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STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON AN ONLINE ELECTIVE MEDICAL ENGLISH COURSE

Summary: This paper examines students' perception of the online elective Medical English (ME) course. This course covers professional correspondence and doctor-patient communication through a combination of theoretical approaches and practical assignments. A qualitative analysis of students' reflection papers is performed and implications for the development and improvement of the course are highlighted. The results of the analysis show the students appreciate the online format, the honing of professional correspondence, and a unique approach to doctor-patient communication. Another important implication is the use of role-plays in the digital environment. Finally, students' suggestions and critical views are analysed and taken into consideration for the future upgrade of the course.

Key words: doctor-patient communication, Medical English, online learning, role-play, students' reflections.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2004, enormous changes were introduced in higher education throughout Europe. The Bologna Declaration was implemented envisaged to enable greater student mobility between different universities. This implied coordination in study programmes and their adjustment to the needs of modern education systems. The trend was applied in the area of Medical Studies, as well.

At the Faculty of Medicine, this process was very specific due to the nature of the studies. In terms of language education, apart from the compulsory curriculum in English in the first two years of undergraduate education, the needs analysis showed the importance of introducing English language courses at higher levels. The requirements of the highly advanced medical studies showed that students were asked to perform an array of different language tasks in order to be successful professionals. Using literature, exchanging medical knowledge, writing research articles (RAs) in particular, as well as participating at international congresses, symposia and other meetings have become the key to their scientific and professional success. Furthermore, doctor-patient communi-

cation has become an important part of instruction. Thus elective English Language 3, 4 and 5 courses were introduced in 2006 aiming at following the core curriculum. At first, the courses were organized in the form of traditional classroom instruction for 10-15 students. However, in time, their numbers increased and there was a need to transform the teaching module into a more sophisticated format. Online courses have turned out to be an excellent way of engaging students and they have found this way of instruction extremely useful. The English Language 3 course has covered medical topics such as emergencies, cardiovascular diseases, transplantation, infections and it is constantly being improved and enriched on the basis of students' ideas and suggestions, as well. To that purpose, Internet resources have provided plenty of materials for learning and practicing various language skills. It is an introductory course to more complex tasks related to writing RAs, one of the most important medical genres. It also provides student with some basics of doctor-patient communication, not only in English, but in general.

2. ONLINE TEACHING

According to Bjekić et al. (2004: 336-352) a modern teacher needs to possess computer competencies in order to meet the demands of their profession. As Fotos and Brown (2004: 7) put it: "Technology will not replace teachers, teachers who use technology will replace those who don't".

Introducing computers in the teaching process is considered to improve this process by engaging students, enhancing their motivation and producing better overall results (Jović & Stevanović 2015: 371). This is why computer assisted language learning (CALL) and computer assisted instruction have developed rapidly. It is believed that CALL enables learners to become responsible for their learning autonomy, to be aware of their learning goals and possibly to achieve better results (Barson 1999). CALL is characterized by connectivism, learner-centredness and learner autonomy, interactivity, task-basedness, cooperative and collaborative learning and efficiency (Veselá 2012: 59) and it involves simulation and animation, multimedia support, development of hybrid teaching systems, web governing, etc. (Jović & Stevanović 2015: 372). Generally, information and communication technology (primarily the Internet) are seen as an excellent source of resources and motivation for both teachers and students and they enable them to be more interactive (Chapelle 2001: 175).

The role of the teacher in such a system is mostly seen as that of a challenger, a motivator or a navigator (Veselá 2012: 50-51). In the field of ESP, the teacher is usually a course designer and material provider (Bojović 2006: 490) as well and when creating a course they mostly rely on two main strategies – input based strategy¹ and output based strategy² (Basturkmen 2008). The latter is more applicable to ESP and it is complemented by the so-called "deep-end strategy" (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998) that implies relying on students' target professional situation and their performance. The courses that are based on these strategies

¹ According to this strategy, students acquire knowledge through exposure to language, so teachers provide them with authentic texts, comprehensive activities, etc.

² Learning occurs owing to students' efforts to communicate and it is usually followed by some sort of input (i.e. feedback).

insist on simulating real-life situations, so they make use of case studies, various projects, presentations, role-plays, etc. (Veselá 2012: 15-16; Sinadinović & Mičić Kandijaš 2014).

