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Employees learn to translate to success

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Living in Napa Valley, most people can squeeze out a few Spanish words or simple phrases, but in today's multicultural work environment, employees are finding, more often than not, they need more than just the basics.

Whether a winery, hotel, restaurant or other business, use of the valley's unofficial second language continues to rise. Local employers know this all too well. So does Josefina Adriance.

This Napan started a company called Spanish for Business that teaches employees how to break down the language barrier. Adriance, a native of Spain, first came to Napa 15 years ago. After spending some time tutoring and translating, she saw an opportunity.

The instructor decided to design her own materials and classes to address the Spanish language needs of valley businesses such as wine and hospitality. She also aimed to condense the learning curve. "Business people are busy. They don't want to spend five years in college to learn Spanish," said Adriance.

Spanish for Business classes meet weekly for 10 weeks. After an introduction to basic Spanish, the classes delve into three different industry sections.

Her first class, Spanish for the wine industry, covers vocabulary and situations pertinent to vineyards and wineries such as tools, equipment, operations and common phrases.

The second session, Spanish for hospitality, focuses on communication related to the kitchen, restaurant, hotel, tasting room, maintenance and housekeeping.

Adriance tailors the third class, Spanish for business, for general business use. It consists of basic Spanish and seven additional chapters including human resources, real estate, banking, insurance, medical, accounting, taxes and legal.

Luckily for those who've ever struggled to form past, present, future and other tenses, Adriance's course streamlines the dreaded conjugation of verbs. She prefers to communicate the basic intent. "You don't have to get into every single conjugation. Just a few that are simple." For example, instead of teaching "I have eaten," Adriance uses "I ate."

Adriance said she prefers the classroom environment for beginning students.

"It's better to have groups, there is more repetition," she said. The class sizes are limited. Adriance only takes up to 12 students for each session. Just like back in high school, students also get homework assignments. "I'm not a miracle worker. You have to work on it at home," she said.

Even though Adriance is from Spain, she teaches what she calls American Spanish. "It's easier," she said. And certainly the most common in California.

Adriance also covers slang or the informal combinations of Spanglish. She gave the example of how some Spanish-speaking workers might use one name for a piece of equipment, while the actual name might be quite different.

"The most important thing is that I want people to communicate," she said.

But Adriance knows communication involves more than just words. Language has its own customs, the teacher said.

"When I teach Spanish. I talk about culture. You learn about the people through language."

Spanish speakers sometimes use more formal language, she explained. She illustrated this by the Spanish words for "you." T is the informal "you." "Usted" is the more formal "you," used when addressing someone senior or older.

"In the Spanish culture age is important. A younger person should never say 't' to an older person. You always say 'usted' to show respect."

Besides Spanish being her first language, Adriance knows firsthand about wine. Her husband worked in the wine industry and her sister owns a vineyard in Spain. Working as a bookkeeper, she gained a business background. It helps her relate to her students, she said.

One student is Jackie Diaz of Joseph Phelps Vineyard. The Human Resources manager took the Spanish for wineries class, saying she always wanted to learn to improve her Spanish.

The class included winery workers, winemakers, vineyard workers and lab employees.

"It was a good mix of people and they weren't afraid to chat and practice. The way the lessons were taught made a good learning environment."

"We had a very dynamic group," said Diaz.

"It's great to begin to feel comfortable speaking Spanish. Your inhibitions go away," said Diaz.

"I wasn't afraid to try and communicate." She sang Adriance's praises.