

'You Can't Work in a School'

A Pakistani SLP defies her professors' predictions that employers would balk at hiring a non-native clinician.

BY KAUSAR H. ZAFAR

I moved to the United States from Pakistan in 1977 at the age of 28. With a master's degree in psychology from the University of Karachi, the natural career path should have been a PhD in psychology. However, my neighbor suggested speech-language pathology and I found myself talking with the graduate coordinator at Wichita State University (WSU) about a career in a profession I had never heard of.

The coordinator looked at me strangely as he explained the requirements for becoming a speech-language pathologist, including a test of basic English. I upped the lexical and linguistic complexity of my responses—and suddenly the English test was waived, probably because of my sudden switch to more complex verbal expression. Clearly, he did not know I had attended a British school and was at the top of my class in English. Four years of college and two years of a master's program—all in English—added to my vocabulary and syntax growth.

After admission, the next hurdle was to take concurrent articulation disorders and phonetics classes. Faculty assumed I wouldn't be able to handle it. When I got a perfect score on the first phonetics quiz, I suppose the instructor thought I was cheating, as the girl sitting next to me also had a perfect score. With his eyes set on me, he told the class to do our own work.

Gradually I felt that everyone was no longer surprised to see their first non-native student. After a while, people even began to ask me the meaning or spelling of difficult English words.

My supervisor told me that 16 out of 20 students in her observation class had named me a good clinician. However, another supervisor told me I couldn't do a clinical rotation in a school because I wouldn't be working in one—I assumed because I have a Pakistani-British dialect. Another instructor, who thought highly of me, told me that I may be a skilled clinician, but that no one would hire me—a non-native speaker.

When I graduated in 1986 with a 3.75 GPA—despite my daughter developing leukemia after my fourth semester—my husband's company transferred us to Houston.

Within two months, I landed my first job with the public schools. I self-taught everything you need to learn about public schools: the eligibility requirements, the acronyms, how to work on */t/*. You won't believe how I now excel at teaching the American */t/* production!

In 1993, two years after my daughter died of complications from leukemia, I left the schools for work in a skilled nursing facility, and three years later became director of rehabilitation. I managed occupational, physical, speech and respiratory therapy. The nursing home chain pointed to my department as an example of clinical and business excellence. I developed programs in wound care, contracture prevention, and weight-loss management and hydration. I learned whatever I could about management from the free seminars offered by the nursing home chain.

On Jan. 3, 2000, I opened the doors of The Speech Clinic Inc.



Kausar Zafar (second from left) and her husband, Humayon, visit their son, Shaarik, and granddaughters Sophia and Aliza.

We now have eight clinicians and two office staff. We get referrals from all over Houston. I love to treat voice clients—that's my passion—but I enjoy all other areas of speech-language treatment, too.

I will forever be grateful to WSU for giving me the opportunity at a time when diversity in communication sciences and disorders was rare. I am thankful and relieved that the situation is so different now. 🌟

Kausar H. Zafar, MA, CCC-SLP, owns The Speech Clinic, Inc., in Katy, Texas. She is an affiliate of ASHA Special Interest Group 3, Voice and Upper Airway Disorders. •khzafar@hotmail.com

This column presents contributors' views and experiences in their own voices.