When it comes to online courses, teachers exploit various tools, such as electronic mail, chat rooms, conferencing, web-based online learning systems, bulletin boards (Daud & Zubairi 2006: 7), as well as Google groups, personal websites, Moodle, etc. In the past twenty years, there have been several studies that explored the results of e-learning and compared the performance of online and offline students. On the positive side, it has been stated that students' participation was greater in online format than in the classroom – 86-92% participation in online courses compared to only 37-60% participation in class discussions (Kelm 1992; Sullivan & Prat 1996; Kern 1995). Moreover, some researchers proved online students had better overall results than classroom-based students (Thirunarayanan & Perez-Prado 2001). Yu-Chih & Cifuentes (2001) reported that their students noticed they improved their communication skills and became better at active learning, critical inquiry and reflective thinking. On the negative side, it was mentioned that some students felt a bit uncomfortable with the electronic environment as they found it less spontaneous than class discussions (Beaudoin 2002). A sense of detachment was reported by some online students as they did not know what was going on on the other side and they also had problems with some of their peers who were slow-responders and it was rather difficult having them as exchange partners (Yu-Chih & Cifuentes 2001). Finally, Gonzales (1995) found out that the teacher was more formal in an online course in comparison with the classroom-based version of the same course.

3. AN ONLINE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 3 COURSE

The online format of this course was first introduced in 2013/14 and it made use of Google groups which enabled sharing video and audio clips, managing discussions, asking questions, etc. The teacher had the role of a moderator and a controller in this format and the following topics were explored: history taking, emergency medicine, transplantation, infectious diseases, pathology, pharmacology, oncology, AIDS, etc. The main focus was on reading and writing skills (that were mostly practiced through reading and summarizing authentic texts), as well as terminology and functions. Students were supposed to write abstracts, make Power Point presentations and explore essay writing. Audio and visual authentic materials were used by means of You Tube, TED Talks and various podcasts.

The current course format was introduced in 2017/18 as a six-week course with online format and it was moderated through a Google group. The assignments that students have to complete in this format have considerably changed in comparison with the previous version of the course. Students are expected to do the following: write a CV and a cover letter, assess doctor-patient communication during their regular visits to hospitals, create a role-play (a doctor-patient encounter), write a case report, give feedback to fellow students on recorded role-plays and write a reflection paper. The current format has successfully addressed some of the challenges and flaws of the previous formats. It has reduced the possibility of students' copying from one another as the assignments are individualized and tailored in such a way that any copying would be noticed immediately. Mijomanović (2017: 201) suggests that one of the biggest flaws of the previous format

was the lack of direct (face to face) contact. This format lacked role-plays where students could practice speaking and pronunciation and learn through peer-work. The new format allows the students to be more personal and relaxed, since they work directly with their colleagues. On the other hand, this allows the teacher to actually see and hear the students. Both of these aspects have helped to create a more personalised rapport, but also closer contact between the students and their colleagues, and students and their teacher.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a qualitative corpus analysis. The corpus consists of 30 reflection papers written by third year students. The papers were randomly selected.

The reflection papers served the purpose of summarizing the student's impressions on what they had learnt and experienced during the course. The students were expected to write their likes and dislikes, what they thought could be changed in the course, pros and cons of an online course, and generally their view of the course. The reflection papers were expected to be concise summaries of approximately 250 words in length. The students were instructed and encouraged to write about specific experiences regarding assignments such as the assessment of doctors and general views on doctor-patient communication, about the biomedical model, about their experience regarding role-play (information gathering, difficulties, expectations, etc.), about their experience with case presentation writing process, and about their experience regarding feedback. The students were also asked to comment on their perception of the usefulness of the tasks and to provide brief explanations for their point of view. Finally, the students were asked to write about their personal views on the online format, i.e. whether the course was appropriate for the subjects covered and whether it was accommodating for them and their schedule.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis produced six main categories: (1) CVs and CLs writing experience; (2) assessment of D/P communication from the perspective of the biomedical model; (3) role-play experience; (4) case presentation writing experience; (5) feedback experience; (6) general impression of the course and the online format. The first five categories actually correspond to the first five assignments. The sixth category proved to be multifaceted and was thus further divided into the following subcategories: a) likes and dislikes; b) expectations and realizations; c) on the online format; d) suggestions; e) personal development.

5.1. Curriculum vitae and cover letter writing experience

The students found this assignment to be of the utmost importance, extremely useful and interesting to complete. Most of them stated it would certainly come in handy in near future, when they start looking for a job or applying for scholarships. They praised the systematic approach to writing these documents (instructions were provided in the materials) and a hands-on aspect of the assignment.

