LSP International, Vol. 1, June 2014, 35–44

Do LSP Textbooks Meet the Communicative Needs of L2 Learners?

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ABSTRACT

Needs analysis and description of language use in target situations are used to define the communicative demands of the target situation (Basturkmen & Elder, 2004). In spite of these steps taken in designing LSP courses, many L2 learners still face communication challenges in the workplace. Such is the case of L2 nursing students who experience various language related issues in their clinical placements. These results are not surprising given that L2 instruction traditionally targets the acquisition of the standard norm of the target language (Valdman, 2000). Indeed, L2 textbooks appear heavily influenced by the prescriptive view of language. This study focuses on the content analysis of French L2 commercial textbooks for nursing students. The materials were analyzed to identify the language use domains presented to students as well as the language features recommended to perform them. The results were then compared to transcriptions of 15 hours of recorded professional interactions between bilingual French-English nurses and French-speaking patients in a nursing home in Western Canada. The analysis reveals that commercial materials do not fulfill students' communicative needs. The concept of pedagogical norm (Valdman, 1976, 2000) appears as a useful tool to improve the communicative content of LSP textbooks

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Basturkmen and Elder (2004) state that the design of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) programs start with two important initial steps: needs analysis and description of language use in target situations. According to them, these steps are crucial to assess the gap between students' second language (L2) proficiency and the communicative demands of the target situation, and thus identify the communicative problems they may encounter. Based on the needs profile generated by these analyses, syllabi and materials are created so that teaching can be tailored to the communicative needs of the L2 learners (Martin, 2000). In spite of these steps taken in designing LSP courses, many L2 learners still face communication challenges in the workplace. Such is the case of L2 nursing students who experience various language related issues in their clinical placements. Such challenges include difficulty in understanding patients' colloquial speech and accent (Shakya & Horsfall, 2000), problems

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reassuring patients and making small talk with them (Hussin, 1999) and difficulty in acquiring medical terminology and English grammar (Malu & Figlear, 1998). Although these results are based solely on the experience of English as a Second Language (ESL) nursing students in English-dominant settings, one might anticipate similar challenges for L2 learners of other languages, given the nature of L2 and foreign classroom instruction.

In fact, these results are not surprising given that L2 instruction traditionally targets the acquisition of the standard norm of the target language (Valdman, 2000). Indeed, the beginning of foreign language education replicated the way Latin and Greek were taught, and greater emphasis was given to the acquisition of written skills (Spolsky, 2002). Even though this goal has been challenged since the 1960's to give importance to the study of spoken varieties of languages, foreign and second language instruction still appears to be influenced by a prescriptive view of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Even in the most communicative classrooms, such as French immersion in Canada, the standard norm prevails in the educational input. Mougeon *et al.* (2002) analysed French language arts materials designed for French immersion students in Canada and found that the dialogues used to represent spoken discourse do not expose students to features found in casual interactions, but rather almost exclusively to formal, standard usage.

This study focuses on the analysis of French L2 commercial textbooks designed for nursing students to determine whether their content is similarly characterized by an overuse of standard features.

1.1 The Linguistic Context of the Study

a. French in Canada

Canada has two official languages, English and French. While the majority of Canadians speak English as a first language, French is the mother tongue of about 7 million Canadians, most of whom (about 6 millions), are located in the province of Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2007). Hence, the French spoken by the elite of that province is considered standard Canadian French (Auger, 2002).

Standard Canadian French differs from standard European French in a number of ways although both varieties are mutually intelligible. On a lexical level, Canadian French includes, archaisms, borrowings from the First Nations languages and from English, as well as French usages that were developed after Canada was colonized by France (Mougeon, 2000). On a phonological level, Canadian French has more phonemes than European French, for example high vowels (/i/, /u/ and /y/) are laxed in closed final syllables and there are two assibilated dentals that occur in specific contexts, /t/ and /d/ (Dumas, 1987). On a syntactical level, there are few marked differences between standard Canadian French and standard European French (Martel & Cajolet-Laganière, 1996).

b. French in the Target Situation

This study takes place in Western Canada, a region where French is not the dominant language. The French-speaking target population of that region speaks a dialect that differs slightly from standard Canadian French. A number of vernacular features that depart from standard French, or other varieties

of spoken French, are used such as simplification of grammatical structures, sociolectal reduction and English lexical borrowings (Mougeon & Beniak, 1991).

Moreover, a few bilingual French-English nursing homes and medical clinics exist in Western Canada, but not all staff members are bilingual. French is only used for interactions between French-speaking patients and health care professionals fluent in both English and French. French L2 nursing students are trained to respond to the shortage of bilingual nurses available for the French-speaking population.

1.2 The Speech Style Continuum

Since this study focuses on the analysis of language use in French L2 nursing textbooks, important concepts and key terms that will be used in further sections of this article need to be defined.

