On dialects, colloquialism and standard Spanish

Spanish-speaking populations need educational programs, but the relative scarcity of Spanish-language and cultural expertise in Extension has kept us from meeting their needs as well as we would like. Some basic misconceptions also have hampered Extension's production of Spanish-language materials. Questions about “TexMex,” Castillian, academic Spanish, dialects and colloquial Spanish often scare and confuse non-Spanish speakers as they plan for Spanish-speaking audiences.

Many people believe that Spanish is a collection of different dialects and that using the “wrong type of Spanish” would impede effective communication. This is no truer for Spanish than it is for English. Extension professionals should approach Spanish-language materials the same way they approach materials in English. There is a standard Spanish just as there is a standard English.

The need to vary sentence complexity, vocabulary and the degree of formality to meet the intended audience is similar in both languages. Dialect, or variation from standard usage, is not an issue because as Extension educators we use standard language to communicate subject matter.

The confusion about dialect comes mostly from spoken language. In Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, for example, the "vos" grammatical variation is widely spoken. However, newscasters and newspapers in those countries speak and write in standard Spanish. Their credibility is at stake just as ours is.

So what's the point here?

With few exceptions, Extension's primary English- and Spanish-speaking audiences will read at "consumer" to "low literacy" levels. We should write and/or translate that way.

Use clear and accessible language that respects the language’s grammatical standards and the audience’s commonly used vocabulary. If the majority of your audience is from Mexico, use the word cacahuate (peanut in Mexico) and follow it with maní (peanut in most of Central and South America) in parenthesis a couple of times. The grammar is the same and this simple allowance for differing vocabulary will ensure that 99 percent of the readers will understand.

Educational materials in either language risk losing their credibility when they vary from the standard grammar and syntax of the target language.