

Spanish for Working Medical Professionals: Linguistic Needs

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Abstract: *This qualitative case study examined the Spanish linguistic needs of working health care professionals. Data from observation field notes, interviews, document analysis, and member checks were coded, triangulated, and analyzed following the premises of grounded theory. Results indicated that participants were able to produce routinely used words and common expression in Spanish, but were only able to understand isolated lexical items as spoken by native Spanish speakers. Their needs included written resources formatted for optimal use in the health care workplace, strategy instruction for lifelong learning, listening skills and strategies, and productive skills that go beyond semantic analysis. It was concluded that there is a need for second language acquisition (SLA) models that apply to nontraditional foreign language learning environments.*

Key words: *adult education, medical Spanish, nonclassroom learning environments, Spanish for specific purposes, strategy instruction*

Language: *Spanish*

Introduction

With ever increasing urgency, various professions call for their practitioners to use more than one language on the job in the United States. Voght and Grosse (1998) argued that foreign language education will have to “focus on the needs of the majority of our college students, who will not be educators, but businesspeople, international lawyers, medical professionals, social workers, and other professionals” (p. 9). According to Voght and Grosse (1998), language education that is related to the professional interests of learners attracts more students to study language because they see the connection between their career aspirations and second language (L2) knowledge (p. 11). However, the void between English-speaking professionals already working in their fields and their clients and colleagues who do not speak English continues to grow. These working professionals do not have access to the same kinds of academic programs as students preparing for their professions because of their limited time and resources. Working professionals have unique needs in two respects: the specific linguistic knowledge required for them to communicate with clients and the practical aspects of fitting language education into their professional lives.

Of particular interest in this study was Spanish language education for the health care profession, a field in which the need to close the communication gap between professionals and patients is urgent (González-Lee, 1992, 1998; Jonsson-Devillers, 1992; Kothari & Kothari, 1997; Mason, 1991). Large numbers of Spanish-speaking patients for whom “the utilization of health care services is largely affected by cultural beliefs, insurance status, language of communication, and income” (González-Lee, 1998, p. 324) are already filling clinics and hospitals throughout the United States. Even if professional schools and university language programs have begun to respond by addressing issues of language of communication for their students (González-Lee, 1992, 1998; Jonsson-Devillers, 1992; Mason, 1991), those already in the health care profession who are no longer college students need specific linguistic proficiency in order to successfully communicate with their patients.

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