

Literacy in the City of El Paso, Texas



The University of Texas at El Paso

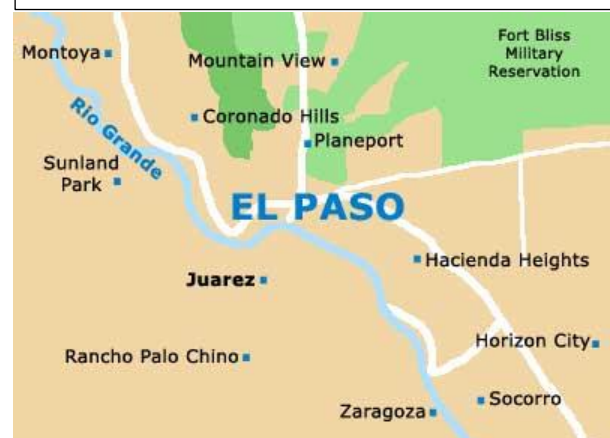
Abstract

Literacy is the ability to academically excel in reading and writing. Through several tests and studies done by Central Connecticut State University in 2014, cities were tested on their overall literacy rates based on several factors. Unfortunately, our city of El Paso has been ranked as one of the least literate cities in the United States. Living on the border of El Paso, Texas and Mexico urges the cross between English and Spanish speakers who have to associate with each other. Speakers learning a second language struggle with proper usage and extensive vocabulary, which accounts for the misleading practice of the English language, thus leaving El Paso illiterate. By reading numerous scholarly articles and websites, research was conducted in order to understand the outcomes an illiterate city has for itself. Elements, such as reading for amusement, have affected how a city functions as a whole. Taking each factor into account, researchers have determined what are some ways to improve the literacy of El Paso. Oddly enough, the research done never included reaching out to these individuals by connecting to their culture. By taking this into account, raising El Paso's literacy rate can be done through several classes and lessons done specifically for the targeted group (people learning English as a second language).

Introduction

The ability to read and write may seem like a simple task for any person, however for some cities it may be a privilege to be considered literate. A recent study done by the Central Connecticut State University has informed the United States of the top ten most and least literate cities. The cities ranked were chosen based on containing a population of 250,000 or more and also on “six categories: bookstores, residents’ educational attainment, newspaper circulation, use of online resources, the library system, and periodical publishing resources”, (Frohlich & Hess, 2014, p. 1). Unfortunately, El Paso has been ranked the fourth least literate cities studied. The study did not focus on “reading test scores, but on reading culture”, where in El Paso the few magazines that are published “had among the lowest circulation rates among large cities, and not one journal had a circulation of at least 500 people in 2013”, (Frohlich & Hess, 2014, p. 5). The impact of a literate city, as stated by Dr. Miller who conducted the study, “Cities that are more successful in terms of business development also have more a more educated population, [and] also have higher income”, (Frohlich & Hess, 2014, p. 1). Announcing the problem illiteracy has on our city will inform readers on reasons each one should take into account on the amount of practice being used to speak the English language. Becoming literate can be achieved through research and trials of classes and educational additions to the city.

Figure 1. A visual representation of the El Paso- Mexico Border.



Small El Paso Map. (2015). World Guides. Retrieved from <http://www.world-guides.com/north-america/usa/texas/el-paso/> <http://www.world-guides.com/north-america/usa/texas/el-paso/>

Living in a border city (between the United States and Mexico), English and Spanish are constantly exchanged and spoken throughout the town, however, not every person gets the same chance to practice their second language. It is apparent that the Mexican culture intertwines with American standards as “the two cities form one of the largest international U.S.–Mexico border communities. El Paso County is 82% Hispanic, almost 30% of whom are foreign born”, (Soto Mas, Mein, Fuentes, Thatcher & Balcázar, 2013, p. 264). Children who are born in the U.S. get to experience the English speaking culture more frequently than their parents, grandparents or any family member who is not exposed to it daily in school or jobs. As the study in CCSU explained, their study focused on the older generations and how much people chose to read as a culture. Adults who have recently moved to the U.S. however, do not have the advantage of learning a new language at an early age.

Problematic Factors

Being illiterate does not only affect ones learning a second language, but it has also been proven to affect health in terms of literacy. Soto Mas et al. (2013) explained how Hispanics in border cities are less likely to seek professional opinion for health related issues due to miscommunication between the patient and doctor (p. 265). Struggling to communicate due to the lack of knowledge on a language keeps restraints on patients. People suffering illnesses are less likely to seek the proper medical care or examinations in order to find solutions to their problems. The barrier between individuals and language brought on an investigation on ways to better health literacy through ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction classes. Soto Mas et al. thought of combining these classes while also educating people on the importance of health literacy. They even mentioned how “one goal of the curriculum was to help familiarize students with the particular literacy demands of health care settings, so that they are better able to

navigate these settings and the reading/writing/communication required within them”, (Soto Mas et al., 2013, p. 265). Researchers concluded that the trials of classes were a success through “the qualitative data [that] indicated that the curriculum was attractive to participants and that they were highly satisfied with both the format and content”, (Soto Mas et al., 2013, p. 271). The classes connected with the students by remaining ESL friendly and presenting students with skills on how to research on the computer. The key factor to their trials was that they connected with the students by providing them with the proper tools to learn but in an inventive way that made the learning easy and affective.

