

Notes from the inside: Research and practice in doctoral and postdoctoral acquisition of English for Science and Technology in a US academic health science center

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The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in the Texas Medical Center is home to 1100-1300 biomedical research trainees at any given time, including doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows. Over 70% are “international,” and thus L2 trainees are in the majority rather than the minority at this institution. (Actual data on native language not available; visa status is used as a proxy.) As a trained linguist, faculty member in an Epidemiology department and associate director of a multidisciplinary research training program, and member of the editorial board of an international journal, the author has had a unique perspective from which to observe, study, and contribute to L2 trainee acquisition of scientific English. The pressures on trainees, faculty, and administration to provide accelerated and efficient solutions to the language acquisition problem are acute and are compounded by the lack of awareness of what linguistic and sociolinguistic differences entail for mentor-trainee relationships and trainee career development and publication prospects. The presentation will examine EST acquisition issues in a US research environment, with particular attention to not only learner perspectives but also research mentor and institutional perspectives in an effort to consider balanced and workable solutions. Data will be presented from various sources: informal trainee surveys and interviews (C. Cameron, Chang, & Pagel, 2011); formal, structured surveys of mentors and trainees (Anderson et al., 2015) from a National Institutes of Health-funded study; qualitative data from mentor and trainee focus groups (C Cameron et al., 2013); and reports on use of various strategies, including mentor workshops and Fulbright-sponsored train-the-trainer workshops in Brazil and Chile (for EAL speakers) (C. Cameron et al., 2011; C. Cameron et al., 2009; C. Cameron, Zhao, & McHugh, 2012). For the given setting, a variety of strategies, not all of them involving direct instruction in English, is needed to approach this complex, high-stakes situation. Solutions should address the concerns and solicit the participation of all stakeholders, including trainees, faculty mentors, administration, and language instructors.

References

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Biodata

Carrie Cameron is Assistant Professor at MD Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston, Texas. She studies scientific communication skill development in diverse populations of research trainees and the role that it plays in their career development. Dr. Cameron designs and implements advanced communication training for researchers, including EAL researchers. As former education director of the Department of Scientific Publications, she created the institutional course "Scientific English" for researchers at MD Anderson and has been invited to research centers in Brazil and Chile to create Fulbright-funded communication skills training programs. As Principal Investigator of an NIH-funded study, she is investigating the role of trainees' linguistic background in their communication skill development and in their mentors' strategies to assist them.