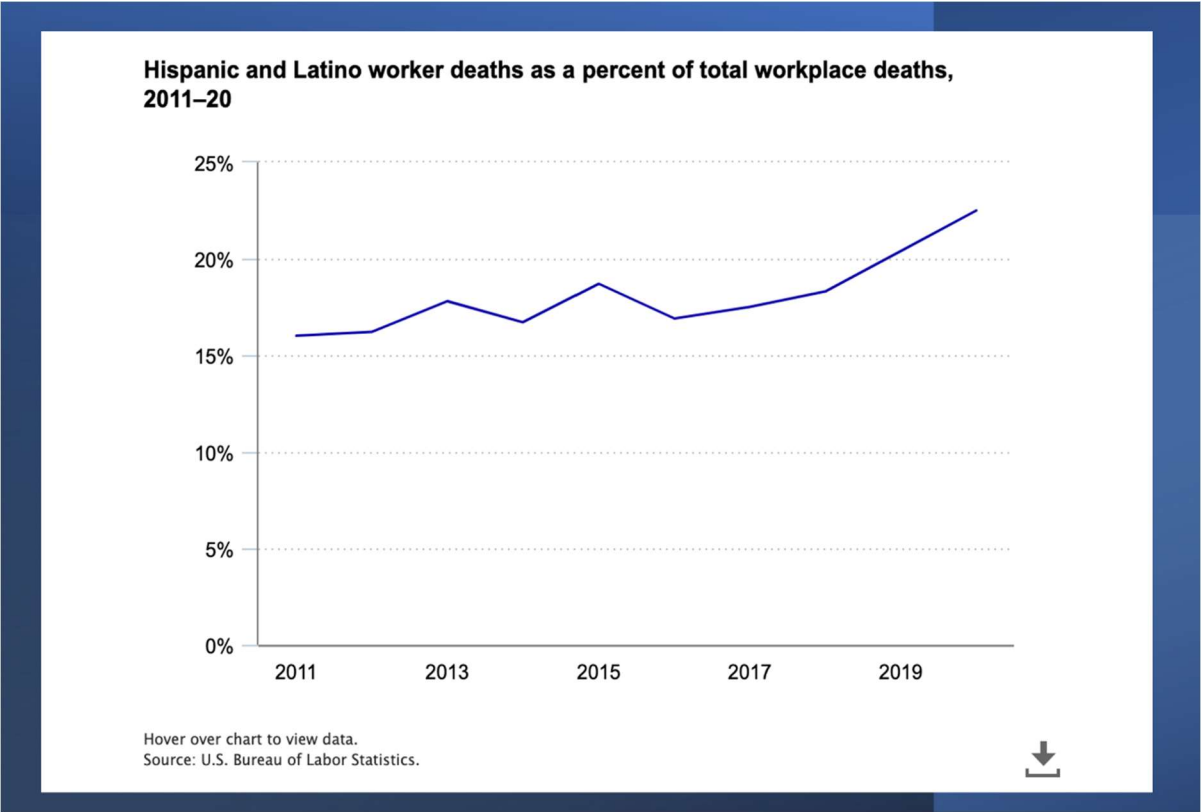


Techniques Against Language Barriers: A Company Case Study

The United States construction industry employed approximately 10.8 million people in 2020. Of these 10.8 million, an estimated 3.3 million, or 30%, were Hispanic workers. On construction job sites, workers are exposed to numerous safety risks, including falls, struck-by incidents, and electrocution. Unfortunately, some Hispanics or workers with limited English language skills encounter language barriers which cause additional safety concerns. Language barriers impact their communication and comprehension abilities and, consequently, their safety. As a result, Hispanics in construction suffer greater workplace injuries and deaths than other groups. This paper presents techniques currently being used by a construction company to reduce the negative safety impacts of language barriers. An interview was held with a company representative, discussing the main themes of this project: (1) language barrier issues encountered on job sites; (2) techniques implemented to combat language barriers; and (3) effectiveness of implemented techniques. Three techniques were presented, including (1) having translators in safety meetings; (2) conducting smaller meetings with groups in their native language; and (3) providing English language training. These techniques can be used as a guide for other companies to consider when developing inclusive safety plans.

Keywords: Language Barriers, Hispanics in Construction, Safety, Construction, Spanish



Disproportionate Death and Injury Rate for Hispanics in Construction

- In 2006, of the 3,370 construction injuries reported in Nevada resulting in days away from work, 1,710 (or 51%) were suffered by Hispanic workers (Menzel).
- In Washington state between 1998 and 2008, Hispanics were “2.6 times more likely than [non-Hispanic] workers to have a work-related traumatic injury (Sears)
- In the US overall, while the fatal injury rate for white, non-Hispanic workers decreased from 2019 to 2020, it increased for Hispanics: while the overall population saw an 8.4% decrease in workplace deaths, Hispanics had a 1.6% increase (BLS)

Language Barrier Issues

- Hispanic workers have reported that “low English skills are an injury risk factor because they were unable to understand safety training” (Menzel).
- The University of Las Vegas, Nevada, when studying a major streak of accidents on the Las Vegas Strip, reported “lack of or inadequate safety training conducted in Spanish as a contributing factor to accident risk” (Menzel and Shreshta)
- During an interview about communication on the jobsite, one Hispanic worker reported:
 - there is a book that goes with the machine [tractor or bobcat], but it is in English... I learned how to do my job from a [coworker], using hand signals and pointing I only learned from my cousin... there was no kind of formal training

Methodology

Project Goal: Provide industry partners with techniques against language barriers they can adopt.

- Identified a company (through past internships) with techniques against language barriers
- Conducted a semi-structured interview with a Safety Office (point of contact) at Company
- Discussed safety concerns, actions taken, and results
- Got worker input through point of contact

Findings

Technique 1: Translators during Meetings
During all meetings with working crews, especially safety meetings, company had a translator present. Translator could be superintendent, safety officer, foremen, or a craftsperson.

Technique 2: Small group/individual meetings
Hold smaller, separate meetings for workers with low English skills. This helps ensure they can receive and retain the information.

Technique 3: Providing English classes for workers
This third technique is more feasible for larger companies with more resources to invest into workers and targets younger workers who will advance positions in the company.