

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE COURSES AND TRAINING IN PREPARING DENTAL STUDENTS FOR THE CHALLENGES OF THEIR FUTURE PROFESSION

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present the ways in which the foreign language course at the Faculty of Dental Medicine, the "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi has been adapted and designed to focus on the requirements of the students' future profession. Dentistry has become a very complex field today and dentists have to face many challenges. Besides the fact that dentists are required to be able to deal with a lot of pressures (keeping their business but also keeping the pace with the permanent development of technology), they are also required to be good communicators both with the patient and the dental team. Dentists' professional obligations also include scientific research that is meant to keep them up with the latest knowledge and discoveries in the field. We believe that the foreign language course may become an important tool by means of which dental students will get significant skills that will help them in their future profession.

Keywords: dentist, dental team, scientific research, communication.

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been a challenge for English language teachers. Foreign language teachers by and large have noticed, in the past decade or so, that teaching foreign language skills only may not be enough. Thus foreign language teachers are expected to also prepare their students to meet the requirements of their future jobs. Subjects taught at the university become more and more interdisciplinary and foreign language teachers have to adapt to these new needs in order to prepare their students with the skills needed for the 21st century. The Internet along with the technology has developed at full speed. Terminology and academic language make use of new words and concepts that both teachers and students have to be able to understand. This perspective, nonetheless, does not have in view only the idea of bringing technology in the classroom, but it also speaks about the kind of collaboration and team work the teacher has to have with the specialists in the field for which they teach English. English has to be explored from the perspective of the students' profession and consequently the English language course has to contain ideas that would enable students understand their profession from a better perspective. Approaching the English language in such a manner will definitely make the study of the language more meaningful for the students, encouraging them to better understand their future profession even from a humanistic perspective.

Teaching English to dental students is in many ways like teaching English for Medicine (nonetheless there will be aspects related to the field of dentistry that will be discussed in this paper). At the center of the dentist's activity we also have the patient, so one of the most important things required from a dentist will still be good communication skills. Dentists have to be able to communicate with their patients from the moment they first meet, in order to build the same therapeutic relationship that is required in healthcare setting. A doctor has to be able to understand all the aspects of the patient's illness and consequently to understand all the social and psychological factors that might impede the patient's access to healthcare. Dentists have to understand all principles of communication and we believe it is the foreign language teacher's duty to introduce his / her students to the principles of the theory of communication. At the Faculty of

dental Medicine, “Grigore T. Popa” University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, students take two courses in which they are explained the theory and practice of the communication process. They learn about the importance of understanding the components of the communication process, both verbal and nonverbal, voice management, active listening and cultural awareness. After they get this general introduction to the theory of communication, the focus is transferred on the idea of communication in healthcare settings. In the 1st year of their study, they learn about the idea of culture as part of foreign language teaching when they are explained that the mere acquisition of language and vocabulary are not enough in the process of learning a foreign language as proficiency is by far more complex in the sense that it refers to being able to use language in context. The context refers to the cultural background in which that language is spoken. Therefore the course progresses with the explanation intercultural communication. In the context of globalization we believe that such concepts should be thoroughly understood. Progressively students start to learn about intercultural communication in healthcare settings. They also learn about the way in which culture influence our health choices, i.e. the way in which we perceive the idea of health and illness. These two notions are always culturally situated so future dentists need to understand how health meanings are negotiated. Ultimately students need to understand that once they overlook the cultural element in their encounter with the patient, the whole medical act fails, everything resulting in poor communication, misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatment. In the 2nd year students in Dental Medicine have the possibility to attend an optional course entitled “Communication Skills in English for Healthcare Professionals” in which the students learn about the challenges of the dentist who is a non-native speaker of the English language if he / she chooses to carry out his / her professional activity in an English speaking environment. The course discusses all the linguistic barriers and cultural challenges that the medical encounter might bring along in such a context.

