

Towards Uniformity in English for Medical Purposes: Evaluation and Design

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SUMMARY

Introduction A thorough analysis of students' needs will enable teachers to build up a profile of a typical learner.

Objective The objective of this study was to determine the current and target English language skill level and use the findings as guidelines in designing a uniform course.

Methods The investigation was carried out at the Congress of Biomedical Science Students of Serbia held in Lepenski Vir in 2009. The investigation was conducted using a questionnaire and included 277 medical students of all study years and from all university centres of Serbia.

Results The obtained results do not vary significantly among universities. The students marked writing and translation as their weakest skills and pointed out that their greatest problem areas were also vocabulary and grammar. On one hand, writing was ranked high among the skills which needed improvement but on the other hand, it was believed to be the least important in medical career. Speaking and listening were shown to be the most important for medical students.

Conclusion In designing the course, teachers need to be able to use approaches and methods flexibly and creatively in order to bring about positive results. Since course design is a dynamic process, teachers have the responsibility of negotiating a plan of work with the learners.

Keywords: English language skills; course design; uniformity

INTRODUCTION

Our modern society puts great emphasis on clear and concise communication and broadening of knowledge. Due to its widespread usage, English is nowadays popularly acknowledged to be the international language of a wide range of occupations. It has also emerged as both an intranational and international language of medical communication, a prime vehicle for the transmission of information. Intercommunication, which means reading and publishing articles, getting involved in research, participating at conferences, following new improvements, is the imperative device for the self-development of a doctor.

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the learner is the centre of attention and one of the greatest contributions to teaching ESP with the emphasis put on a thorough analysis of the students' needs. The major interest in this approach is to create knowledge about the specific needs to be covered in specialized language classrooms, in order to make this kind of language teaching as efficient as possible.

The demand for English teaching in the medical field is an example of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) [1], a type of programme that may concentrate on language learning in general while keeping to a specific purpose [1, 2]. Courses in ESP focus on the specific vocabulary and the unique language skills likely to be required in a given field. Students' language and skills use and difficulties can be surveyed by means of questionnaires given directly to the learners. In this way, an overall picture will emerge of students' perceived needs. In addition, it will be possible to build up a profile of a typical student attending the English for Academic Purposes/English for Medical Purposes (EAP/EMP) course.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study was to determine the current and target English language skill levels of medical students in Serbia. It explores the language proficiency among university centres. The findings could be used as guidelines with the aim of designing a more uniform course.

METHODS

The study included 277 biomedical students from the university centres in Serbia. There were also four students from Foča who took part in the study but due to the small number, their participation was not taken into consideration.

The participants were given a questionnaire which consisted of 11 questions. They were asked to state their opinion on the importance of the English language during their studies and in the future careers. The students were expected to name their biggest problems with the English language, grade their language skills according to strengths and weaknesses and importance in their professional development. In the part of the questionnaire where students were asked to grade their skills, the highest value they could give was 5 and the lowest was 1.

The questionnaire was in Serbian. The basic language skills taken into account were listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The questions also covered vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and translation. Mean values and percentages were drawn from the obtained answers.

RESULTS

Out of 277 medical students there were 39 participants from Novi Sad, 84 from Belgrade, 42 from Kragujevac, 45 from Priština (currently situated in Kosovska Mitrovica) and 67 participants from Niš. The students taking part in the questionnaire were in different years of their studies.

In the introductory question, the students were asked how long they have been learning English. The results spanned from 10.6 years (Priština) to 11.46 years (Novi Sad). The knowledge of general English was graded lowest in Niš (3.80) and highest in Kragujevac (4.28). On the other hand, the lowest average grade of medical English was 3.46 (Novi Sad) whereas the highest was 4 (Priština).

In the following section of the questionnaire the students were asked to grade their knowledge of the language skills. The grades ranged from 1 (the lowest) to 5 (the highest). This part included listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. The results did not vary among universities and, as presented in Table 1, the students from the Universities in Novi Sad, Belgrade and Niš found writing to be their weakest skill. Translation was graded lowest by the students from Kragujevac and speaking by the students from Priština. On the other hand, the highest graded skill was listening in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Priština and reading in Niš. Overall, the skills were ranked in the following order, starting from the lowest: writing (3.34), translation and speaking (3.63), reading (3.91) and listening (4.25).

