International health professionals’ skills in Finnish: Domain-specific communicative functions and constructions in use

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The language skills of international health care professionals are under public debate worldwide. Also in Finland, the question has become under scrutiny as the number of health professionals with immigration background is growing. Currently, the B1 level skills required in Finnish are demonstrated in a Finnish National Certificates of Language Proficiency (FNCLP) test. There is, however, an increasing concern as to whether this level is sufficient for working as a health care professional, and tightening of language requirements to B2 and assessment of professional language skills has officially been suggested.

The focus of this paper is on the professional language used by 34 internationally educated health care professionals. The core data includes their test performances (N=204) in a tailor-made professional language test module developed in the project Health care Finnish: developing and assessing Finnish proficiency among health care professionals (2014-2015). The module included integrated tasks focusing on such domain-specific communicative functions as giving advice, providing information, requesting action and reporting. The addressees were colleagues, patients and third persons. The skill profiles obtained in the FNCLP intermediate level test (B1-B2) serve as background data.

The test performances were analysed qualitatively by combining functional and construction-based approaches to find out, what kind of constructions the participants use to express domain-specific communicative functions and how they shift between professional and colloquial language and different modalities.

The results suggest that many participants are even more confident with professional language than with general language. They use conventional constructs to express communicative functions typical for health care settings in spite of lacking accuracy or basic vocabulary. By relying on their still developing linguistic resources they also shift smoothly between different registers and modalities. The more advanced participants show increasing fluency in mediating professional content in a dense manner and when shifting between different domain-specific genres.

Keywords: professional language skills, health care, communicative functions, professional language, Finnish as a second language.