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Training initiatives for non-native English speakers in laboratory animal care

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At the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where I work, a significant percentage of animal care employees are immigrants to the US. Many employees live in Maryland, which has the fourth largest population of African immigrants in the US (African Immigrants in America: A Demographic Overview; Immigration Policy Center; June 2012); Virginia, a neighboring state, is fifth on this list. In my animal facility, 42% of staff members are African immigrants and 10% are foreign-born Latinos. This demographic breakdown is mirrored in many other animal facilities within the NIH community. While the necessary technical skills are easily acquired, the harder-to-learn communication skills—writing in particular—present a greater challenge for immigrants. Lack of such skills hinders employee advancement and creates a promotional road block that frustrates both the employees and the management staff.

I am the veterinary point of contact for animal care staff training, and I work closely with our in-house facility trainer. There are three major position groups in our animal care staff, and employees typically advance from cage wash technician (CWT) to animal care technician (ACT) and ultimately veterinary technologist (VT). Over time, I began to notice a lack of in-house promotions to the VT level; these positions were filled by hiring new employees from outside the facility instead. Curious, I compared the language demographics of the employees in each of the three position groups and found that 71% of CWTs (5 of 7) and 74% of ACTs (14 of 19) were non-native English speakers (NNEs) whereas none of the 10 VTs were NNEs. I felt the frustrations of the staff

members and noticed a decline in morale. I wanted to help, but I did not know how.

Then an ACT asked me to proofread a letter she had written. It contained numerous spelling and grammar errors that made it unreadable. I got a glimpse of one of the potential roadblocks to advancement: were staff members hindered by their level of English proficiency? Another ACT told me that he was enrolled in a class for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL; **Table 1**). At the time, I had no idea what that was, so I looked it up online. I wondered if I could receive training to become an ESOL teacher. Could I help the care staff? I found a training institute that offers classes on Saturday, enrolled and, at this writing, have only one more course to complete.

Being a veterinarian with specific ESOL training has given me a unique perspective and new appreciation for the immigrant staff members. It has made me sensitive to their daily challenges inside and outside the animal facility. It has shed light on the amount of courage it takes to come to this country to create a better life for their families and generations to follow. They are so brave! Can you imagine leaving your home country, and sometimes your family, to go to a new country where people speak an unfamiliar language and have weird customs (like potluck dinners) and expressions (like ‘raining cats and dogs’)?! As a vet, I can assess an employee’s weaknesses and needs in order to create lessons that address the animal skills they need to master in order to advance. As an ESOL teacher, I can bridge the language gap by tailoring the needed information specifically to an ESOL learner.

I decided to start a lunchtime training initiative to foster in-house promotion

TABLE 1 | Terms related to English language instruction

ELD	English language development
ELL	English language learner
ESL	English as a second language
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages

ELD describes the teaching method, whereas ELL describes the student. ESL has been used to describe adult education programs, whereas ESOL has been used to describe programs for school children. But many programs now use the terms ESOL and ELL for all classes and age groups because many students are speakers of multiple languages before they learn English. English may be their third, fourth or even fifth language.

for all ACTs, not just ESOL learners. My primary goal was to introduce the staff members to skills required to be considered a strong candidate for VT positions. The identified objectives were to learn common health observation vocabulary; how to observe, describe and write clinical health observations; how to correctly complete medical records; and how to communicate effectively and clearly with investigators and veterinarians by phone, by email and in person. Out of 20 ACTs on staff, 17 enrolled in the initiative, 13 of whom were NNEs. Ten ACTs completed all the requirements; four, including three NNEs, were deemed ready to continue on to the cross-training phase.

I hope this training will foster employee retention; improve communication between management and staff members; and build confidence in speaking, reading and writing the English language for all staff members. With this investment in the animal care staff, the return benefit for the animal program will be tremendous. Staff members will be afforded the opportunity to apply for higher-level positions, thereby boosting morale. The work environment should be improved for all.

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