Taking into account vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, along with reading and writing, the students seem to be aware that the difficulties arise from the more basic levels and thus majority of the students found vocabulary

(36.16%) and grammar (32.93%) to be the most problematic areas which need improvement. On the other hand, a rather small percentage (7.06%) of students had difficulties with reading. This may be interpreted in the sense that the majority of students had no problem understanding what is read. The results are presented in Table 2.

As for determining the most important skill for medical students, oral communication skills (4.31) were at the top of priority lists as shown in Table 3. Writing (3.29) was considered the least important. The average grade given to translation was 4 and such high ranking might be explained if we consider that translation was an essential part of their high school English courses and exams.

The majority of students (93.50%) agreed that English was important during their studies and even a greater number of them (96.75%) agreed that it was important after graduation in terms of professional development. It is interesting to note that 79.78% of students stated that a good knowledge of medical terms facilitated the learning of English.

DISCUSSION

The field of medicine and health care brings medical experts from all over the world into close contact with each other. In order to be equal members of the discourse community, the students of medicine, future doctors, need to be well prepared for the linguistic tasks awaiting them in the future. One way to achieve positive motivation during the course is using materials which will be useful and relevant for their future careers [3]. An emphasis on the special needs of the learners and designing a specific course of English which would most effectively meet those needs are prob-

Table 1. Weakest language skill

University	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Translation
Belgrade	4.44	3.53	3.73	3.14	3.80
Novi Sad	3.92	3.72	3.66	2.45	3.44
Kragujevac	4.33	3.76	4	4	3.33
Priština	4.44	3.53	3.73	3.73	3.80
Niš	4.13	3.65	4.43	3.40	3.82
Total	4.25	3.63	3.89	3.89	3.63

Table 2. Greatest problem with the English language

University	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Writing	Reading
Belgrade	35.71%	28.57%	17.85%	28.57%	7.14%
Novi Sad	30.76%	30.76%	46.15%	15.38%	7.69%
Kragujevac	21.42%	42.85%	7.14%	28.57%	7.14%
Priština	46.66%	26.66%	13.33%	26.66%	13.33%
Niš	46.26%	35.82%	13.43%	17.91%	0%
Total	36.16%	32.93%	19.58%	23.41%	7.06%

Table 3. The most important skill for the students of medicine

University	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Translation
Belgrade	4.4	4.4	4.03	3.43	4.07
Novi Sad	4.11	4.33	3	2.18	3.4
Kragujevac	4.33	3.92	4.16	4.25	3.92
Priština	4.5	4.23	4	4.33	4.16
Niš	3.61	4.67	3.63	2.29	4.45
Total	4.19	4.31	3.76	3.29	4

ably the most important concerns of teaching English for Medical Purposes.

Our study included the more dedicated students from the university centres in Serbia. Contrary to what might be expected, the results obtained in the study do not vary among universities. This might be explained as a consequence of previous high school education. But this education has one major drawback – it emphasizes the dependency of the learner upon the teacher and does not bring into focus the necessary language skills. The weaknesses that the students observe in themselves point to an inadequate approach in teaching which is used in general English classes. It is important, in this final stage, to direct the learning of English towards a uniform goal and to bring to surface all the language skills equally, paying special attention to those the students believe to be the most important.

The study showed that the greatest problem for the students lies in the lack of vocabulary, so terminology and correct pronunciation would be the starting point of a course which is in accordance with the students' needs. Terminology in this sense would represent a sort of a skeleton on which the building of knowledge may take place. English for Medical Purposes is highly context-based and terminology is naturally put in a suitable context because it does not represent knowledge in itself. The same methods apply for grammar as well, which was marked as the second biggest problematic area. Grammar should not be taught explicitly but rather within the medical context because the students are basically familiar with grammatical rules but often fail to use them correctly. In this sense, grammar would have a remedial function.

