

Spanglish 101

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Abstract

The rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States, particularly in the agricultural sector, presents both challenges and opportunities for veterinary professionals. Herein we, explore the nuances of English and Spanish languages, advocating for a pragmatic approach to cross-cultural communication. Drawing from personal experience and linguistic analysis, we challenge conventional language learning norms by promoting the use of “Spanglish” – a hybrid of Spanish and English – as an effective interim communication strategy. The efficiency of the Spanish language in contrast to common English language pitfalls can make communication difficult, however the concept of “Caveman Talk” as a means of building confidence in bilingual interactions, can be a starting point to improve communication. We emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and the willingness to actively engage in learning basic Spanish, while also evaluating the role of translation tools. By embracing imperfect, yet earnest, attempts at communication and demonstrating a commitment to language learning, veterinarians can significantly improve their relationships with Spanish-speaking clients and staff. This approach ultimately enhances animal care and professional efficacy in an increasingly diverse agricultural landscape.

Key words: Spanish, communication, English, language, learning

Prevalence of Spanish speakers in the United States

The United States is experiencing significant demographic shifts, with the Hispanic population driving much of the growth. Between 2010 and 2022, Hispanics accounted for 53% of the nation’s population increase.¹ This change is particularly evident in agriculture, where approximately 78% of the workforce is Spanish speaking.² These trends underscore the growing need for effective cross-cultural communication in U.S. agriculture, generally, and veterinary medicine, specifically. Katherine Dotterer is uniquely qualified to effectively provide this cross-cultural communications training as she combines practical agricultural experience as a former dairy farmer with academic credentials in Business Management, Secondary Education (Spanish), and English as a Second Language (ESL) certification. With over 15 years of engagement with Spanish-speakers in agriculture and study abroad experiences in Panama, Mexico, and Cuba, she has developed a comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural communication in agricultural settings. Additionally, she has created the curriculum and instructed online Spanish courses tailored for the agricultural industry, further demonstrating expertise in bridging language gaps in professional contexts.

Challenging the norm: A new approach to language

Learning the language is the easy part. It is, to align with the conference theme, “Challenging the Norm”, of how we define and shift our way of thinking to address language barriers through three lenses: attitude, mindset, and relationships. Attitude refers to one’s feelings about learning Spanish and embracing Latino culture. It significantly impacts the approach to language acquisition and cross-cultural communication. Mindset encompasses the perception of one’s ability to learn. Recognizing the difference between attitude and mindset reframes challenges as growth opportunities in language learning and cultural adaptation. Relationships explores connections with native speakers, stressing openness to cultural exchange and the value of embracing imperfect communication to build stronger professional relationships.

Language nuances

Speaking of imperfect communication, English is a challenging language to learn due to confusion between words such as “affect” and “effect,” inconsistent pronunciation rules (e.g., “laughter” vs. “daughter”), and homonyms (e.g., “right,” “write,” “rite”). These examples illustrate the complexities faced by English language learners and native speakers alike. My current ESL students recently questioned the homonyms “right, write and rite” and I found it challenging and frustrating to explain the why behind the different spellings for each. Their confused expressions turned to rolled eyes as this was not the first English oddity they had learned. This example reinforced how difficult English can be to learn as one’s second language.

Conversely, Spanish demonstrates efficiency through various linguistic features. Cognates, words that share similar spelling, pronunciation and meaning across languages, facilitate quicker vocabulary acquisition. Examples include “importante/importante” and “electrolitos/electrolytes”. These examples can be easily illustrated during an oral presentation, where I have placed a Spanish word alone on a slide, asking the audience to guess the English cognate, then animate the answer on the screen to demonstrate the similar spellings of the words. These linguistic bridges allow English speakers to rapidly expand their Spanish vocabulary, boosting confidence and comprehension.

During this presentation, I provided half of the audience with random notecards displaying a single word in English (i.e. tank, dad, pipe). The other half of the audience received notecards displaying the respective cognate in Spanish (tanque, papá, pipa). One by one, each English card holder orally stated their word. Then, the person holding the matching Spanish cognate notecard attempted to verbally pronounce the Spanish word. The purpose of this activity is to show the ease of learning Spanish and how a strong English background can be an advantage and motivate others to learn the language.

