

Five Tips to Translating K12 Outreach Materials for LEP Parents

Promoting Participation among Multicultural Parents and Community

A K12Translate Whitepaper

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As the effects of global communication and travel alter the face of our world, the ethnic and linguistic makeup of the United States is changing as well. What was predominately an English-speaking nation with strong Western European cultural roots is swiftly evolving into a complex mix of ethnicities, languages and cultures.

With this rising tide of change, how can K12 professionals keep up and effectively reach out to this new, increasingly multicultural American population? As all good educators know, it is imperative to understand parents and students and speak directly to their experience. By delivering culturally appropriate translations that have been approved by the focus community itself, your materials will ring true for the K12 audience.

The 2000 census data tells us that 47 million U.S. residents, or 18 percent of the U.S. population, speak a language other than English at home. Of that 47 million, 75 percent of limited English proficient (LEP) speakers prefer to use their mother tongue. If you have ever lived abroad or studied a foreign language in high school you can empathize with the daily challenges of such a situation.

Among the difficulties faced by LEP adults is learning how to effectively help their children succeed and thrive in school. In one survey, 43 percent of parents said that they actively participate in their children's school activities. According to respondents, that number would jump to 76 percent if language services were available.

To promote participation among these underserved multicultural audiences, here are five tips to help educators develop outreach materials for the parents of English language learners (ELL).

✓ **Tip 1: Tread Carefully During Language Translation**

In order to effectively reach this ELL population, we must address one of the most fundamental divisions faced by cultural and ethnic groups — language. A necessary component of effective communication, language is nevertheless highly complex, often ambiguous and routinely open to interpretation. For this reason, when translating K12 materials we must tread carefully to ensure that we are considering all of the linguistic implications and are not offending any of the LEP segments of the school district.

Approximately half (47 percent) of the parents and students surveyed felt that their families have been harmed by the lack of language services at school. This statistic illustrates the importance of providing translated materials for ELL parents. Communicating with LEP audiences in their preferred language improves parent involvement, which in turn improves their children's performance in school. Everyone wins when outreach materials are properly translated.

✓ **Tip 2: Learn Your Audience's Linguistic Preferences**

How you proceed with the next step in the translation process can make or break the effectiveness of your translated materials. By learning the linguistic preferences of parents and students, language translators can better ensure that your message is delivered as intended. One common pitfall is to translate a document in another language without taking into consideration specific dialects or regional nuances.

For instance, there are over 450 million native Spanish speakers in the world from over 20 different countries. In Latin America alone there are five recognized Spanish variants ranging from Caribbean Spanish spoken in the Dominican Republic and Cuba to the Highland Latin American Spanish of Mexico and Guatemala. With 28.1 million U.S. residents speaking Spanish at home, knowing what type of Spanish your audience speaks will prevent misunderstanding and minimize the need for costly editing.

✓ **Tip 3: Understand Audience Literacy Levels**

In addition to language preferences, it is always a good idea to determine the literacy level of the English Language Learner (ELL) population you are trying to reach. Literacy level is an individual's ability to read, write and speak in English and is typically measured in grade level equivalents. We recommend a sixth grade literacy level for general public information.

Of course, people's literacy levels may vary widely depending on several factors such as the country they are from, education level, affluence and natural aptitude. A good question to ask when determining literacy level is "Who am I writing for?" Are you writing language access notifications for Iranian PhD political asylees that contain complex legal content? Or does your audience hail from Burkina Faso, which has a 26 percent literacy rate among adults, and you are trying to get basic school closure announcements out?

Furthermore, it is a good idea to consider specific demographics such as gender when determining literacy level. For instance, in Chad literacy among women is 23 percent, half that of men. So, if you are reaching out to Chadian mothers in the U.S. you may actually consider working with oral language interpreters instead of written translation to maximize your communication effectiveness. Armed with literacy level knowledge, educators and staff can adjust the grade level of outreach materials or work with language interpreters to achieve the greatest comprehension.

✓ **Tip 4: Show Cultural Sensitivity**

While language provides the building blocks to communication, it is also imperative to understand the cultural components at work within the larger socio-political context. Considering the arduous and often traumatic experience of many of these newcomers, the next step to expanding K12 outreach effectiveness lies in understanding the impact of basic cultural disparities. This growing population of immigrants, refugees and asylees hail from a wide range of war-torn countries, economically devastated regions and politically tumultuous regimes. We must tailor the message directly to their unique experience.

The story of Karen, a staff social worker, perfectly illustrates how personal experience can deeply influence perception. Karen was responsible for organizing the new school year registration kick-off for her district. She chose a "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie theme for the event to keep the registration process upbeat and lively. Unfortunately, Karen didn't consider the implications that a pirate motif would have for the Cambodian parents, many of whom had fled the Khmer Rouge as refugee "Boat People." The images of pirates recalled horrible memories for the Cambodian parents which, in turn, significantly reduced their enrollment participation.

✓ **Tip 5: Work with Community Reviewers**

Finally, involving LEP community members themselves in the outreach process can significantly minimize the potential for embarrassing mistakes, thereby increasing your local

impact. When community members have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on your student handbooks, NCLB regulatory requirements and parent/teacher communications, they can serve as the perfect focus group. Applying their cultural expertise to your materials can be the difference between a poorly translated flyer and an engaging brochure that significantly increases parental involvement.

Working closely with community reviewers at the beginning of a project can prevent expensive errors and reduce the possibility of offending your target audience. Your reviewer can provide insights about possible taboo subjects such as sex education or discipline methods. In addition, creating glossaries and style guides with your reviewers will ensure a baseline for all future translations. You can rest easier with a stamp of approval from an LEP community reviewer.

Getting it Right, Every Time

In conclusion, when developing outreach materials for LEP populations it is important to keep their unique cultural experience in mind. Through targeted language, cultural sensitivity and community involvement, you will be well on your way to reaching all the audiences that make up the new American melting pot.

To learn more about how K12Translate can help ensure you reach your multicultural markets and communities, call us at 1-800-737-8481 or visit us at www.k12translate.com.