The level of lexis is then raised to a higher level which would focus on the skills of writing and speaking. It should be emphasized that the students in our study marked writing as their weakest skill and ranked it second among the skills which need improvement but generally do not believe it to be important in their medical studies. Interestingly, they find translation to be more important. This may be understood if we take into account that high school education still largely relies on the Grammar-Translation method and pays little, if any, attention to guided writing. However, in higher education, English is becoming the official language of expert writing and the development of the writing skill should by no means be neglected.

The writing phase of the syllabus is naturally followed by speaking. Students are aware of the significance of this skill and rank it first among those they believe necessary in their medical careers. Moving to the communicative design, the course enters its final phase. 'This requires us to go beyond the sentence and to look at longer stretches of language' [4]. In accordance with the results of our study,

various surveys have shown that one of the biggest difficulties for students is expressing themselves in speech which is something that future doctors must not allow, because 'limited English can hurt patients' [5]. In the context of medicine, this mostly applies to speaking in seminars, taking part in oral discussions and conferences.

Being conducted at the students' congress, the study is limited by the fact that it included only more dedicated students, i.e. those who actively took part in these expert interactions. However, one of our goals is to establish a course design which would produce learners who will be comfortable in using the English language as a tool for expressing themselves precisely. In this sense, it is exactly these dedicated students who herald the new era of teaching and represent a starting point for achieving uniformity and homogeneity.

CONCLUSION

When designing a course, it is important to bear in mind that the ultimate objective is to assist students to learn as efficiently as possible. Modern methodology puts learner autonomy as one of its basic postulates because students should be able to continue their learning even after the course itself has finished. The purpose is to enable the students to become more effective and independent learners of English.

In designing the course, it is usually the case that a number of different approaches are needed and are best combined in an eclectic manner in order to bring about positive results. Teachers need to be able to use approaches and methods flexibly and creatively based on their own judgment and experience. The teacher has the responsibility of negotiating a plan of work with the learners on a regular basis because it is a dynamic process. Learners' involvement in the needs analysis can have benefits [5]. This calls for personal sensitivity from the teacher, flexibility in terms of teaching style and mastery of a wide range of methodological alternatives [6].

The ability to communicate precisely is of paramount importance because it represents means for professional improvement and interaction with experts in the field which, in turn, help build the qualities of a good doctor.

This study dealt with evaluation of English language skills level in medical students and design of a uniform language course. It was based on students' perceived needs and beliefs that no matter which university they attend, there should be homogeneity and uniformity of language proficiency levels. Further research should be directed towards implementation of a uniform syllabus as is the case with their medical subjects.

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Хомогенизација у подучавању енглеском језику за потребе медицине: процена и осмишљавање наставног плана

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КРАТАК САДРЖАЈ

Увод Детаљна анализа потреба студената омогућава наставнику да створи профил типичног ученика.

Циљ рада Циљ рада је била процена тренутног и циљног нивоа познавања вештина енглеског језика и примена добијених резултата у креирању хомогеног наставног плана.

Методе рада Истраживање је изведено на Конгресу студената биомедицинских наука Србије одржаном у Лепенском виру 2009. године. Истраживање је обављено путем упитника и обухватило је 277 студената свих година медицине и из свих универзитетских центара у Србији.

Резултати Добијени резултати не варирају значајно међу универзитетима. Студенти су означили писање и превод као своје најслабије вештине, а такође су истакли да највећи про-

BLEM представљају вокабулар и граматика. Писање је рангирано високо међу вештинама које треба да се унапреде, али, с друге стране, студенти сматрају да вештина писања није посебно битна у медицинској професији. Студенти медицине сматрају да су говор и слушање најважније вештине.

Закључак Приликом осмишљавања наставног плана потребно је да наставници буду флексибилни и креативни у примени приступа и метода, како би се дошло до позитивних резултата. С обзиром на динамичну природу креирања курса, од наставника се очекује да целокупни процес обавља у сарадњи са студентом.

Кључне речи: језичке вештине; осмишљавање курса; хомогенизација