“My first task was to write CV and cover letter in English, as a part of application for international student’s internship. Before that, **I have never done anything similar even in Serbian**, so English was not the only challenge I had. This assignment **helped me to understand the appropriate form of these documents and to recognize the importance of emphasizing the relevant information** in CV and my personal motivation in cover letter. I believe that these documents **will be useful** in future as templates for internship or job applications.”³

However, some students described the assignment as surprisingly time-consuming since most of them had never written anything similar and found the task of presenting themselves in a professional, yet compelling way challenging.

5.2. Assessment of doctor-patient communication from the perspective of the biomedical model

The students described this assignment as one of the most interesting, important and absolutely eye-opening.

“Where this course helped me most is that **it drew my attention to how impatient even the best doctors can get when they are tired** or the patient is almost determined to misunderstand the questions. I was always concentrated on absorbing the tricks and hints pertaining to illness, but **I am now aware that the way in which the doctor eases the patients concerns is an important skill to master.**”

Most students are well aware of how important successful doctor-patient communication is, but they think this fact is often neglected in medical encounters.

“...a very important topic that is **often overlooked** in our profession.”

Some students stated they learnt new communication skills through this assignment by observing their professors. This assignment also helped the students to see doctors and their role differently.

5.3. Role-play experience

Most students described this assignment as exciting, fun to do, challenging, useful and different from anything else they have had during their studies. Similarly to the previous category/assignment, they have achieved new insights into what being a doctor means and how D/P communication can influence the entire encounter including the diagnosis and the course of treatment.

³ The authors have bolded some segments of the text for emphasis. The same approach is used hereinafter.

“When it comes to **the most exciting assignment** during the course, it was definitely the role-play! **It was very interesting to act as a real doctor**, which was my role in our short movie, while my friend Danilo had a patient role. During the preparations, we realized how much is important to have **the right communication and relationship between the doctor and patient**. We have learnt that professional knowledge is not the only thing we have to care about, but also **the right approach to the patient** and the essential need to get his/hers **trust** during the treatment.”

On the negative side, some students described it as very time-consuming, tiresome and stressful. We believe the reason for this is the misunderstanding of the technical part of the assignment. The students were instructed not to worry about the editing of the video and were even allowed to send several shorter videos. However, some students encountered problems with this aspect. Another factor was the nature of the assignment. This assignment was conceived as pair work. Some students found it difficult to find a pair even outside of the group that was attending the course, which they had the freedom to do.

5.4. Case presentation writing experience

The students found this assignment very useful as they had the subject Clinical Examination in the same year and could practice the skill and knowledge they had obtained in English. This assignment was one of their favourites and they also liked and emphasised the practical application of it. The students were thankful for being presented with an adequate format for writing a case report and accompanying materials.

“Writing of case report was **very useful** too because **never before I didn't have the materials** how to write a case report such as a list of common abbreviations in CR and many others documents who where in the attachments.”

5.5. Feedback experience

Students often described this assignment as the one they liked the least and as not very useful. This was also obvious from their course work as the reluctance to write for this assignment was mirrored in the length of feedbacks. We believe that it was the artificial nature of the encounters that discouraged the students from applying themselves more to this assignment and also many found it uncomfortable to criticize their peers.

On the other hand, some students found it interesting to see what their colleagues had created.

“**I was a bit worried when I realized that someone besides the professor is going to watch our video**, so I thought that it will be embarrassing, but that shame went away as soon as I figured out that I will also get someone's video. **It was interesting** to see how this task was filmed by others.”

5.6. General impressions of the course

The students did not find the course hard. According to some students the difficulty of the assignments was well balanced. The assignments were not demanding for the students and they found them interesting, educational, and amusing. The students found the course format convenient as they were able to do the assignments at their own pace. They found the course diverse in the topics it covered and helpful for their future profession. The students thought the duration of the course was adequate - neither too long nor too short.

“I find this course **amusing** and extremely **useful**. It’s nice **to expand our experiences** in this branch, because today world medicine is advancing fast and in need of good and well connections we need knowledge of English. The course **in designed well** and it **goes beyond borders of classic teaching methods** in our lecture system, which is good. Our lecturing system is old fashioned and not all students can give their maximum, so I believe in new approaching.”

5.6.1. Likes

Generally, the students believed the course was useful and helpful. Some of them emphasised its applicability for anyone who is interested in working abroad. As for the language itself, they were glad that they learnt new vocabulary. Their favourite assignment was the role-play assignment which they found fun and useful.

