

Reaching People Whose Primary Language is not English

People who live and work in the U.S. but who do not communicate in English are listed as having “limited English proficiency” (LEP). As you may consider methods to reach LEP people with life-saving information, consider the following background information and tips.

How People Learn

There are four major points to keep in mind about people who are labeled as “LEP” and about learners in general:

1. People who have limited English proficiency do not communicate in English that well, but it does not mean that they are not intelligent, thoughtful, or capable of learning.
2. Just because someone speaks a language **does not** mean that he/she can read the written form of that language.
3. Not everyone learns the same way. Traditional Western education by study, reading, writing, and classroom-led instruction relies on auditory and visual learning modalities. Those who have grown up and have been taught this way think that is the only method used to educate anyone about anything. Not true! Many people in non-Western cultures learn by hands-on practice and demonstration. This is called “kinesthetic” or “tactile learning.”
4. 65% of people are visual learners, meaning that about 2/3 of audiences learn by demonstration and practice rather than by reading for information. *Note: the term “reading for information” has specific meaning in the LEP community. It is different from general literacy. Most people can read, but there are a significant number of people who do not process what they read as information to learn, internalize, and to act.*

What Puts People At Risk for Disaster-Caused Injury and Death

Over 50 years of disaster research has shown that certain groups of people whose primary language is not English are at great risk for death or injury caused by a tsunami. These groups may include visitors, migrant farm workers, and fishermen. They are at higher risk of disaster-caused injury and death because:

- **they may not understand the risk** since the location is different from past experience.
- **most people rely on past experience to guide future action.** If someone has no past experience with a tsunami, then he/she may not know about environmental clues of an impending tsunami event.
- **they may not choose to read for information.** This is an important matter – just because someone chooses not to read does not mean that they are illiterate. It only means that they choose to get information through different methods as first choices. They may be able to read the written form of their primary verbal language, or they may not.
- **in times of crisis, people listen for instruction from authority** rather than go find a written brochure or read a sign.

- **translations from English to other languages often miss nuances that convey information to the degree of severity.** Words such as “alert” in English are not cleanly translated as “alerta” or sometimes “advertencia” in Spanish. *Alerta* in Spanish has a higher degree of severity that is understood in context than the word *alert* in English.
- **some languages depend more on verbal tone and delivery pace to convey how critical a message is.** This is especially true in Asian languages including Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. It is also true for many of the native languages spoken on Pacific islands.

Be Aware of Language Translation Pitfalls

Well-intended people who do not know another language have made serious errors when attempting to provide safety information in other languages. Beware of these issues:

- **people who do not know a language may not realize how its printed form is different from its spoken form.** For example, spoken Mandarin and Cantonese sound very different. However, the printed form of these Chinese languages are the same. It is possible, therefore, to prepare one printed product “in Chinese” but if a video is produced, the voice-overs would have to be different.
- **Spanish is not spoken the same way or uses the same words to convey the same information.** Latin Spanish, spoken in Texas, Arizona, California, Mexico, and Central America has some different word choices for important matters than Caribbean Spanish, spoken in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. There are five “watch/warning” terms in Spanish (Boletín Informativo, Aviso, Alerta, Advertencia, Vigilancia) are used for these four terms in American English: Information Bulletin, Advisory, Watch, Warning. [Red Sísmica example](#)

Before Deciding to Translate, Do Your Homework

- **Obtain statistics that will help you focus your efforts.** Consult with your local Department of Health to find out who they are reaching most often, methods they are using to reach them, and what languages are most prevalent in your target area.
- **Review [U.S. Census Quick Facts](#)** – Look for “languages spoken at home by ability to speak English.”
- **Consult employers, visitors bureaus, hotels and housing sources, etc., for information on how long groups of people with LEP are in your tsunami zones.** For example, commercial fishermen may be in certain harbors at certain times, and land-based migrant farmers are in certain fields during harvest times. The point here is: try to figure out the priorities on whom to reach.
- **Have a few sentences or a paragraph of a document such as a tsunami safety brochure translated into one of the target languages.** Then ask a random sample of your audience to read it and explain what it means. You may be astounded at the differences.
- **Find examples of materials that have already been created** and ask the developer/owner of those materials if they have evaluation information or even anecdotal feedback about how the materials have worked. It is highly likely that no evaluation was done, so no feedback is available. That has been a major problem with these well-intentioned efforts – create stuff, hand it out, and have no way of knowing if it worked or made a difference. (Counting brochures

distributed without knowing their effect is an all too-common widget-counting budget experience that is commonly done.)

How To Reach People with Low English Proficiency

These steps summarize and synthesize the information from what is above:

1. **Determine who the audience is** based on risk and actual data on language usage.
2. Determine the **best method** to reach people whose primary language is not English.
3. Consider methods other than translate-for-print, such as:
 1. - **Develop video** that shows what to do (not what not to do) with native spoken language narration (not subtitles).
 2. - **Create pictographic and visual illustrations** that transcend language.
 3. - **Conduct exercises and drills** – such as a “tsunami walk” to practice evacuation and drop-cover-hold on drills for earthquakes.
 4. - **Empower community leaders** with information and presentation guides – a version of “train-the-trainer”. Respected Tribal Elders, religious leaders, maritime fishing leaders, labor union leaders, community-based organization leaders (Red Cross, LULAC, La Raza, United Farm Workers, etc.) [List of Latino/Hispanic Non-Profits](#).
4. **Ask the audience.** If possible, conduct a focus group directly with your audience(s) to ask about what methods to reach them will work best.
5. **Evaluate outreach activities** – best done by a neutral party, such as someone from a college or university. Incorporate results from evaluation into improving future work.

Reference data sources:

[Readability Score Calculator](#)

Reference documents:

[Key Terms](#)

[Federal Highway Administration/USDOT -- Tailoring Outreach Guide](#)

[Presidential Executive Order 13166 -- Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency](#)

[Federal Interagency Website -- Limited English Proficiency](#)

[Seattle/King County Translation manual and policy: Reaching populations with limited English proficiency](#)

[Disaster Preparedness for Limited English Proficient Communities: Medical Interpreters as Cultural Brokers and Gatekeepers](#)

How Not To Do It

[HHS Civil Rights office](#)