

Teaching Spanish for Business in the USA: Results of a Hands-On Experience in Nebraska

[¹] José Miguel Lemus, [²] Ethan Husser

[¹] Creighton University, [²] Heider College of Business

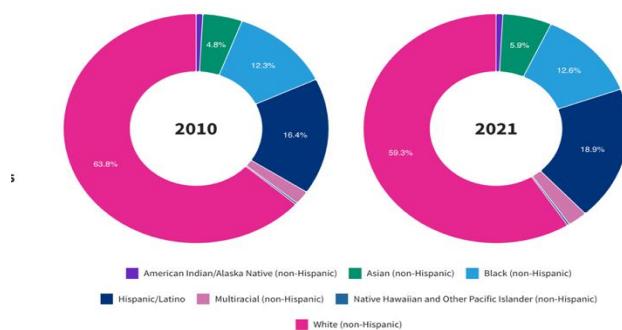
[¹] JoseMiguelLemus@Creighton.edu, [²] EthanHusser@Creighton.edu

Abstract— Demographic and ethnic change has always been a part of the history of the United States. In recent years, that change has also been accompanied by a socioeconomic transformation. This article explores: 1) The new patterns in economic development of the Latino cohort as part of the US economy, 2) The increasing importance of the Latino business and Latino buying power, and 3) The results of teaching three non-consecutive semesters of a hands-on Spanish for Business course at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

Index Terms— Latino buying power in the USA, Latino-owned business in the USA, Spanish for business in the USA.

I. INTRODUCTION

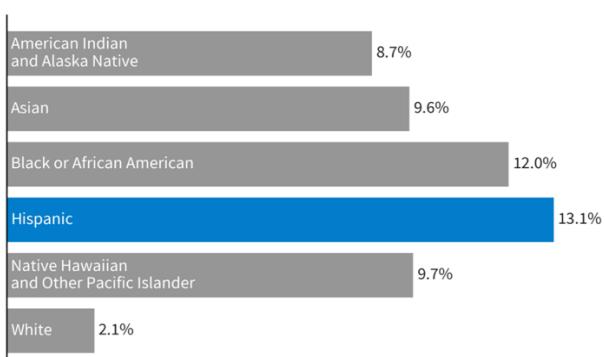
According to data collected by the United States Census Bureau from 2010 to 2022, the proportion of Hispanic or Latino populations in the US has increased from 16.4% to 18.9%, representing a growth of around 62 million people. As depicted in the included graph, Latinos account for most of the ethnic growth in the past decade, which highlights the increasing presence and contribution of this group to the diverse landscape of America.



Graphic I. Pie chart displaying the rapid rate of growth among Latinos in America compared to other ethnic groups. Source: USA Facts with US Census Bureau data [1].

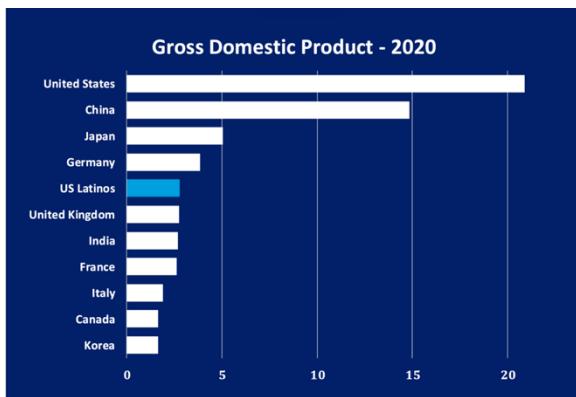
Coinciding with this, the number of Latino-owned business has increased significantly. Among all the ethnic groups represented in the US population, (including the mainstream Caucasian/White segment) Latinos represented the strongest growth in the establishment of new businesses, 13.1% (See graphic II)

Hispanic-Owned Employer Firms Are Growing Quickly



Graphic II. Growth of Hispanic-owned businesses compared to other ethnic groups. Source: Small Business Administration, USA Government [2].