Most of the students lauded the structure of the course which was deemed efficient. They particularly liked that they were provided with myriad materials and highlighted the attention to detail in them. They especially liked that the topics were in synchronisation with other core subjects such as Clinical Examination.

“On of the pros of this course is the **material we are given**, which is very useful and will serve very good, no matter if you are working here in Serbia or abroad. Also, **the templates for the cover letter and cv are something which that will be very useful in the future**. Furthermore, it helped us **save time** searching others resources, so we didn’t have to bother with the endless searching on the internet.”

The students found the structure of the course to be time-saving and were pleasantly surprised by the remote/online format of the course. They were especially delighted to find out that there was no formal exam and that they could manage their time in accordance with their schedule. The flexibility in doing the assignments meant less pressure on the students which also reflected on the teacher-student communication. This is one of the aspects of the course that the students praised as they were always given sufficient and to the point explanations and were always answered in the shortest time.

Most of the students liked the duration of the course. What is especially interesting is also the fact that they highlighted the possibility to work with their peers as something different and something they enjoyed. Finally, the students appreciated the effort and creativity put into the course.

5.6.2. Dislikes

As previously mentioned, most students found the duration of the course to be adequate. However, there were some who found it to be too long. Others found the “easy” tasks (such as CV and cover letter writing, and the checklist) to be too time consuming and boring. They described these tasks as monotonous and robbed of creativity. Many had issues with the mailing system via the Google groups – some students had emails that for some reason were not compatible with this platform. They also found the platform to be a bit messy and not that easy to use. For some making of the videos was an arduous task (possible reasons for this were already discussed). Another downside that some students emphasised was the lack of live interaction with the teacher. And finally, few commented on the level of English being too high for them.

“There is one disadvantage... For example, i’m in the middle of English course for High B level, and **all of these exercises were a little difficult for me**. To keep up, to understand... I was doing my best to accomplish everything in time.”

5.6.3. Expectations and realizations

The online format has been going on for a while, however, some students expected the class to be in the traditional format. Even though they were not expecting it and were not used to it they were pleasantly surprised by the online format and the ease and fun of doing their assignments as well as the final outcome – learning something new.

“After six weeks of teaching English 3, I would like to tell you a few things about how much I liked the course. I **was first surprised**, and I can say that I **did not understand the concept of the course very well**, since we have done so far only by traditional methods of language learning. Now **for the first time I had the opportunity to be on the on-line course of a language**. As I said, my first impressions were **very confusing**, but later all that was confusing, I really **liked it**. One of the things that I like most about this kind of work is the fact that we do not have to spend hours at institutes on amphitheatres or classrooms. Then, we do not only process classic topics that we can find in books, **but we have the freedom to search and access information**. At the same time we **develop the ability to use the language** in many ways.”

5.6.4. On the online format

The students found it accommodating in the sense that they were able to manage their own time, particularly because they were provided with a time limit for each task, but did not have to follow any strict deadlines.

“I have **enjoyed in all advantages of the digital learning!** Online form gave us a **freedom** to learn and do our tasks when we want, which means

that we had an opportunity to work when we are the **most productive** during the day or the week, without any bad feeling that are usually connected with traffic jams and **ineffective schedules** in traditional (physical) learning. I deeply believe that **this contributed to the quality of this course** and I hope that some other courses in our curriculum will become digital in the recent future.”

The tasks were, according to most of the students, well designed. They allowed the students to do more individual work than in a traditional teaching setting. The assignments were both active and interactive, but also had a practical application. The students felt like the class/course was personalised, meaning it addressed them as individuals rather than as one member of the group. Although the course was online, the students agreed on having a lot of one on one time with the teacher, as they regularly got structured feedback. The format of the course helped them memorize things better and they believe knowledge acquired this way will stick longer. Finally, and maybe most importantly, the students had a sense of accomplishment after each task.

“Just the **sense of accomplishment** after finishing each lecture was worth it.”

5.6.5. Personal development

The students realized how important doctor-patient communication and social skills are for not only doctors, but students of medicine as well. They recognised the need for learning about it and the benefit of practice.

“I think its good to **do more patient-doctor communication** because when we finiched our studies we have to work in the hospital and **do our work with the patients**.When we had our **practice** I can see how much that is **important**.This can **prepare us to the future jobs**.”

When it comes to learning the language, the students recognised that they “refreshed” their knowledge of English, but also learnt new medical words, abbreviations, and phrases. Additionally, they have gained new insights into writing skills and perfected them.

“I learned some **new words, abbreviations** and **phrases**, and I **reviewed the structure of formal documents**.”

