UTILIZATION OF STANDARDIZED PATIENTS IN A MEDICAL COMMUNICATION ESL PROGRAM

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Introduction

The Standardized Patient (SP) Program developed a novel teaching program that provided an intensive, interview-focused communication activity to supplement the established ESL curriculum and accelerate development of medical communication skills in English.

The learners were physicians training in the US as part of the Esteemed Bolashak Scholarship Program, from the Republic of Kazakhstan. These health professionals, visiting the United States to learn about western medicine and medical education, were immersed in small group role play with standardized patients.

Learning Objectives:

- To practice listening and speaking in a comfortable and safe venue.
- To gain exposure to Western "doctor" communication in English.
- To use medical English vocabulary, gaining fluency, and learning tenses of language specific to medical communication.
- To practice "high frequency topics" that can be utilized upon return home.

Seven Kazak scholars, with a variety of medical backgrounds and skill levels, rotated through several SP interview experiences daily for two weeks. Learners were broken into teams of two; each member of the team took a turn interviewing four SPs for four hours with the support of a staff facilitator.

Methods

A scaffold approach to the construction of the activity design was taken; case conversations grew in complexity each day progressing from brief scripted interviews and basic data gathering to more complex requirements such as empathy and dealing with patient emotion, breaking bad news, and ethical considerations in patient care. Daily debriefing focused on learner curiosity and self-identified needs. SP cases were comparable to those used in typical medical school courses, tailored to this specialized program. SPs were carefully selected and trained to assist in facilitation, portray the patient cases, and provide feedback.

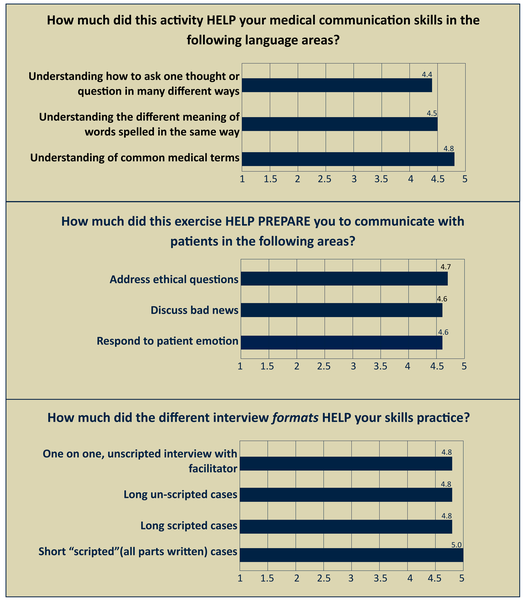
A Facilitation and Debrief Guide was provided to the SPs and to the volunteer staff. The guide was developed by the SP program and the identified ESL leadership to provide a quick summary of the objectives for facilitation and fundamental philosophies of debriefing. The guide is literature-based and similar in theory to the Medical School experiential learning courses that include facilitation and debrief sessions.

Exposure to a variety of people (SPs) was preferred in order for the visitors to hear different voices and different tones, so the SPs were scheduled in a rotation format to offer the most interpersonal variety to the visitors. The SPs were instructed to speak clearly and at a normal pace, slowing down if asked to do so. No knowledge of Russian or Kazak was required, although two of the SPs were fluent in Russian which eased some initial discomfort of the participants.

Scholars very quickly began using humor and enjoying the open structure of the interactions, especially being given the option to ask questions in their own way while using the script as a tool. They liked to try different ways of saying things and asking questions. Empathy was the topic of much discussion. The difference between the statements such as "Don't cry; you need to be strong; don't worry," and "I am sorry that this is happening. How can I help you?" were discussed at length. Visitors were interested in open-ended versus closed-ended questions, rapport building, interpersonal skills, and the weight of different words (e.g., "I feel *suspicious* about your pain").

Results

On the post-course evaluation, learners reported a high level of satisfaction with the program, rating the value of all components from 4.4 - 5.0 on a 5-point scale, going from 1 through 5. In particular, they rated the course as being highly effective in improving their medical communication skills across multiple aspects of communication, and in preparing them to communicate in key areas that required culturally-sensitive handling. The bar graphs below show the scholars' average ratings for evaluation items.



Conclusions

The scholars perceived this activity to be educationally rewarding. Comments made by the scholars reflect appreciation for the course, e.g., "I like friendliness. These are many different situations. I have gained a lot of good." The experience complemented the ESL curriculum and other shadowing experiences scheduled at the Medical School. As a result, more such courses are being implemented with other groups of visiting scholars.

Advanced teaching on difficult communications topics such as breaking bad news, ethical considerations of patient care, and dealing with emotion and empathy could have more dedicated time in the future.

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