

**MONTEREY COUNTY**  
**CALIFORNIA STATE ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES 2012 CHALLENGE AWARD ENTRY**

**A TIME TO GROW, A TIME TO LEARN**

**Overview**

25% of Monterey County residents are functionally illiterate. Many agricultural workers work seasonally. The Library utilizes the off-work period to offer a Conversational English/Literacy class.

**Problem or Challenge:**

Approximately 25% of the residents in Monterey County are functionally illiterate. Agriculture is the biggest industry in Monterey County employing much of the unskilled labor. Many of the agricultural jobs last just 36-40 weeks a year and workers may be unemployed the remaining 12-16 weeks of the year. A large number of the workers are indigenous Mexicans from Oaxaca, primarily Triqui speakers. The indigenous languages have no written version.

Language isolation and poverty are two characteristics of the indigenous communities in Monterey County. In Greenfield in South Monterey County over 80% of the population speaks a language other than English at home, with 43% having no one in the household that speaks English very well. 26% of families are below the poverty line. Many workers who have the capacity to work at more complex and better paid jobs are hindered by their lack of English language skills.

The indigenous community is often reluctant to access community and government services because of their long history of facing discrimination both in Mexico and in the US, and because of many cultural differences. Monterey County Free Libraries (MCFL) has been working with the Triqui community in the Greenfield area over the last five years, and has built a relationship of trust, which is crucial to bringing services to this close-knit community.

The Triqui community approached MCFL in the summer of 2010 requesting help in learning English. Though the primary goal was improving their quality of life and integrating better into the local community, being able to communicate with their children, many of whom do not speak Triqui, was another motivator. The community also requested childcare assistance, which is not normally part of library services, but was vital for many of the adults to be able to attend class and focus on learning.

MCFL's Adult Literacy Program, though well-established, is aimed at teaching reading and writing skills to adults who already have some spoken skills and understanding of the English language. Clearly a new paradigm was needed.

This project offered MCFL the opportunity to serve a historically underserved population and also launch an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) component for the 25 year-old Literacy Program. For the first time, MCFL expanded from one-on-one tutoring to a classroom setting for English language instruction. A pre-school literacy component, evolving from the request for childcare, was included to help in preparing children for kindergarten.

Because MCFL focused on pre-literate adults, many were learning the same skills as the pre-school age children like proper use of writing implements and understanding the way ideas and objects are represented in print. Thus the parents and children were able to share and reinforce the literacy skills being gained.

## **Solution:**

Classes, which were open to all members of the community including Triqui speakers, were held twice a week for three-hours at a time. The session extended through the “learning season” of 12 weeks. Three follow-up sessions to help students keep up their skills and stay motivated to continue to learn are being held on weekends over the course of the “growing season” when workers are back working in the fields.

This Conversational English and Basic Literacy class was originally planned with two parallel sessions focusing on the same topic for adults and children. Parents were to take turns assisting with childcare in the children’s classroom. However because of a smaller enrollment of children than anticipated (19 adults and 5 children), children stayed and learned with their parents, much to the delight of all. Parents were able to remain the caregivers for their children during the lessons.

The focus was on Survival English: greetings and introductions, filling out forms, money, shopping, making doctor appointments, calling 911, etc. Students were able to take home the “props” that were used with the lessons, e.g. the fruits and vegetables that were used in the make-believe grocery store during the lesson on shopping. During the 12-week session, learners were also given many of the school tools that most American families take for granted, like dictionaries, books, and simple calculators. These props and school tools were paid for by the program. As diabetes and many nutrition problems are common in the community, healthy snacks were offered during each session.

A major part of the remaining expenditures in this project were the early literacy computers and a large screen TV for the children’s class, which will be used in the Library all year round, and for the class again as it is offered annually. The Library obtained a Library Service and Technology Act (LSTA) grant for \$37,000 and private donations of \$1,900. Classes next year or those in other branches will require an initial investment of just \$5,000, and will be prepared to deal with larger groups of adults and children. The curriculum and lesson plans will be reused and simple updates made as needed. The County’s contribution to this project was in-kind: staff time and use of the facilities.

## **Results:**

By the end of the 12 weeks almost all the students and the post-toddler children were able to conduct simple conversations in English. They were all more comfortable with interacting in an English language environment than they had been at the start of the class. Two of the adults had progressed so rapidly they were recommended for one-on-one tutoring in the Adult Literacy program. All the students indicated an interest in returning next year, and inviting family and friends to participate.

Based on this model MCFL has since started another ESOL class in the Marina branch which is already serving 14 adults and 9 children.

## **Contact:**

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