5.6.6. Suggestions

When it comes to the possibilities of improving the course, the students had a lot of ideas. Mijomanović (2017: 201) noticed that even though the expected language level of the students should be higher, some of them struggled with grammar. This was also voiced by the students in this research. However, since there is a big discrepancy in the language levels in the group, some students would find grammar exercises too tedious

and redundant, while for some it is something they actually need. As a result of this discrepancy Mijomanović (2017: 201) suggests correction of students' works and implementation of tasks that target both linguistic and pragmatic competencies as a solution. This is to an extent addressed in the current format of the course through the provision of structured examples and guide templates as well as feedback and corrections.

Some students noted that having the course plan in advance would be helpful. This is, however, something that is done at the start of the course where each student is emailed a detailed plan and the plan is also posted in the group. Others suggested rearranging the tasks. We believe that they would rather do the technically more demanding tasks (role-play) first. This, however, would disturb the gradual introduction of doctor-patient communication and consequently would be more confusing than helpful. Some students also suggested a blended learning approach where role-plays could be done in a real classroom. This has, however, in our experience proved to be challenging and very often impossible. The reasons for this are the very busy schedules of our students as well as the existence of several groups that take other classes at different times. Blended learning exists in the elective course English language 4 where students are expected to present their scientific posters, but is proving to be more and more difficult to organize in practice for all the abovementioned reasons.

Other suggestions included omitting video making and pair work, but as we have stated before in an online format this is one of the most effective ways of exposing the students to speaking exercises and doctor-patient communication is best learned through observation and practice. Some students find these exercises to be too time consuming, but we believe that the time spent on doing the other assignments balances this out.

One of the most important suggestions was to create a special site on a faculty run platform (Moodle/Reticulum). This would allow easier access and would enable both the teacher and the students to upload materials and have a more direct communication.

“The **Reticulum platform** is used for numerous other classes we attended, like Histology, and on it we have **access to many different materials** related to those classes like **illustrations and practise tests**. I feel that the platform is more than suitable for most of the assignments we had during this semester.”

There were also some very specific and creative suggestions. Some students have suggested including video instructions, live conferences or voice interviews, and researching virtual libraries (PubMed, ScienceDirect). While some of these are applicable, others (e.g. live conferences and live interviews) might be problematic for technical reasons as not all students have access to a computer/device with a camera and microphone (some of our students use library/public computers). Hopefully, this will change in the future and expand the possibilities of the course.

CONCLUSION: The future of the course

Since this paper was presented a new school year has started and we have already implemented some of the suggestions and changed the platform. Namely, a new web page was created with a separate page for each assignment where students can find materials, examples, and instructions both in the form of a written text and in video form (by the teacher). Materials and examples range from written texts (templates and instructions), to images and videos. One of the assignments was dropped (feedback on role-play) for now. The communication is still done via emails.

However, a plan was set in motion and we believe we will put our course on Moodle soon. This will allow us to add new content and materials, but also to create a place where students can exchange their ideas in the form of a forum. Some of the ideas for the future of this course also include a student-run online magazine in English, a blog or even a student created corpus of texts and videos that could be used for future generations who take the elective course English language 3, but also for other courses, and maybe even for scientific studies in medicine, linguistics and teaching methodologies.

The teachers and the students are enthusiastic about the future of this course and we believe that this is a format that can be applied not only to teaching and learning English, but also to other subjects at the Faculty of Medicine as well as at other institutions of learning.

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STUDENTSKE OCENE IZBORNOG KURSA MEDICINSKOG ENGLESKOG NA DALJINU

Sažetak: Ovaj rad istražuje kako studenti doživljavaju kurs medicinskog engleskog na daljinu. Kurs pokriva profesionalnu korespondenciju i komunikaciju između lekara i pacijenata kroz kombinaciju teorije i praktičnih zadataka. U radu se analiziraju studentski eseji u kojima iznose ocenu i svoje misljenje o kursu. Posebna pažnja posvećena je implikacijama za unapređenje i razvijanje ovog kursa. Rezultati pokazuju da studenti cene nastavu na daljinu, usavršavanje znanja o profesionalnoj korespondenciji i jedinstven pristup komunikaciji između lekara i pacijenata. Važna implikacija je i korišćenje vežbi sa podelom uloga u digitalnoj sredini. Analizirani studentski predlozi i kritike kursa predstavljaju početnu tačku za unapređenje kursa.

Ključne reči: komunikacija između lekara i pacijenata, engleski jezik u medicinske svrhe, učenje na daljinu, ocene studenata