Native speakers of any language modify their speech according to whom they speak and to the social context in which the conversation takes place; this phenomenon is known as *stylistic variation* (Labov, 1972). Their choice of linguistic styles is determined by the perceived degree of (in) formality of the communicative situation in which they find themselves. At one end of the speech style continuum is the *vernacular style* found in spontaneous interactions in familiar settings, which trigger the use of non-standard linguistic features (Tagliamonte, 2006). Nonstandard forms can be divided into two groups: those that are socially marked (often referred to as vernacular features) and those that are mildly socially marked (also known as informal features). Marked non-standard variants refer to those features that do not conform to the rules of the standard language. At the other end of the continuum is the *careful style* found in formal situations which is conversely characterized by the use of standard features (ibid). Standard forms refer to those features that are accepted and socially valued in formal communicative situations (Tagliamonte, 2006); they can also be divided into two categories: formal and hyper-formal forms (Mougeon *et al,* 2008). Formal and hyper-formal variants are typical of written language and careful speech.

1.3 Literature Review

a. L2 Nursing Students' Experience in the Workplace

Studies focusing on L2 nursing students are scarce; the majority of them are descriptive in nature and focus on the experience of ESL nursing students (Choi, 2005; Wang *et al*, 2008). Hence, the linguistic problems reported in this section are found in English-dominant clinical settings with ESL learners and cannot be generalised to the current French minority clinical settings where French L2 learners will undertake their clinical placements. These studies reveal, however, that participants experience difficulty or fail to meet the requirements of their clinical placements and similar findings might be anticipated for French L2 nursing students given that these students have limited experience with French outside the classroom.

The Faculty of Nursing of the University of South Australia identified a number of communication problems in their ESL student body. Such issues included difficulty in explaining procedures and offering reassurance to patients, problems performing change of shift with medical staff, and inappropriate use of communication strategies (e.g. smiling and nodding instead of responding verbally

when misunderstandings occur) (Hussin, 1999). Malu and Figlear (1998) periodically observed and interviewed ESL nursing students during their first year in a nursing school in the United States and found that participants lacked fluency and vocabulary to engage in meaningful technical discussions with medical staff and nurse educators. It was also found that students struggled to make small talk with patients and to respond to their comments appropriately (ibid). Shakya and Horsfall (2000) interviewed 9 ESL students in Australia about their experience at the end of their first year of an undergraduate degree in nursing. Data analysis showed that the participants experienced various language related issues which ranged from difficulties in using technical language in interactions with peers and medical staff, difficulty with spoken English when dealing with patients, concerns that they would not be understood well by patients, and problems understanding patients and peers due to accent, use of colloquial expressions and fast rate of speech (ibid). Similar findings were found in Rogan *et al.* (2006) who asked 15 ESL nursing students to participate in focus groups to investigate their perceptions towards their performance in their first clinical placement. Participants commented on their problems understanding abbreviations or terminology used by nurses. They also struggled to understand slang and ironical comments used by patients which impeded them from responding appropriately. Students mentioned they wished they would be better prepared to create rapport with patients and families. It is worth noting that the participants in the studies reviewed above had all met the language requirements set by their universities or nursing schools. Although L2 proficiency is usually seen as a good predictor of academic success, it does not, in the case of nursing students, guarantee success in clinical settings since the mastery of communication skills other than academic English are required of them.

b. French L2 Students' Communicative Competence

In Western Canada, only one university trains health care professionals in French and English, but they mainly recruit bilingual students for whom French is a second language. Although, these students are very proficient speakers of French, their communication skills are clearly not like those of native speakers as there is gap between their receptive and productive skills. These students show near-native proficiency in listening and reading comprehension (for a review see Lyster, 2007). However, Lapkin *et al.* (1990) argue that claims about students' native-like receptive skills were made on the basis of measures of comprehension of academic language, and that measures of comprehension of informal French texts should be added to the research agenda. Moreover, the speaking and writing skills of these students are not native-like in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic and sociolinguistic accuracy (for a review see Ranta & Lyster, 2007). Also, research in variationist sociolinguistics has demonstrated that these students tend to be monostylistic, i.e., they hardly ever acquire the full range of speech styles in French. In fact, students appear to be unable to navigate the speech style continuum, being trapped at its formal end (Rehner & Mougeon, 2003; Nadasdi *et al.*, 2005). It has been argued that these results may be due to the fact that their educational input only exposes them to the standard usage of the language (Mougeon *et al.*, 2002) and that they do not seek opportunities to use their L2 productively and thus seldom interact with native speakers of French (Van der Keilen, 1995; Wesche *et al.*, 1990).