The efficiency of the Spanish language is further demonstrated by the concise verb conjugations, as exemplified by “hay” (there is/are). The conjugated verb “trataré (I will treat) is a perfect example, as three words in English translate to one word in Spanish. Furthermore, Spanish’s highly phonetic nature, where words are generally pronounced as they are spelled, contrasts with English’s often irregular spelling-to-pronunciation relationship, potentially easing the learning process for native English speakers. Examples given in Spanish for the audience to practice pronunciation include: grande, sange, lunes, arena; which contrast English words such as have, blood, hour, Wednesday, which are common words that most non-native English speakers struggle to pronounce.

Bridging the gap: Practical strategies

The use of “Caveman Talk” and Spanglish can be effective inter-communication strategies as language skills are developing. These approaches involve using simplified or mixed language to convey meaning, even if grammatically imperfect. Utilizing the example sentence, “Juan mix feet in morning por cows dry”, presentation attendees were asked to decipher what message is being conveyed. Although the sentence utilized imperfect grammar, it still effectively communicates “Juan mixed feed in the morning for the dry cows”. The efficacy of these methods stems from the listener’s natural inclination to decipher meaning rather than judge linguistic accuracy. This principle applies bidirectionally, with Spanish speakers interpreting broken English and English speakers using Spanglish (e.g., “No sé how”). This exercise during the presentation was designed to provide the audience with confidence to practice a new language imperfectly, showing the listener an intent to communicate more effectively. Embracing these imperfect communication methods allows veterinary professionals to overcome initial language barriers effectively. This approach encourages cross-lingual communication attempts, prioritizing idea conveyance over linguistic perfection and facilitating essential information exchange in diverse veterinary settings.

Tools and techniques

Google translate

While useful in emergencies, Google Translate has significant limitations. As an AI tool, it often fails to capture cultural nuances and context-specific meanings. For instance, translating “shots” for animals may be misinterpreted as “gunshots” due to the lack of direct linguistic equivalence. Overreliance on translation apps can also convey a lack of respect or effort to learn the language, potentially hampering relationship-building with clients or colleagues. This action sends a non-verbal message of lack of willingness to learn a new skill to better communicate.

Language learning

Challenging the norm involves adjusting attitudes, mindsets and relationships through active language learning. Even basic language skills can significantly improve communication and demonstrate respect. This effort often motivates reciprocal language learning among Spanish speakers and fosters confidence in using “Caveman Talk” or Spanglish. The resulting mutual respect enhances professional relationships and overall communication effectiveness. Feedback I have received from past students of my “Spanish for Agriculture” classes indicate improved professional relationships between native and

non-native English speakers when there is an effort to learn Spanish to facilitate better communication. Many students have shared stories of a Spanish speaker overjoyed was because his employer, a native English speaker, utilized numbers in Spanish to sort cows; or the amount of respect a seasoned milk tester, a native English speaker, gained in one shift by using basic Spanish words with Spanish speaking employees. The common theme of this feedback is that minimal effort to improve communication can have a major impact. This further cements the importance of challenging stagnant attitudes and the rewards of growth mindset.

Conclusion

The growing Hispanic population in the United States, particularly in the agricultural sector, necessitates innovative approaches to cross-cultural communication in veterinary practice. This paper has explored the concept of “Spanglish” and “Caveman Talk” as practical strategies for bridging language gaps. By challenging traditional norms of language learning and usage, veterinarians can significantly enhance their ability to serve diverse clientele. Understanding the nuances of both English and Spanish, embracing imperfect communication attempts, and committing to ongoing language learning are key to improving veterinary care in multilingual settings. While tools like Google Translate have their place, they should not replace genuine efforts to learn and use the language. Ultimately, the willingness to engage in cross-lingual communication, even imperfectly, fosters respect, builds stronger relationships, and improves overall care quality. As the veterinary field continues to evolve in an increasingly diverse industry, embracing these communication strategies will be crucial for professional success and effective animal care.

References

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