The dentist does not communicate only with the patient, he / she is actually the manager of the whole dental team. Whateley describes the group of dental health professionals as “a group of individuals able, willing, and preparing to work with others while taking responsibility for their contribution to the dental care of individual patients” (Whateley 1998). In the British system the dentist does not work only with a nurse, the dental team is formed of a receptionist, a dental hygienist, an orthodontic therapists, dental technicians. In their book describing the process of preparing for dental practice, F. J. Trevor Burke and Ruth Freeman identify the skills needed to communicate effectively with the dental team: “The same effective communication skills are required from the dentist when we refer to his / her dental team. Achieving this unified approach requires the dentist, as team leader, to have a variety of management skills that reflect the diversity of his / her position within the practice. These include the following: the establishment of effective communication skills, the ability to respond positively to team members, the provision of a platform for planning and identifying practice target goals and the motivation of team members. Thus the dentist can identify specific goals for each team member insuring the quality of the dental health care provided in the practice. Doing so affords the dentist an opportunity to give positive and appropriate feedback to each team member as means of team development. In this way staff are encouraged to develop and evolve their skills both in the clinical area and their interpersonal dealing with others” (Burke 2004). The process of team development has been described as empowerment with the dental team being characterized by “a high degree of interdependence, self-determination, competence, commitment and concern about the quality of work being performed” (Wilson 1998).

Academic Writing is another chapter of the foreign language course that needs special attention. There are many forms of the written academic texts and students need to become familiar

with these different styles and to be able to use the appropriate structure and vocabulary in each context. Writing is a very complex process. Nowadays we have different media through which we can communicate (the Internet, social media, emails, journals etc.). All these require different styles and conventions. It is important to learn to pay attention to the context in which you write and to know your target audience (readers). Grammar is also very important, along with other formal aspects of language (orthography, punctuation and spelling). The first things students learn about are the application forms. In order to apply for a position, to get a scholarship, dental students need to know how to write a CV, a letter of application or a personal statement. CV layouts may vary according to the post being applied for. These should include personal details, education and academic achievements, prizes and distinctions, positions of responsibility, interests, habits and activities. In a personal statement the applicant should give an explanation of his / her desire to study at a specific university, giving details of his / her aspirations and ideals, for example stating how much he / she is looking forward to working hard, to working in general dental practice, to achieving high quality. The letter of application should be addressed to the practice owner by name or hospital / university personnel manager. The letter should include the following: the reason why he / she applied to the advertised post, the features in the advertisement that attracted him / her to the particular post, how the post fits his / her overall career plan, when he / she is available for the interview (Burke 2004).

Academic writing also involves research. As B.J.J. Scott put it “research is an important aspect of dental academic work. The dental academic research may be carried out in a wide number of areas” (Scott 2003). These include clinical research or laboratory-based research: “It is essential that research findings are disseminated to the end users – dentists and patients and accordingly the writing of research abstracts and papers is central to the role of the dental academic. S/he may also choose to review articles or books, usually on subjects on which s/he has particular expertise, and this is also a valuable method for the dissemination of information. The peer review process, by which articles in peer-reviewed journals are assessed and checked for accuracy prior to publication, is central to the publication of good ‘evidence’ and as dental academics are often experts in their own fields of interest, they tend to carry the main burden of the peer review process. Some may also become the editor of a dental journal” (Burke 2004). These are only some of the writing activities a future dentist might be involved in. Thus students will have to learn about the accuracy of the scientific style, knowing how important clarity in such texts. The purpose of the written text is to inform or to influence the reader, therefore students will need to know how to find their voice and tone, to avoid using overcomplicated sentences and, last but not least, to have a good command of the English language. Nowadays, in order to be “visible” in the scientific context, you have to write in the English language. Therefore, besides the language barrier, there are some cross-cultural issues involving the written text. Written communication is influenced by the author’s cultural and educational background. People may have different writing expectations, different ways of using methodologies and sometimes even terminology may differ. Proof reading is also needed when dealing with such texts. The advantage of the written text is that it is not sent until the author is satisfied with the way in which it sounds.

These have been some of the challenges of the dentists’ future profession, and we have seen how some of the skills needed by the dentist are part of the linguistic training they get during the university years. Therefore we consider that the academic curricula should contain this foreign language course which is meant not only to teach foreign language skills to students as they have been adapted to respond to the latest requirements of a dentist’s profession: communication with

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both the patient and the whole dental team, intercultural communication in healthcare settings and academic writing.

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