The review of the ESL nursing students' experience in their clinical placement and French L2 students' communicative competence reveals some of the challenges French L2 nursing students in Western Canada may face. Indeed, the experiences of ESL nursing students have demonstrated that non-native

nurses face many language-related challenges in clinical settings. The majority of those setbacks are related to their difficulty in understanding and using speech in this specific context. Given French L2 students' limited stylistic repertoire, we can anticipate that they will face similar challenges in their interactions with French-speaking patients. It is thus crucial to investigate whether French L2 language learning materials available for nursing students meet their communicative needs.

1.4 Pedagogical Input: Commercial French L2 Nursing Textbooks

To prepare L2 nurses for their clinical placements and address their linguistic weaknesses, language learning materials are designed. There exists a variety of learning materials in English as a L2 for nursing students, but the same is not true for other languages, French being no exception. At the time of the analysis, only two commercial textbooks where available: *Nursing in two languages*, created in Belgium by Fizaine (1994) and *Santé-Médecine.com* by Mourlhon-Dallie (2004) a French textbook for health professionals that contain a chapter on the nursing profession. Both textbooks were analysed so as to identify whether their content reflected not only the language use domains found in nursing situations in Canada, but also the language use typically displayed in these situations.

a. The Language Use Domains

Fifteen hours of recorded clinical observations in a bilingual French-English nursing home located in Western Canada, a region where French is not the dominant language of the population, allowed to identify nine language use domains where French is used on a daily basis: performing routine examinations, getting the patient up, washing and dressing the patient, administering medications, offering meals, performing therapeutic interventions, giving injections and treating wounds. The content analysis of the two textbooks (see table 1) reveals that *Nursing in two languages* accurately reflects the nursing situations found in the target situation. In addition to portraying the nine target language use domains, it presents a section on how to perform change of shifts and report on patients' health status and needs. Clinical observations reveal that this function is performed in English in the target situation as not all medical staff members are fluent in French. On the other hand, *Santé-Médecine.com* focuses only on three of the nine language use domains thus offering French L2 nursing students a very limited view of the target situation.

Table 1 Language use domains in the target situation and in French L2 nursing textbooks

	Clinical observations	Nursing in two languages	Santé- Médecine.com
Routine examinations	✓	✓	✓
Getting the patient up	✓	✓	
Washing and dressing	✓	✓	
Medications	✓	✓	
Meals	✓	✓	
Therapeutic intervention	✓	✓	✓
Injections	✓	✓	
Wound care	✓	✓	✓
Change of shift		✓	

b. Language Use in the Target Situation

The recordings of the clinical observations were transcribed and analysed so as to identify the phonological, grammatical and lexical features used in the target language use domains. The results were then compared to the examples of language use displayed in *Nursing in Two Languages* and *Santé-Médecine.com* (see tables 2 and 3). The comparison reveals that both textbooks fail to present students with authentic language use in terms of nurses' and patients' speech.

1.5 Nurses' Language Use

Even though real nursing situations are presented to students in both textbooks, the examples of language use recommended to perform these functions fail to provide students with the phonological, grammatical and lexical features commonly found in the speech of bilingual nurses. In fact, all nurse interventions in *Nursing in two languages* and *Santé-Médecine.com* appear to take place in a formal and / or hyper-formal setting. For example, in the section on routine examinations, it is suggested to use the following sentence when taking a patient's blood pressure: *Donnez-moi votre bras, je prends votre pouls. Je prends votre tension. Cela va serrer un peu* (Give me your arm, I will take your pulse. I will take your blood pressure. That will feel a little tight) (p. 63, emphasis mine). However, clinical observations reveal that mildly marked informal phonological, grammatical and lexical features are preferred in this context: *J'vais lever vot' manche pour prend' vot' pouls. Ça va serrer un peu, mais pas longtemps* (I'm going to pull up your sleeve to take your pulse. That will feel a little tight, but not for long). Formal features are rarely found in the nurses' speech. They are used solely in terms of lexical content when using medical terminology and body parts with patients. The same pattern is found in all nine target language use domains identified above.

Table 2 Nurses' use of stylistic variants in the target situation and French L2 nursing textbooks

	Phonological variants	**Grammatical variants**	**Lexical variants**
Clinical observations	Informal	Informal	Informal /Formal
Nursing in two languages	Formal / Hyper-formal	Formal / Hyper-formal	Formal
Santé-Médecine.com	Formal / Hyper-formal	Formal / Hyper-formal	Formal

1.6 Patients' Language Use

While *Santé-Médecine.com* does not present students with patients' reactions suggesting that they remain silent in the target language use domains, *Nursing in Two Languages* lists possible patients' reactions, out of context, at the end of each section. Similar to the nurses in this book, patients use formal or hyper-formal speech styles. However, clinical observations of the target situation reveal that it is never the case. On the contrary, patients use marked and mildly marked informal features when interacting with nurses. They also sometimes code switch from French to English to get their message across. Since it was found that one of the challenges that ESL nurses face is related to their ability to

understand patients' accent and use of colloquial expressions, it appears that both *Santé-Médecine.com* and *Nursing in Two Languages* fail to enhance L2 nurses' receptive skills.