Another reason people with a native tongue delay learning English properly are thoughts of being inferior to others. Since English may be a second language for older crowds, adults may be ashamed trying to learn it at an older age. De la Pierda (2010) found that “some parents felt they were not able to directly help their children with homework because of their low levels of formal education”, (p. 578). Younger students are able to gain an education, but it is seen that adults can too. It is seen all around colleges, adults are going back to school to receive a degree, and there are many reasons for adults to learn a second language. Soto et al. (2013) highlighted Knowles’ (1984) six key principles of adult learning, which summarized that “adults have a need to know why they should learn something...[are] self-directed...learn better when they themselves perceive the need for learning...[and] tend to have a more problem-centered (or task-centered) approach to learning”, (p. 265). This suggests that there are many ways in order to aid first-time English learners through specific tactics highlighting the need to learn another language in their best interest. Citing other articles done by Hornberger & Micheau, (1993) and Walsh (1994), De La Pierda (2010) motioned how “research among Latino [students] suggest that it is vital for teachers and schools to value... language and cultural experiences to motivate

and engage them to learn content and literacy” (p. 575). Although adolescents influence the need to speak English in households and for educational purposes, it is important to be influenced by the self-need to learn a second language by “providing opportunities to reflect on their own expertise and share knowledge with others may facilitate academic engagement’, (De La Pierda, 2010, p. 582).

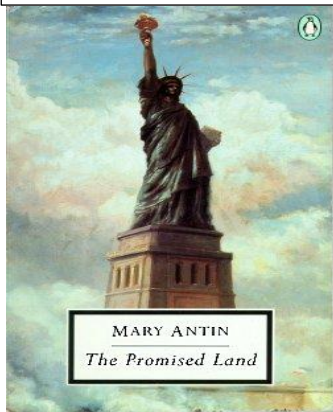
Embracing Dual Cultures

Each city has a logical way of educating their population. One of the more common ways of teaching a new language is in ESL classes, where students are taught to learn and write in English. The “students typically take a placement test in either English or ESL, and they are subsequently enrolled in either a developmental English course or an ESL course” and they are taught the proper ways of English (Bunch & Kibler, 2015, p. 21). Each course is designed to teach students proper English through courses provided by the states. It is important that “targeting their development of language and literacy for success in academic and professional settings [and] as well as progress toward completing credits required for associate degrees, certificates, and transfer to four-year institutions” (Bunch & Kibler, 2015, p. 21). Another article done by Gardener (2014) shows the impact on the STAR test, which is a curriculum taken in order to improve the language of students through series of test, on multiple students. After research was conducted, students were asked what they felt on the outcome of the series of STAR teaching, and there was a conclusion that most of them learned tremendously (p. 137). Overall, what was concluded was that “intermediate students in STAR classes have a higher percentage of level changes than non-STAR students” due to the concentration of these classes” (Gardener, 2014, p. 138).

The thought of teaching second languages in classroom settings is not a new thought, however there is also the aspect of adding components of the previous mother language in order to better connect with the students. An article by Fránquiz & Brochin-Ceballos (2006) goes into depth on a study where sixteen students were chosen to take place in a three-week period where their literal understanding of English was implied (p. 8). The research was based on the thought that “many scholars agree that literacy experiences connected to the local context allow students to gain meaningful understanding of their multiple realities”, (Fránquiz & Brochin-Ceballos, 2008, p. 6). During those weeks students wrote poems, then edited a prompt of theirs and last made a videopoem on what was learned. In order to make this a true project, visual artists were asked to participate in preparing the research, it was vital that the “visual artists use traditional forms of visual literacy such as creative writing, quilting, and ceramic making as well as visual media literacy projects such as videopoetry to engage students critically with their culture”, (Fránquiz & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006, p. 11). This tactic gave into students who appreciated art, while also allowing them to educate their selves through visual learning. The original classroom setting may be useful for some students, however providing people with multiple ways to learn can embrace the influence of learning new languages.

One author, Mary Antin, wrote on her experience as an immigrant and her experience with moving to America. Written in 1912, *The Promised Land* was an autobiography that goes

Figure 2. A book written by Mary Antin on her personal experience in learning English.



Antin, M. (1912). *The promised land*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

into depth on her points of views on immigration and learning a second language. Dayton-Wood (2009) analyzed her story and highlighted major points given in the perspective of an individual who her herself had to learn English as a second language. One point argued was that “literary text offers important insight into literacy as a set of social practices inflected with particular, historically situated ideologies”, (p. 82). Although many critiques of the story were opposed of her point of view, the article expressed the

significance of the desire to learn a new language. Antin’s autobiography presents the idea of learning a second language as a set of goals not only to become educated but the want to become a portion of the culture. The

article suggest the thought of “literacy [as] a set of social practices marked by the acquisition of a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes rather than a neutral or technical skill’ where if the proper procedures are presented, then “learning to read and write in a new discourse is not significantly different from learning to speak it”, (Dayton-Wood, 2009, p. 83).

Conclusion

As suggested, there are countless ways to teach individuals English, however what has been concluded through each article is that one major way to reach each individual is emotionally. The thought of teaching may cause people to dread learning in classroom settings. A key factor is to encourage people rather than force them to learn. Classes for ESL students can be informative, but keeping to the original flow of teaching may tire students. Combining culture

can introduce countless ways of teaching like presented in this article. Some can be taught through art, computers and that may even lead to larger more informative ways to learn, thus bringing up the literacy of El Paso and other cities overall.

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