

Learning Medical English: A Prerequisite for Successful Academic and Professional Education

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SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to present specificities of the English language teaching necessary for successful education and professional training of medical students. In contemporary globalized world the English language has become the basic language of communication in all scientific fields including the field of medical science. It is well established that Medical English teaching should primarily focus on stable linguistic competence in English that is created by means of content and context based curriculum, thus preparing students for active use of English upon graduation. In order to achieve this it is very important that English language teaching be based on specific real situations in which the language is to be used. In addition, students should be encouraged to adapt practical skills applicable in specific future professional setting. Medical English teaching represents constant challenge for teachers because they need to be flexible, open to new approaches and methods, make decisions and adapt themselves to constant changes. In addition, long-term learning is at the core of higher education, and being equal partners, both students and teachers should be aware that education is a two-way process.

Keywords: English language teaching; medical students; linguistic competence; professional setting; long-term learning

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

In the last few decades English for specific purposes (ESP) has become one of the most prevalent forms of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The concept underlying the term *language for specific purposes* (LSP) is closely associated with the teaching of language for professional purposes where students need to learn how to use language in their future professional setting. In this context, specific linguistic features of the language used in different specialized fields are emphasized.

The basic principle of teaching languages for specific purposes has been created to meet specific academic and professional needs of learners, whereby each pedagogical situation and each group of learners is considered to be new and different from the previous one. The language courses for specific purposes are based on particular vocabulary set and unique language skills that will be indispensable to learners in a specialized field. There is no single approach for all pedagogical situations; there is no curriculum and set of activities that are applicable in all contexts. Therefore, it is of crucial importance in ESP teaching to determine the unique features of teaching and learning and apply them in the development of the curriculum, syllabus and assessment [1].

The goal of ESP teaching is to achieve successful professional and educational goals. Such form of teaching is based on a serious analysis of the needs of students and should be specially

designed. It includes a special selection of skills, topics, contents and functions. What is important in designing special programmes is to take into account the level of students' knowledge of the English language. Some students are beginners, some have an intermediate level of English, while others have a high level of English and strive to improve their knowledge. For this reason it is very important to begin the process of designing an adequate programme by performing adequate needs analysis. Such an analysis may provide two important pieces of information: the first relates to the current level of knowledge, motivation and previous learning methods; the latter relates to students' aspirations. Therefore, this information will be of great help to the teacher to adequately perform his role [2].

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES

Nowadays English is *the lingua franca* of communication in the field of medical science. It is used as the primary means of communication in correspondence, at conferences, in the process of writing scientific articles, which leads to globalization and homogenization of science and scientific language. It is characterized by specific linguistic features and requires special study which can be realized only by using specifically designed programmes.

Designing a curriculum in which the student is in the centre of attention is the basis of

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foreign language teaching in most universities worldwide and is becoming more and more prevailing. It is based on the needs of students and reflects their motivation and success, consequently affecting the creation of adequate curriculum and syllabus [3].

English for medical purposes (EMP) belongs to the category of discipline-specific language learning. It should primarily focus on stable linguistic competence in English created by means of content and context based curriculum preparing students for active use of English upon graduation. In order to achieve this, it is very important that the English language teaching be based on specific target situations, that is, real situations in which the language is to be used. In addition, students should be encouraged to adapt practical skills applicable in specific future professional setting [4].

EMP is primarily taught from the perspective of the real situation. Teaching is focused on language in context and acquiring specific vocabulary, as well as on grammar and structures. The aim of such a course is to prepare students for further education or training in specific fields, where the knowledge of English would greatly facilitate this process. The goal is to instruct future medical professionals to actively communicate in English, primarily through specific situations that closely reflect the real world of professional setting. This approach combines the core medical courses and an English language course. Having already oriented their education towards a specific area, medical students are generally aware of the purpose of learning English and finding it complementary in that orientation. Moreover, the knowledge of the basic field of interest allows them to identify the real context of vocabulary and language structures presented to them [5].

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE ON MEDICAL EDUCATION

Numerous studies have investigated the influence of the English language knowledge on students' medical education. The aim of an Australian study was to assess students' level of EFL prior to enrolling in Medical School. The results of the study indicated that students lacked the speaking skill and the authors of the study offered recommendations for improving oral communication skills thus enabling them to successfully communicate in professional setting [6].

In addition, the study carried out in Italian medical schools aimed at the assessment of English language knowledge of medical students. The authors of the study came to the conclusion that the goals of EMP teaching and minimum level of specific skills were not strictly defined. They pointed to the fact that there should be greater collaboration between universities and believed that it would contribute to higher teaching quality, and students' academic performance. Furthermore, they proposed taking mandatory Medical English language exam upon graduation [7].

According to Brown [8] from the United States of America, the ESP curriculum should be based on content leading to students' successful academic performance. It also

pointed the fact that traditional methods of language learning were out of context and lack adequate linguistic competence needed in everyday, real-world situations. Thus it was suggested that the content of all academic core courses should be incorporated into the curriculum of a foreign language. As a result, the solid base for acquisition of specialized communicative skills, both professional and academic, could be established [8].

