

## **Training Your Non-English-Speaking Employees in Safety**

Language barriers can present real threats to worker safety, particularly in certain industries that employ a larger share of non-native English speakers.

Only 57% of U.S. agricultural workers in 2019 were born in this country, including Puerto Rico, according to [U.S. Census Bureau data](#). [One-quarter](#) of construction workers in 2020 were foreign-born.

Occupations in these industries can be among the most dangerous. Language barriers that prevent effective communication about safe work practices present a significant problem for achieving workplace safety.

OSHA requires employers to train their workers on:

- Injury prevention by performing tasks safely.
- Injury protection by wearing protective clothing and gear.
- Necessary steps after an injury occurs.

Unfortunately, language barriers make effective training on these topics difficult. OSHA requires employers to provide training to employees in "a language and vocabulary" they can understand.

However, simply providing signs and written instructions in non-English languages is not enough.

### **What employers can do**

Here are some measures you can consider taking to overcome language barriers to workplace safety:

**Training programs** — Depending on how proficient workers are in English, you can modify safety training by:

- Providing training interpreters for workers with low proficiency.
- Speaking more slowly and clearly enunciating words for those who are more proficient.
- Providing visual aids and demonstrations.

**Pairing** — Have low English-proficiency workers pair with experienced workers who can demonstrate safe practices and supervise their progress.

If resources are limited, this can be done for the first days or weeks of the person's employment. The more dangerous the work, the longer the pairing arrangement should ideally last.

**Interpreters** — If a large percentage of the workforce does not speak English, consider hiring interpreters to be on-site. Interpreters can relay instructions and warnings from supervisors to workers in words they understand, while also responding to supervisors in English with worker questions and concerns.

**Written content translation** — Provide written instructions in multiple languages, appropriate to the specific workforce, for workers who are literate. Keep in mind, however, the possible differences in dialects.

**Pay to have employees learn English** — If it is within your budget, consider paying for English classes for workers who need them. This may make communication easier and improve employee loyalty.

**Hire multilingual employees** — Look for employees who, for example, speak both English and Spanish. This puts less of the burden on the non-English speaker and may make the workplace feel more inclusive.

### **The takeaway**

Ideally, language differences should not prevent employers from giving opportunities to earn a living to those who do not speak English.

Providing a workplace that is safe for all employees will reduce workers' compensation benefit costs and help you hire and retain desirable employees.

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