational materials used within various public health domains have been assessed at reading levels that exceed the ability of their intended populations (Freimuth, 1979; Johnson, Mailloux, & Fisher, 1997; Streiff, 1986). Research (Cotugna, Vickery, & Carpenter-Haeefe, 2005) has shown that the average reading level of 31% of the patients in a Veterans Administration Arthritis Center was

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