E-WRITING IN ENGLISH FOR DENTAL MEDICINE

Anișoara Pop, Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University of Târgu-Mureș

Abstract: E-materials destined for out-of-class extension in English for Dental Medicine (E_{DM}), besides offering further language practice, target to assist the formation and consolidation of the students' narrative competence, their learning through critical reflection and in our case, consolidation of their writing skill. The starting premise was that medical writing represents a key skill that involves writing different materials for specific target audiences such as: textbooks and materials for continuous medical education, patient information materials, journal articles, case reports, abstracts, posters and meeting presentations, clinical trial and research proposals. The current paper will showcase several reading- and listening-integrated e-writing materials focusing on specific sub-skills and envisaged outcomes stipulated in the E_{DM} syllabus while highlighting the specific purposes, strengths and challenges of an on-going asynchronous writing portfolio.

Keywords: integrated writing, English for Dental Medicine, asynchronous writing, portfolio.

I. INTRODUCTION

Optimization of a patient's health as well as avoidance of medical errors, re-admissions, re-interventions, and unnecessary tests depend to a large extent upon successful oral and written patient-physician communication [1], [2].

Narrative competence, learning through critical reflection, questioning skills for eliciting information as well as counselling and offering information effectively in order to make informed decisions based on patient information and preference are, therefore, core communication skills targeted in the initial formation of doctors [2, 3, 4, 5]. The US Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) considers listening, explaining, questioning, counseling and motivating, key communication competences which are tested and objectively evaluated [6]. The importance of correct English language use is, moreover, stressed by the same official body, who considers that foreign language competence and linguistic and cultural differences may function as physician-patient communication barriers.

On the other hand, physician-patient communication surveys also stress the importance of linguistic abilities either as formality level, many patients being unable to comprehend the physician's jargon [7], or as quantity and quality of the information that doctors provide: *"Patients approaching a physician always expect good and detailed information regarding their medical condition, complications, therapy, and adverse events associated with therapeutic regimes* [8].

The current paper will start from the premise of the importance of forming and consolidating the above-menitoned key linguistic skills in pre-service stomatology physicians E_{DM} and showcase several asynchronous materials designed for extension and therefore optimization of, basically, written communication types, likely to be encountered in their future dental medicine activities.

II. WRITING FOR THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

Effective, accessible, and informative written communication in English is of paramount importance in a doctor's duties of informing the patients and educating the public in conditions of internationalization of medical practices and medical tourism but also for continuous professional development and access to best practices and research in the field, where English functions as a Lingua Franca.

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From the point of view of formality, English medical writing includes academic genres such as abstracts, presentations, posters, articles, clinical trials and research proposals as well as materials for continuous medical education or patient information that the research and promotion side of a doctor's activity involves, as well as career-specific pieces for interpretation, documentation, explanation/reflection or report on every day activities, completion of forms or referrals.

Essentially, stomatologists write for two types of audiences: specialists in the field (publications, presentations, case reports, reviews) and patients/general public (information leaflets, education material, formulaic documents).

2.1. Writing in E_{DM} – Current framework

Formation of the writing skill is integrated with speaking, reading and listening skill in our higher education EMP (English for Medical Purposes), no special consideration being given in the curriculum to writing in either mother tongue or L2, although it is a key competence for the medical profession.

Physical constraints pertaining to large class sizes (2 groups: N= 24-38/group, G1 – Romanian, G2 – Hungarian, bilingual) and EMP module time (2 hours/week, i.e. T= 28 hours/semester) have determined us to resort to blending autonomous [integrated]e-writing with face-to-face traditional instruction in order to activate and extend productive (writing) and receptive skills (reading and listening) in second year Dental Medicine (DM) students from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures.

2.2. Asynchronous e-writing portfolio

EMP pre-service medical students may find writing demotivating in class [9] and time-consuming in out-of-class assignments, as writing requires repetitive drafts and elaboration. Positive effects of blogs on writing and learning that have been documented refer to collaboration, interaction, critical thinking as well as enhanced willingness to write and discuss about professional matters[10].

Our asynchronous E_{DM} blog-writing portfolio included tasks meant to contribute to the optimisation of writing accuracy, clarity and formality in order to match the future patients' level of understanding, i.e. simple and jargon-free English. Increased awareness of correct written English in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar was also targeted alongside employment of written discourse markers (introducing ideas, exemplifying, explaining, concluding), as well as the formation of writing subskills of: counselling, arguing, narrating, expressing information explicitly vs implicitly [1], – which are crucial skills for medical communication.

III. DESIGNING INTEGRATED E-WRITING MATERIALS

This section will showcase several reading- and listening-integrated e-writing materials focusing on specific sub-skills and envisaged outcomes stipulated in the E_{DM} syllabus, while highlighting the specific purposes, strengths, opportunities, challenges and threats of the on-going asynchronous blog-writing project.

Blogger has been employed for about five months so far, hosting the portfolio of E-materials destined for out-of-class E_{DM} writing activation and extension with G1 and G2, 2nd year DM students in the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures. The platform, entitled Medical-English-UMF (http://www.medicalenglishumf.blogspot.com - Image 1 below), was established on November 21st 2013 and it contains student writing practice on 10 major topics (an average of two posts/month), with two extra posts for stimulating motivation, interest and fun.

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Image 1. Platform for asynchronous communication

The writing topics integrated listening with note-taking and reading (skimming and scanning) while practising different language functions (table 1 below) and skills: breaking bad news, advising patients, describing/explaining procedures, asking questions for filling in patient and medical records, expressing personal opinions, etc.