We can attribute the impressive evolution of the Latino buying power to two main sources. The proportion of the Latino population, alongside the ever-growing number of Latino-owned businesses. To illustrate how much this demographic has achieved, in 2019, the buying power of Latinos in the US was nearly equivalent, but slightly exceeding the GDP of France, India, and the United Kingdom. This means that if the Latinos within the USA were a separate nation, their economy would be 5th largest GDP in the world, only surpassed by the entirety of the USA, China, Japan, and Germany. (See graphic III)



Graphic III. GDP of countries around the world in trillions of US dollars. Source: Center for Economic Research & Forecasting: LDC U.S. Latino GDP Report. International Monetary Fund, CLU-CERF [3].

II. SPANISH LANGUAGE IN THE USA

Currently, Spanish is both a foreign and a domestic language in the United States. The number of Spanish speakers residing in the US make it the second largest nation by count of speakers. (The top five, in descending order are as follows: Mexico: 121 million, USA: 53 million, Colombia: 48 million, Spain: 47 million, Argentina: 42 million) According to the most recent data (2022) 41 million members of the Spanish-speaking population in the USA are native speakers, whereas 12 million others consider Spanish as their second language.

The Modern Languages Association of America estimated that in 2019, (most recent data) around 791,000 students in 2,700 colleges and universities are learning Spanish as a second language in the United States [4]. Since the 1990s, the number of students learning Spanish has surged, surpassing the cumulative enrollment of students studying French, German, Chinese, and all other foreign languages combined. LOTS (Languages other than Spanish) was an acronym created to describe this phenomenon.

As a response to this explosive demand, several Modern Language departments at schools where Spanish is taught have started offering a new “Spanish for professions” track. This is in addition to pre-existing traditional academic topics such as culture, conversation and literature. Where the older courses focused on teaching the language along with its culture, the new approach emphasizes the use of the Spanish for professional and practical purposes. Classes such as: “Spanish for Medical Professions”, “Spanish and Law”, “Professional Translation and Interpretation of Spanish” are in high demand among students who plan to use their Spanish language skills to work in the US or abroad. This new approach also reached the Modern Language Department of Creighton University. To help students studying Spanish, the university created the Spanish for Business courses (intermediate and advanced). For the last decade, the first coauthor of this article, Jose Miguel Lemus, has taught SPN 314 and SPN 430 “Spanish for Business”. Originally the course was conducted under the traditional lecture approach where students would attend class, explore topics exclusively around Latino businesses, take notes, make presentations, write reflections, interview Latino entrepreneurs, create a hypothetical business, and present final papers. While this was effective, this method of teaching lacked actual business experience. That lead to the idea of creating a more practical experience within class.

Using a combination of the two previously depicted social and economic trends, (the growing proportion of Latinos among the US population and the increasing number of Latino-owned businesses) a unique project was devised to teach students how to create a business using Spanish as an anchor.

III. SPANISH FOR BUSINESS IN THE USA

During the Fall of 2018, we decided to craft a close-to-real-life experience for the students enrolled in Spanish for Business. Throughout the academic semester, in addition to the topics and activities traditionally taught in previous semesters, the students were also required to create their own business and make it profitable. The parameters of the project were as follows: The students each received \$50 dollars as “seed capital” at the beginning of the semester. They signed a sheet accepting the money and agreeing to return the same amount at the end of the semester. This functioned to show the young entrepreneurs an example of a loan that a real business owner would have to take out to start their endeavor.

They accepted the conditions that all business created strictly consisted of legal activities and should use the Spanish language in any, or all parts of the business process (production, distribution, advertisement, service, etc.) A strong motivator

was put in place to encourage students to try as hard as possible, all profit acquired would be retained by the business owner. Although this was not a requirement, they were also encouraged to create businesses that produced a beneficial impact on the environment, community, and customers.