Table 3 Patients' use of stylistic variants in the target situation and French L2 nursing textbooks

	Phonological variants	**Grammatical variants**	**Lexical variants**
Clinical observations	Vernacular /Informal	Vernacular /Informal	Vernacular /Formal
Nursing in two languages	Formal / Hyper-formal	Formal / Hyper-formal	Formal
Santé-Médecine.com	N /A	N /A	N /A

In every language, native speakers choose lexical, phonological and grammatical features that carry the appropriate social meaning for the communicative situations they encounter (Labov, 1972). Moreover, French as a minority language speakers use a number of vernacular features that depart from standard French, or other varieties of spoken French (Mougeon & Beniak, 1991). French L2 textbooks for nursing students fail to reveal these notions to students choosing to portray and idealized variety of standard spoken French in clinical settings.

1.7 How Can LSP Textbooks Meet the Communicative Needs of L2 Learners?

Given that French L2 commercial materials for nursing students do not accurately portray the language use of the current target community, it is thus crucial that the nursing students be exposed to the type of French they will likely encounter in their clinical placements and future job appointments so as to enhance their chances of successfully engaging in interactions with their French-speaking patients.
To integrate non-standard features, dialects and varieties in L2 teaching materials, Valdam (1976a, 2000) proposes the concept of pedagogical norm, a notion born of a concern that students ought to learn languages as they are actually spoken by native speakers from different backgrounds in varied communicative situations (Valdman, 2000). Valdman's pedagogical norm is based on three criteria: (1) sociolinguistic: the pedagogical norm must reflect the actual linguistic behaviour of native speakers in authentic communicative situations; (2) epilinguistic: the pedagogical norm must take into account native speakers' perceptions towards expected linguistic behaviour of L2 users, (3) acquisitional: the pedagogical norm must consider the relative ease of acquisition of the target features (Valdman, 2003). Valdman and collaborators created textbooks using his criteria for selection of linguistic features and practice exercises (for a review of the textbooks see Sieloff Magnan & Walz, 2002). *In Introduction to French Phonology and Morphology*, Valdman (1976b) chooses to first introduce the features that are most generalizable and most commonly used in the spoken discourse of native speakers of French; he later introduces patterns of variation for the same features in different naturally occurring contexts. "Criteria for linguistic authenticity were thus balanced against constraints of learnability" (Sieloff & Walz, 2002: 23).

Hence, pedagogical norms appear as a useful tool that can be adapted to address the communicative demands of the target situation. Moreover, a pedagogical norm could be established for the development of receptive skills, and a different one could be designed for the acquisition of

productive skills. Indeed, the analysis of nurse-patient interactions reveals that French L2 nursing students should be acquainted with recurrent vernacular and informal features of French present in clinical settings if they hope to fully understand their patients. Moreover, the description of French-speaking nurses' speech in the target situation suggests that French L2 nursing students should acquire mildly marked informal phonological, grammatical and lexical features. However, to my knowledge LSP research has never investigated whether target community members expect or want L2 learners to emulate their language use. Investigating target community members' attitudes towards L2 learners' speech is, nonetheless, important because Valdman (2003) argues that informal registers serve as powerful symbols of ethnic and cultural identity that native speakers may not want to share with L2 speakers.

2.0 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDIES

Description of language use in target situations is a crucial step that must be taken in the design of LSP programs and courses (Basturkmen, & Elder, 2004). These descriptions, however, do not seem to make their way into language learning materials as L2 instruction still appears to be constrained by standard language usage. This becomes problematic for L2 students who will work in environments where a spoken variety of the target language differs from the standard written variety portrayed in their textbooks, as it is the case for French L2 nursing students in Western Canada. Valdman's (1976a, 2000) concept of pedagogical norm appears as a useful tool to integrate the target population's language use and introduce linguistic variation into LSP textbooks in an informed way.

Even though this study attempts to describe the language use of the target population, Douglas (2000) states that a discourse domain is dynamic and continually evolving as it is constructed by the participants involved in the communicative situation. The inclusion of new community members, such as L2 users, might therefore change the language behaviour of that target community. Further observations and recordings should be made to ensure that the description of language use remains accurate. Moreover, in light of Valdman's recommendations and epilinguistic criterion to establish a pedagogical norm, it appears that needs analysis procedures for LSP courses should move beyond the identification of language use domains and description of language use, and investigate the expectations target community members have towards L2 speakers. Last, further studies investigating other languages are needed to determine whether the problem described in this paper is one which concerns LSP textbooks in general or only French textbooks.

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