

## TALK THE TALK Translating for Safety

By Loretta Mulberry

**Workers across the U.S. depend on safety training materials to do their jobs well and return home whole each day. But those materials are often available only in English even though a growing portion of the workforce in construction, manufacturing and other trades is comprised of people for whom English is a second language.**

**After English**, Spanish is one of the most common languages spoken natively in the U.S. While it is often assumed that people living in the U.S. understand enough English to get by without much difficulty, U.S. Census Bureau data show that around 40% of native Spanish speakers self-report speaking English “less than very well” (Edelman et al., 2022). The situation gets more complicated when people do not feel comfortable speaking up at work about not understanding what is being communicated to them. It is natural to hide such vulnerabilities to avoid being viewed as incompetent or otherwise lacking by colleagues and superiors, but any number of risks arise for the whole team when safety and training materials are only comprehended partially, if at all.

The U.S. workforce has always been diverse, and language gaps are common in many industries. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) estimates that one in four construction industry workers were born outside of the U.S., with about half of all construction laborers being Hispanic. This number has been growing significantly over the past 20 years, and

the trend is common to similar industries as well (U.S. BLS, n.d., 2019, 2024).

This means that a large and growing population is likely to speak Spanish as their primary language. If information outlining their professional rights and responsibilities is only available in English, they are not being afforded the same access to knowledge as their native English-speaking counterparts. This is a disservice to these workers and could signal that safety is not truly the organization’s top priority.

Translation is an investment in employee well-being and the company’s operational success. According to a study by CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training, employees who are trained in their native language report substantially better understanding of and adherence to safety protocols (HSI Training Solutions, n.d.). The study showed that using Spanish to train Hispanic workers resulted in a 90% increase in engagement with safety materials. It also improved team efficiency, boosted morale and reduced workplace injuries.

There are many ways safety professionals can begin bridging the language gap within a company, but first it is important to become familiar with the terminology. While this article focuses on translation, it is beneficial to understand the scope of all language services since they are often used concurrently. The term refers to one or more language-related services, such as translation (converting written documents from one language to another), interpreting (in-person or remotely converting spoken language), cultural consulting (understanding which topics are more important, sensitive or offensive to a certain group of people), and subtitling or providing voiceover (dubbed) work for videos.

Speaking with a professional language services provider (LSP) can help determine which services a company would benefit from most. While it is tempting to rely on bilingual employees to perform these tasks, working with a professional provider can result in significantly higher linguistic and cultural accuracy. It also allows bilingual employees to focus on their standard responsibilities. LSPs have

industry knowledge as well as technical language skills to accommodate the nuance of language when preserving a particular tone and branding voice and determining the proper variant and reading level for a specific audience.

Beginning a company’s language access journey might seem overwhelming, even if its importance is well understood by leadership. Several small, practical steps can help a company start slowly and build an intentional foundation. While other language services are also important, translation is the most accessible starting point since it can begin with a single document but reach an entire workforce. Following are some ideal first steps toward translation:

First, identify which languages are spoken throughout the team. This will provide factual data on how many employees prefer to learn in which languages, rather than making assumptions. Also, it is best to handle this in an open, transparent manner such as including a question in onboarding paperwork or anonymous satisfaction surveys to ask all employees in which language they feel most confident learning or training. The question would ideally be accompanied by a clarifying point about training being proudly offered in other languages to avoid employees fearing any sort of judgment or punishment for not being totally confident in their English language skills.

Second, evaluate which type of documents have high priority for translation. This will vary between organizations. It could be anything that causes friction, inefficiencies, damages or injuries when not communicated clearly. Common starting points are employee handbooks, toolbox talks, training courses, field manuals and general human resource forms. Consider which documents are used daily, which reach the widest audience, which are most critical for safety, and which are potentially underutilized due to the existing language barrier. Mental health resources and physical health documents should be considered high priority because workers with limited English proficiency are often more vulnerable than their colleagues, especially in the construction industry with its disproportionately high rate of suicide.

### KEY STEPS TO TRANSLATION

- **Assess language needs.** Identify employees’ preferred languages through onboarding paperwork or anonymous surveys.

- **Prioritize critical documents.** Translate essential materials such as safety manuals, training courses and HR forms, with a focus on safety and health resources.

- **Avoid relying solely on bilingual employees.** Work with professional language services providers or consider hiring an in-house linguistic team if translation needs are extensive.

- **Consider expanded language services.** Explore interpreting, subtitling and voiceovers for training videos to improve accessibility.

Third, find the right type of provider for the organization's unique needs. The right partner will act as a guide to determine the best plan for the company's budget and specific goals. Beyond translation, consider which services are needed immediately, and which could be valuable in the future, such as an interpreter to assist English-only trainers or onboarding specialists. For training videos, subtitling in other languages is a relatively low-cost accessibility solution. However, if concerns exist about illiteracy among learners, investing in voiceover ensures that nothing is missed. Depending on the volume of content to be translated and the size of the organization, employers may consider partnering with an LSP or hiring an in-house linguistic team.

Beyond the safety and operational benefits, translation can also benefit human resources departments. Commitment to language services can improve a team's cohesiveness and culture, which improves an organization's chances of hiring and retaining the best possible talent. Translation is also beneficial to legal and compliance teams. Companies that do not provide training in employees' native languages could be deemed in violation of

OSHA's training standards policy statement, which requires that training "be provided in a language the employee can understand" and that said training must account for limited English proficiency (OSHA, 2010).

Lastly, translating safety materials protects not only workers, but also an organization's reputation with prospective employees, customers, competitors and regulatory bodies.

It speaks volumes when companies dedicate significant resources to keeping workers safe and educated on the job, and language access is the next step to ensure that employees are getting the most out of those resources. Every document counts and every organization must start somewhere, so let this be your sign to begin. **PSJ**

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