

Analysis 4: Workforce Development (Depth Study)

The construction workforce's image has been deteriorating throughout the years. Today, a predominant percentage of construction workers are immigrants. The problem with illegal immigrants has been an issue that has affected the construction industry. There is a reason why children always want to be football players, astronauts, etc. There is a reason why young college students want to be engineers, businessman, etc. There is a reason why very few people want to be construction workers these days. That reason is image. Children as well as college students want to be successful, wealthy, and happy. It seems to me that the image of a construction worker does not portray success, or wealth.

Owners do not care about the workforce image; they just want to build buildings. Owners just care about budget. That is the reason why there are so many construction workers that are immigrants. The fact is that immigrants are seen by the industry as cheap labor. Money is the main factor driving the construction industry. It seems to me that, for the industry, it is more important to have cheap labor rather than improve the industry's image.

It is hard to say exactly why the construction manpower is predominantly Latin-American people. Some people say that the construction industry's image has been deteriorating throughout the years making the construction worker job to be an undesirable job. Some people say that immigrants can be cheap labor and having foreigner manpower can lower the budget of a project. My personal belief is that there is a large percentage of Latin-American workers due to the combination of many factors that will be analyzed later in this section. However, the real problem is that those Latin-American workers are Spanish speakers who do not know how to speak English. The other side of the problem is that most of the project engineers, construction managers, and superintendents do not know how to speak Spanish. This creates a big problem to the industry since there is a problem with communication.

One thing that I have learned through my short experience in construction is that without good communication things cannot be properly done. Without good communication, it is impossible for a project to be completed without conflicts. On my previous two internships, which were in Washington DC, I realized that having workers that do not speak English was a problem. Even a simple task, such as telling a worker to do something, was hard. Communication between the engineering staff and the workers is essential. The language barrier between these parties is creating a problem for the entire construction industry.

I am from Venezuela, and therefore I know Spanish. During my two internships in Washington DC I realized the advantage that I had over my coworkers just because I knew Spanish. I am sure that if we could eliminate the language barrier, projects would run smoother. I plan to study in more depth the effect of the language barrier on the construction process. My goal is to determine how much this language barrier is hurting the industry. I think that if we give this problem the attention it needs, we can find a solution. Giving Spanish classes to the management staff, or giving English classes to construction workers could be an easy solution to the problem. This is a problem that concerns the entire construction industry. If we could eliminate the language barrier, the entire industry would be benefited.

Problem statement – The language barriers that the industry is facing has become a problem. However, there is little information about how is this problem affecting the industry in terms of costs and productivity.

Goal - This analysis will explore the consequences in terms of; costs, safety, and production, associated with the language barrier on construction projects in Washington DC. This analysis will also explore possible solutions to this problem.

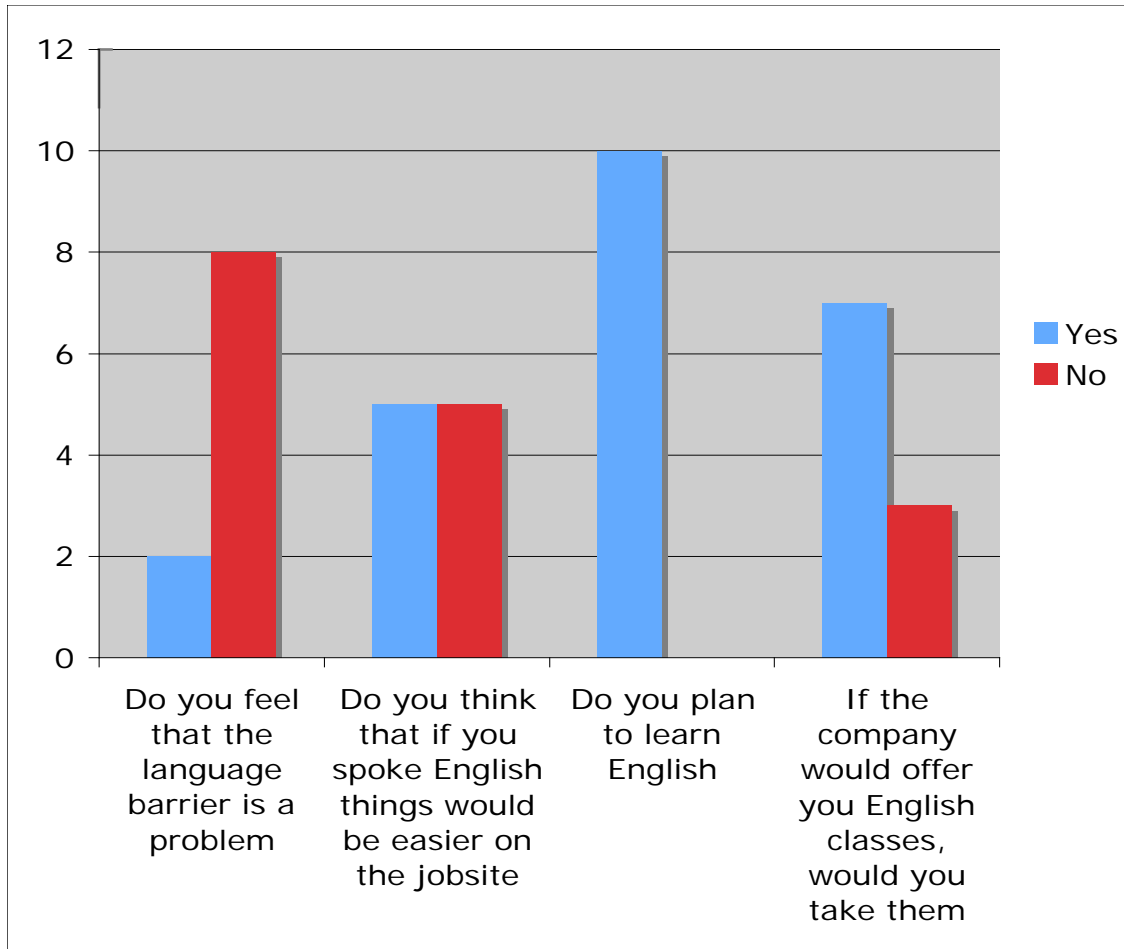
Expected Outcome - This research should identify if there is a pattern, regarding costs, safety, or production, that can be seen in projects where the language barrier is present. If a pattern is found, then solutions or strategies can be proposed. One solution, that I already thought, could be to implement intensive Spanish classes to the management staff on site. Hopefully, other solutions will emerge as I do my research.