Hull [3] believes that the priority of Medical English teaching should be adequate linguistic competence achieved by involving healthcare professionals in the process of creating the English language curriculum. At the centre of the approach he advocates is the content and context based programme preparing students for active language use after graduation.

According to O'Dowd [9] from Hamamatzu University, Medical English teaching should not only focus on vocabulary acquisition and text analysis but also on developing communication skills, problem solving, as well as decision making. ESP teachers should recognize the necessity of implementing and developing the so called *higher-order thinking skills* in their students so that they would be able to satisfy both professional and social requirements.

STRATEGIES FOR ACCELERATING LEARNING AND BOOSTING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

It is generally agreed that ESP teaching should be directed towards the needs of individuals learning the language. Regarding EMP teaching, basic needs of medical students include understanding of referent texts about the latest developments in the field of medical science, practicing and improving the speaking skill with an emphasis on acquiring medical terminology through role play, pair and team work, projects. In addition, practicing writing skill in terms of presenting case reports, case studies, and completing medical documentation is also beneficial. Furthermore, medical students should be able to follow relevant literature, write research papers, as well as participate in student exchanges and international student congresses. Such activities provide firm base allowing them to share their knowledge and experience with colleagues from abroad, as well as to publish scientific articles in prestigious international journals [10].

Small group work based on the skillfulness of each individual student is considered to be one of the important components of ESP teaching. The main activities that are to be used in class include *brainstorming*, the process designed to obtain the broadest range of ideas relating to a specific subject, *circle of knowledge*, the strategy providing a framework for developing effective group discussions, and *metaphorical expression*, where direct analogies and personal analogies are used to teach new concept or to deepen students' understanding of already known concepts. The objectives of teaching in small groups are encouraging students to think and discuss openly, participate actively, develop communication skills consisting of listening, explaining, asking and answering questions [9].

Advantages of small group work include enhanced identification of the needs of the students and development of responsibility and interpersonal skills. According to this approach, teachers need to demonstrate positive attitude, confidence and respect of their students, as well as express understanding of students' way of learning. Teachers cannot teach students the thinking process, but they can increase the awareness of their own inner potential through practice of the so-called sub-skills. These sub-skills include analytical thinking, problem solving, deduction, and use of imagination. In order for these skills to be improved, teachers are expected to adopt the attitudes and approaches of students in various activities in class [9].

The task of the ESP/EMP teacher is to provide balanced practicing of all these skills in the teaching process. This is a very demanding task if one considers the huge amount of necessary research and at the same time very limited duration of lectures and classes. It should be emphasized that designing an academic course is very dynamic process, primarily due to the development of both medical science and methods of teaching English. Since students usually transfer their knowledge of core courses to English classes, they can participate in planning the content

of the course, which enables introduction of autonomy in the English language course [11]. Some of the strategies include improving the constructive dialogue between teachers and students, collaboration with teachers of core courses, as well as continuous evaluation in order to create adequate curriculum specially designed for medical profession. The special relationship between teachers and students has great impact on teaching methodology and is student initiated. In addition, long-term learning is at the core of higher education, and being equal partners, both students and teachers should be aware that education is a two-way process [12].

CONCLUSION

Medical English teaching represents constant challenge for teachers because they need to be flexible, open to new approaches and methods, make decisions and adapt themselves to constant changes. In this context, they should take on the role of organizers whose job is to create the conditions and opportunities for learning, and provide assistance to students in the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their professional and academic goals.

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Учење енглеског језика за потребе медицине – предуслов за успешно образовање и стручно усавршавање

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КРАТАК САДРЖАЈ

Циљ овог рада је да представи специфичности наставе енглеског језика неопходне за успешно образовање и усавршавање студената медицинске струке. У савременом глобализованом свету енглески језик је постао основно средство комуникације у свим научним областима, укључујући и медицину. Опште је познато да би настава енглеског језика за потребе медицинске струке требало да се заснива на чврстој језичкој компетенцији, коју је најбоље постићи кроз наставни план базиран на садржају и контексту, чиме се студенти припремају за активно коришћење енглеског језика након дипломирања. Да би се ово постигло, веома је важно да настава енглеског језика буде заснована на одређеним реалним ситуацијама у којима ће се језик користити.

Поред тога, студенте би требало охрабривати да усвоје језичке вештине које су применљиве у будућем професионалном окружењу. Настава медицинског енглеског језика је стални изазов за наставнике због тога што је потребно да буду флексибилни, отворени за нове приступе и методе, доносе одлуке и прилагођавају се сталним променама. Поред тога, дугорочно учење је у основи високог образовања, а наставници и студенти би требало да су свесни да је образовање двосмеран процес с обзиром на то да су у том процесу једнаки партнери.

Кључне речи: настава енглеског језика; студенти медицинске струке; језичка компетенција; професионално окружење; дугорочно учење

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