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Oral Proficiency Language Testing for Medical Students

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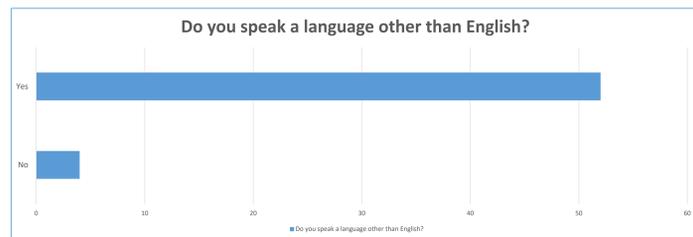
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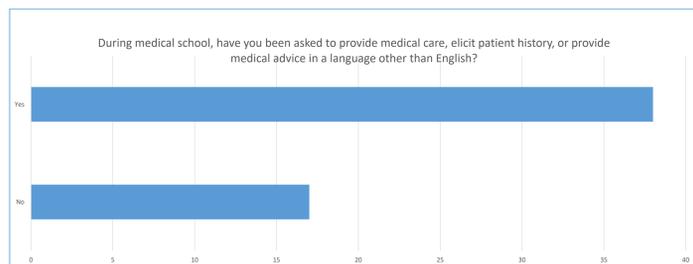
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INTRODUCTION

Access to language services in health care settings is a requirement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act that serves to ensure limited English proficient (LEP) persons have safe, accurate, complete, and meaningful access to health care. The use of standardized language proficiency tests is one mechanism to ensure that providers who deliver care in another language, have the language skills to do so safely. At UNM School of Medicine, many students report having other language skills and the desire to become bilingual health care providers.



92.86% of 56 stated they spoke a language other than English.



Many health care institutions have mechanisms in place to ensure a minimum oral proficiency threshold for health care providers to serve their LEP patients. At UNMH, we have historically relied on health care providers' self-rated proficiency without requirement of formal documentation or testing. This project is a pilot to formally qualify medical students via oral proficiency testing to communicate directly with their LEP patients in their preferred language.

METHOD

All 3rd and 4th year medical students (200 total) received an email invitation to take a general oral language proficiency test. Once students expressed interest, they received more information and were scheduled to test in the language they chose. Depending on the language, testing was offered via computer or phone. UNMH Interpreter Language Services (ILS) received, filed, and sent to each participant their report, threshold guidelines and a link to a survey for their feedback.

RESULTS

13.5% of students expressed interest in testing in seven distinct languages (Burmese, Dari, Farsi, Nepali, Romanian, Spanish, and Ukrainian); 67% of this group completed testing; 83% met the minimum threshold of Advanced Low; 30% met threshold for Advanced High.

Languages	Number Interested	Number Tested
Burmese	1	1
Dari	1	1
Nepali	1	
Romanian	1	
Spanish	22	15
Ukrainian	1	1
Grand Total	27	18

Language	AH	AM	AL	IH	IM	S	Total
Spanish	4	5	3	2	1		15
Language Other than Spanish	1		1			1	1
Grand Total	5	5	4	2	1	1	18

AH = Advanced High, AM = Advanced Mid, AL = Advanced Low, IH = Intermediate High, IM = Intermediate Mid, S = Superior

ORAL PROFICIENCY LEVELS IN THE WORKPLACE

ACTFL Level	ILR	Language Functions	Corresponding Professions/Positions*	Examples of Who Is Likely to Function at This Level
Distinguished	5	Ability to tailor language to specific audience, persuade, negotiate. Deal with nuance and subtlety.	Foreign Service: Diplomat, Contract Negotiator, International Specialist, Intelligence Specialist	Highly articulate, professionally specialized native speakers
	4			Language learners with extended (17 years) and current professional and/or educational experience in the target culture
Superior	3	Discuss topics extensively, support opinions, hypothesize. Deal with linguistically unfamiliar situations.	University Language Professor, Financial Services Marketing Consultant, Foreign Area Officer, Lawyer, Judge, Court Interpreter	Well-educated native speakers Educated language learners with extended professional and/or educational experience in the target language environment
Advanced High	2+	Narrate and describe in past, present, and future. Deal effectively with an unanticipated complication.	Physician, Human Resources Communications Consultant, Financial Services Senior Consultant, Quality Assurance Specialist, Marketing Manager, Financial Advisor, Broker, Military Linguist, Translation Officer	Language learners with graduate degrees in language or a related area and extended educational experience in target environment
Advanced Mid			Banking and Investment Services Customer Service Representative, Fraud Specialist, Account Executive, Medical Interpreter, Patient Advocate, Court Stenographer, Court Interpreter, Human Resources Benefits Specialist, Technical Service Agent, Collections Representative, Estimating Coordinator	Heritage speakers, informal learners, non-academic learners who have significant contact with language Undergraduate majors with year-long study in the target language culture
Advanced Low	2		K-12 Language Teacher, Nurse, Social Worker, Claims Processor, Police Officer, Maintenance Administrator, Billing Clerk, Legal Secretary, Legal Receptionist, 911 Dispatcher, Consumer Products Customer Services Representative, Retail Services Personnel	Undergraduate language majors
Intermediate High	1+	Create with language, initiate, maintain, and bring to a close simple conversations by asking and responding to simple questions.	Fire Fighter, Utilities Installer, Auto Inspector, Aviation Personnel, Missionary, Tour Guide	Language learners following 6-8 year sequences of study (e.g., AP) or 4-6 semester college sequences
Intermediate Mid			Cashier, Sales Clerk (highly predictable contexts), Receptionist	
Intermediate Low	1			Language learners following 4-year high school sequence or 2-semester college sequence Language learners following an immersion language program in Grades K-6
Novice High	0+	Communicate minimally with formulaic and rote utterances, lists, and phrases.		Language learners following content-based language program in Grades K-6
Novice Mid	0			Language learners following 2 years of high school language study
Novice Low				

*The levels of proficiency associated with each of the positions above are minimal levels of oral proficiency based on task analysis. The minimal levels were determined by subject matter experts from companies and agencies who use ACTFL proficiency tests.

DISCUSSION

UNM School of Medicine has an untapped pool of students with skills in languages other than English. Many students enter medical school with conversational proficiency. They are allowed to interact with patients to the degree they feel comfortable and are trained to partner with professional interpreters when they reach their limits. The slightly low interest shown by students to be tested could have been due to the time of year and conflicting commitments for students. Testing was offered for only a 3 week time period. Despite the limited pool, the results showed that over ¾ of the students that completed testing scored in the advanced to superior categories. It was agreed upon that scoring in any of the advanced categories was sufficient proficiency for the role of medical student.

Evaluating medical students' oral language proficiency skills in languages other than English allows the School of Medicine to support medical students in their desire to become bilingual providers. Creating required standards for proficiency is a critical piece in ensuring clear communication and patient safety in health care settings.

NEXT STEPS

- (1) Create and institute a program that qualifies medical students to directly communicate and care for LEP patients in their preferred language. This would be an important credential to include on their residency applications.
- (2) Establish language training programs for medical students with skills in other languages to improve their skills during medical school.
- (3) Explore challenges and opportunities to create similar proficiency testing programs for residents and attendings in order to verify that all providers who deliver care in a language other than English meet a minimum oral language proficiency standard.

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