The Best way to find out how is this problem affecting the industry is to ask the people in the business. Below there are two different surveys; One is for the management people that only speak English, and the other one is for those construction workers that only speak Spanish. These surveys are intended to find out and understand the issues that the language barrier has brought to the industry on each side.

Spanish Speakers Survey	
Position	
Do you feel that the language barrier is a problem	
How does the language barrier affects you	
Do you think that if you spoke English things would be easier on the jobsite	
Have you worked in construction before	
Do you plan to learn English	
If the company would offer you English classes would you take them	

English Speakers Survey	
Position	
Do you feel that the language barrier is a problem	
How does the language barrier affects you	
Do you think that if you spoke Spanish things would be easier on the jobsite	
Have you had any problems with workers not understanding you	
Do you plan to learn Spanish	
If the company would offer Spanish classes would you take them	
Do you think the language barrier could affect the safety on the project	
Do you think the language barrier affects the efficiency and productivity on the jobsite	
Do you think the industry should pay more attention to this issue	
Do you think it should be mandatory for construction workers to speak English	
Do you think is worth investing money on this issue	
What do you think could be a solution to this problem	

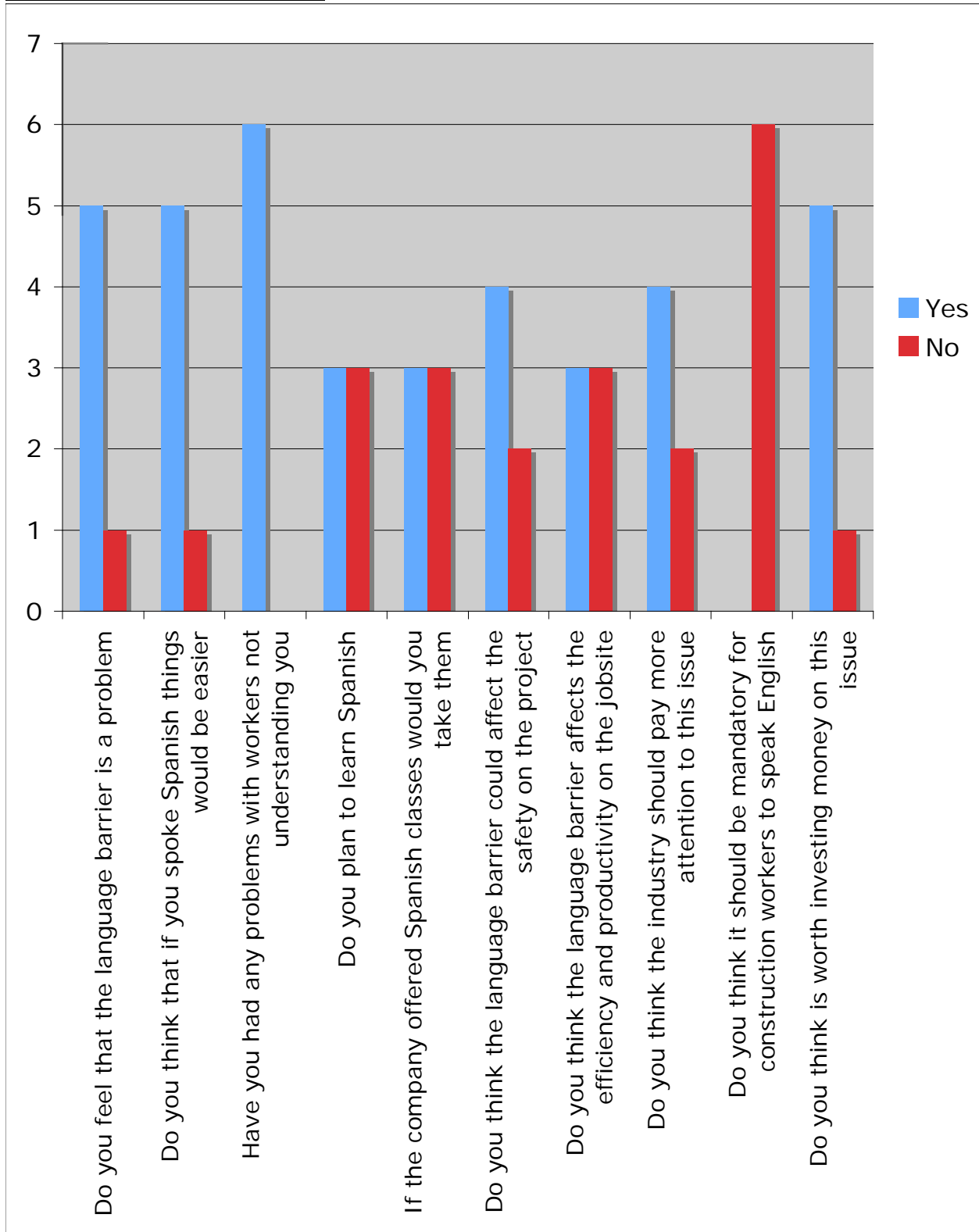
Spanish Speaker Survey Results



The graph above summarizes the results of the survey done to ten Spanish speakers workers in the Washington DC area. The information that I got from their answers helped me understanding what Spanish speakers construction workers think about the language barrier problem. To be honest, I was surprised with the answers that I got. First of all, most of them, to be exact eighty percent, thought that the language barrier is not a problem. Most of them think that not knowing English is not affecting their job and they think that they can perform their job even without knowing any English. However half of them did think that things would be easier if they knew English.

On the other hand, when I asked them if they were planning to learn English at some point, they all said yes. Furthermore, when I asked them if they would take English classes if the company offered them, seven of them told me that they would take the classes. From the answers that I got, my impression is that the language barrier is not really affecting the workforce performance.

English Speaker Survey Results



The graph above summarizes the results of the survey done to six project Managers and Superintendents in the Washington DC area. From the answers that I got, I realized that the language barrier problem is affecting more the management area. Five of the six people thought that the language barrier is a problem to the industry. Moreover, five of them told me that they thought that if they knew Spanish, things would be much easier on the workplace. All of them admitted to have had an experience where a construction worker did not understand what they were told due to the fact that they did not understand English. After that, I asked them if they were planning to learn Spanish and just half of them said yes. Furthermore, when I asked them that if they would take Spanish classes if the company offered them, only the same three answered yes.