The academic profile of the students typically enrolled in the course was young men and women between the ages of 19 and 21. Some had majors related to economics and finance (Financial Intelligence, Advertisement, Business Administration, Accounting, among others), however, this wasn't always the case with majors including: Education, Psychology, Dance, Medicine, and many others. At the beginning of the semester, we conducted an exploratory questionnaire to ask students about their general attitude toward money. We also asked if they had previous experience regarding running a business and if they could foresee themselves as entrepreneurs in the future. The first reactions of the students receiving the capital money was interesting. Students with previous experience in business and investments enthusiastically accepted the idea and even questioned if they could have a larger starting sum to create a bigger enterprise. Conversely, students in a field different to business or unfamiliar with similar experiences held attitudes that were generally more reserved, anxiously accepting the money. At the end of the semester, the students were required to make a detailed final presentation reporting the results, struggles, successes, and business processes of their semester-long venture.

IV. RESULTS AFTER THE FIRST SEMESTER

Despite initial hesitation, the results of the first semester displayed great outcomes. All students returned the initial investment, and all made at least some profit. The most successful entrepreneurship was a student who used the seed money to purchase ingredients for cakes and then advertised them in Spanish on local social media outlets. After returning the \$50 dollars, she made a profit of \$475 dollars. Another student (majoring in dance) taught modern dance lessons in Spanish to children and young teenagers. A team of students printed stickers with the Nebraska moto: "The good life" translated into Spanish and sold them for \$1 dollar each, ending up with a large profit that they generously decided to donate to charities of their choosing. In the end, the experience was a success for all students enrolled, regardless of profit generated. For the first time in June 2022, we published the results (in Spanish) of this activity in the Journal of the Business Administration and Accounting College of the main university in Mexico, UNAM [5].

V. RESULTS AFTER THE SECOND SEMESTER

The second semester business course in Spring 2020 was conducted with the same hands-on approach. Despite everyone's efforts to achieve positive results, the outcome was discouraging, to say the least. Only one out of eight students reported actual profit in his business endeavor. The rest not only made no monetary gain, but even lost the seed capital. It is important to note that in this second experience, we decided to increase the amount of initial capital from \$50 to \$100 dollars to see if it would foster better performance among students.

In search of a possible explanation for such unsatisfactory results, we can point to two potential causes: Unlike the first experience, rather than allowing groups, the students in the second experience were asked to work individually on each business they created. Second, and by far the most influential, the experience was affected by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, this meant that businesses closed, classes were transferred to virtual settings, and potential customers evaporated from all corners of the market.

VI. RESULTS AFTER THE THIRD SEMESTER

After the pandemic, we changed some of the rules for the students. Like the first attempt, students were allowed to work in teams of up to three members again. We returned to the initial amount of \$50 dollars per student, and we encouraged the participants to compete against their classmates by adding a final self-group evaluation. The rubric for the evaluations included the profit obtained, the ingenuity of the endeavor, the use of Spanish in the process, and the benefit to the community.

This time the proportion of success was the opposite to the previous semester: only one of nine students failed to make any profit. The rest paid back the original investment, while making some profit in the process. Two remarkable examples stood out from the rest: one student from a Latino background involved his parents in the acquisition of a restaurant franchise. The original business is from Colombia, and the family decided to invest in the creation and start-up of a branch in Denver, Colorado, where the family lives. They plan to inaugurate the franchise in the next months. Another student asked not to be videorecorded for his final presentation, because his project is the creation of an Artificial Intelligence application (like ChatGPT) to assist with learning languages. He designed it specifically for Spanish for this project but is expecting to expand it to many others in the future. The reason for the anonymity and little disclosure is because this student is planning to bring his application to the market at the end of this year.

VII. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Taken as a whole, the three non-consecutive semester experiences seem to give us some important take-away lessons: 1) Much like others who attempted to start a business in 2019, the disruption provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic severely affected the network of crucial interactions needed for a successful business creation and expansion. 2) The Spanish for Business class attracts a variety of students with innovative tools and approaches and is a valuable learning experience for all involved. 3) The students can use their Spanish skills into the careers they are pursuing at the University. 4) Some of the

students' projects reached other US states and even other countries where Spanish is spoken, opening a very interesting venue for future enterprises. 5) This course provides students with a valuable opportunity that little to no other classes are able to match, along with demonstrating the importance and power of knowing another language.

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