

Business Language in Focus column

Linking language directly to the workplace: Spanish for Healthcare

Margaret Gonglewski, The George Washington University

A top concern to those teaching *language for the professions* is making the content and skills that students acquire in our classes directly and immediately applicable in the real world. Arguably more than with the traditional language course, students in a business language course see a direct link between the language and their current or future job. More specific content courses, such as *Spanish for Healthcare*, forge an even tighter bond to students' careers. This month's column focuses on an example of such a course, taught at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Courses in the general category of *language for specific purposes* (LSP) are first and foremost keyed to "helping students discover and practice the types of language they need to meet their specific professional goals" (Crouse, p.32). Not surprisingly, LSP teachers, no matter what their particular content area focus, encounter similar issues in learner expectations and often draw on similar effective teaching strategies. Issues like these are increasingly discussed in academic journals, books, and conference presentations (see especially the *Modern Language Journal* 2012 Focus Issue on LSP), but they are also at the heart of a new webinar series sponsored by the [Network of Business Language Educators](#). (To learn more about NOBLE, see last November's NCLRC [Business Language in Focus](#) column in which the organization and its founder, Mary Risner, were featured).

The free [NOBLE webinar series](#), entitled "Preparing Students for the Global Workplace: An Online Professional Development Series," is held every second and fourth Tuesday evening of the month. Risner set up the webinar series as "conversations with professionals from different fields of work who are involved in innovative initiatives to connect the humanities (language, culture, and area studies) to the professional schools." Participants benefit not only from the resources presented by the speakers but also from the chance to connect with other teachers with the common goal of "seeking innovative ways of preparing students to be globally competent citizens able to choose from multiple career paths."

Medical Spanish was the topic of the February 25 webinar presentation held by Melissa Swarr, Spanish teacher in Hempfield High School District in Pennsylvania. Swarr was first motivated to propose her *Spanish for Healthcare* course because she saw the pressing need in the community: Teaching Spanish at a nursing college, she noticed that the students were lacking the specific skills they would need to communicate with patients in Spanish. She quickly approached the department coordinator with the idea of developing a course geared toward these healthcare-bound students.

Designed for students with some Spanish proficiency, the course aims to introduce content and develop communicative competence within the field of healthcare. Topics range from “patient intake and health history” to “release and homecare instructions” and cover specific contexts such as emergencies (car accidents and first responders; heart attacks) and continuing care (well child visits; physical therapy; high blood pressure). In addition to contextualizing necessary vocabulary in each of these areas, Swarr integrates grammar and cultural aspects needed to fulfill functions appropriately in different communicative contexts. When discussing office visits and patient intake, for example, students grapple with the concept of formal versus informal forms of address in Spanish.

Because of the need for interpretation skills “on the ground,” Swarr places primary emphasis on oral communication. At the same time, she establishes a low-stress environment in which students are comfortable speaking, even when their speech has grammatical errors. To her, language production takes priority over perfection.

To that end, oral skill development activities focus on using the language that students do know to their full advantage in communicating. For one activity, Swarr fills a bag with “medical complaint cards,” which students draw from and must describe the ailment along with any instructions from the doctor. Similarly, learners can be challenged to translate medical terms for which they may not know the target language term, like cardiologist, e.g., a person who specializes in the illnesses of the heart.

Swarr is quick to point out that she herself is not a medical expert and she does not teach medical content such as diagnostics or procedures, like taking blood pressure. When questions come up that challenge her knowledge of appropriate medical terminology or formulations, she will openly admit to her students that she does not know and will then turn to trustworthy sources for answers.

Because she is not working within a program to officially certify medical translators and interpreters, Swarr wants students to be aware of ethical and liability considerations in interpreting in medical situations. Although Spanish speakers in health professions are often called upon to interpret on the spur of the moment, there may be times when the situation reaches beyond their comfort zone. In such cases, they should feel confident saying “I’m not comfortable; it’s time to bring in the hired interpreter for this task.”

Taking on the work of developing an upper level LSP course can be daunting. For Swarr, challenges included the long course approval process and, more important, the ongoing work involved in creating the appropriate materials for the class, since purchasing textbooks was not an option. For the online version of the course, which she is currently teaching, Swarr sees the greatest drawback in the difficulty of engaging students in the immediate interaction possible in a face-to-face setting.

While the experiential or service-learning potential for this course is obvious, Swarr has not yet been able to forge contacts in the local medical community needed to set up this type of learning scenario. Even students' ability to taking their *Medical Spanish* to the next level within the academic context has been limited, since LSP courses are still uncommon at colleges and universities.

To Swarr, though, the benefits of developing and teaching the *Spanish for Healthcare* course far outweigh the challenges. She has enjoyed getting to the "practicality and usefulness" with the language and having a break from teaching the same basics over and over. She noted that with the *Spanish for Healthcare* course she could "have a little freedom and fun," rather than being tied to simply covering material in the curriculum.

Swarr's *Spanish for Healthcare* course proposal, and other documents and sites relevant to teaching language for the health professions can be found on the NOBLE website under Language Resources and [Health Professions](#).

References

Crouse, Douglass. (2013). [Languages for Specific Purposes in the 21st Century](#). *The Language Educator*, 8 (3), 32-35.

Modern Language Journal. (2012). Focus Issue: Languages for Specific Purposes in the United States in a Global Context: Update on Grosse and Voght (1991), 96 (s1), 1-202.