I also asked them if they thought that the language barrier could affect the safety on a project, and four of them answered that the language barrier could definitely affect the safety on a project. Moreover, I asked them if they thought that the language barrier could affect the efficiency and productivity on a jobsite, and half of them said yes. I also asked them if they thought that the industry should pay more attention to this problem, and four of them said yes. The next question that I asked them was if they thought that speaking English should be mandatory for construction workers, and surprisingly all of them answered no. That made me realize that they know that it is their responsibility to fix the problem. By answering no, they basically admitted that solving this problem is up to them. Lastly, I asked them if they thought that it is necessary to invest money in this problem, and five out of six said yes.

After summarizing and analyzing the results from the surveys, I got to the conclusion that the construction workers are not being affected much by the language barrier problem, but the management part is. Therefore, out of all the possible solutions, the most appropriate solution is to give Spanish classes to the management employees. Companies rather invest their money on their employees rather than in construction workers who may work for many other companies afterwards. After talking with some companies, I realize that there are in fact some companies that are already offering Spanish classes to their employees.

From my experience I have come to realize that it is impossible to learn a new language in a classroom. In a classroom you tend to learn the basics, but to really learn a language you need to practice, study, and dedicate a lot of time to it. That is why I felt the necessity to do another survey to project managers/superintendents that were interested on learning Spanish asking them if they were willing to spend time studying Spanish after work. The results of the survey are shown below.

	Yes	No
Would you take Spanish classes if the company offered it?	5	0
Would you spend time studying Spanish at home after work?	1	4

The construction business is very difficult as it is. People get to their homes exhausted from work. The people that I interviewed told me that they rather spend their free time with their friends and family rather than study Spanish after work. I did tell them that through my experience I have come to realize that you need to spend time studying outside class in order to learn a new language. They told me that in that case they rather not learn Spanish since they value more the time spend with their family and friends.

The only way to learn a new language is to be motivated, willing to make some effort, and willing to make some sacrifices. Maybe Spanish classes will not eliminate the problem completely, but at least it will help a lot. I think that offering Spanish classes to the management staff is the first step that we need to take in order to eliminate the language barrier problem.