TOPIC	**INTEGRATED SKILL**	**Language functions/skills**
Dental curriculum and practice – student's perspective	Listening - videoclip	Compare and contrast
Low cost dental care	Reading – skimming and scanning Listening - videoclip	Expressing opinion, arguing
Dentists in the media	Listening - videoclip	Reflecting
General health issues: what do they mean for our teeth?	Reading – article Listening - news	Explain, reflect Express opinion
Myth vs truth about dental procedures	Reading – newspaper article - Scanning	Narrating, exemplifying
Prevention is better than cure	Listening	Agreeing/disagreeing, exemplifying, explaining
Teeth jewellery	-	explaining, bringing arguments, counselling (advise, agree, assist)
Breaking bad news	Reading – journal article	Hedging vs. direct language (use of patient-friendly language) Counselling on unhealthy behaviours Asking open questions
Case study	Reading	Debating, bringing arguments in a clear, logical manner
Parental stress and childhood caries	Reading	Summarizing, abstract writing

Table 1: *Reading- and listening-integrated e-writing materials*

Method. Authentic spoken English (videos) and/or reading (articles in the news, on the Internet) were integrated in each task input. Students replied to the teacher's original

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post but they were also encouraged to agree/disagree and express opinions on their peers' contributions.

Although blog writing style is less formal than that of an academic essay, expression of ideas in a grammatically-correct, clear, concise (up to 100 words) systematic and organized way was essential for comment publication. Comment moderation enabled writing improvement: mistakes-ridden, unclear writing was only accepted after revision/s. Occasionally, in order to make students aware of the importance of error and typo-correction in written communication, they were either challenged to find and correct their own repetitive grammar/spelling mistakes or given the right version in reply.

IV. OUTCOMES

This section reports on partial results of this on-going project of integrating e-writing in the EMP curriculum of higher education medical dentistry students, highlighting its positive aspects and effectiveness but also threats and encountered challenges.

Qualitative empirical results derived from examination of the blog writing portfolio as well as unstructured class feed-back, pointed out the following:

Strengths

- Convenience in terms of platform access and timing, visibility;
- One-on-one feedback and error correction;
- Autonomous and peer-learning.

Opportunities

- offering individual feedback in a memorable way (short pieces of writing): students became aware about their own writing competence and of written language areas in need of improvement;
- building up rapport with students.

Threats

- students have neither been taught nor have they carried out any technology-based collaborative projects until then: reticence in expressing opinions in the public space or commenting on peers' productions;
- social media and its oral, face-to-face communication character, may impact on asynchronous blog-writing portfolios negatively: students tend to write more carelessly, not editing their productions.
- extremely tight medical curriculum and overcrowded schedule prevent students from assuming additional activities, prioritizing content to the detriment of English, which is perceived as a skill to be formed later in their professional life.

Challenges

- for the teacher, providing appropriate, relevant and intrinsically interesting field-specific writing opportunities as he/she has no background in stomatology and content knowledge.
- generating cooperation rather than response to the teacher's initial post – students did not feel asynchronous communication as an opportunity for responding directly to their colleagues, as they do in synchronous class debates:

„I can see the point in what O. C. is saying [n.n. addressing the teacher rather than O.C.] *about the relationship between the low income and the proper medical attendance. However, as far as I'm concerned it aslo depends on the instruction which people get about oral hygiene and prevention. For example, patients, who don't even know how to protect their teeth, they are more likely to have tooth decays. In my opinion the other main reason why patients have to pay a fortune at the dentist (and of course suffer) is that they are too scared of the specialist and they skip the controls. On the other hand, I consider this "mission" thought-provoking, since even in our country an event like this would be vital as often as it's possible"* (Comment by **F.O.** 4 January 2014 13:25)

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- ensuring constant rather than sporadic and intermittent student contributions and, therefore, constant feedback from the teacher, likely to support learning.

Weaknesses

- a limited group of participants.

Of the total number of students in G1 and G2 (N=62), 25 (40.3%) contributed single and multiple comments. The reduced number of students who engaged in out-of-class asynchronous work, despite constant efforts to make E_{DM} writing attractive, relevant and easy to access and accomplish, prompts us to further investigate the students' level of satisfaction with content and methodology as well as their preferences regarding classical versus technology-enhanced learning and writing, unless final results demonstrate de opposite.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to stress that writing is a core competency for the medical profession and that integrated asynchronous e-writing activities can be designed to bridge the gap between the real medical environment and classroom learning in order to facilitate and extend E_{DM} writing practice in a motivating way.

Since blog-writing is generally shorter than other types of class writing, commenting on blog posts can offer students a chance to practise writing accurately, clearly and above all, concisely on topics and in situations they are most likely to encounter in their future medical activity: eliciting information, expressing opinion, counselling patients on correct medical conduct and procedures, breaking bad news, giving details on processes, summarizing, etc.

Findings suggest that:

- Asynchronous integrated-blog writing presupposes extra time investment, listening, webquest-ing and reading both the post content and the peers' contributions and, therefore, extended time spent in an authentic L2 environment.
- Students were reticent to get involved in the blog-writing project due to the extremely tight and domain-fraught schedule of their field as well as lack of previous experience of employing technology in learning.
- Participants in the project (40.3%) considered E_{DM} asynchronous writing a reflection-inducing experiment in both subject-matter and E_{DM} writing: increased awareness about personal writing competence and areas of the written language that need improvement. Most importantly, students realized that it takes time to organize, structure and then draft in order to produce good, effective writing.

Contrary to certain findings [10], partial results of this ongoing asynchronous E_{DM} writing project highlight that while some students like to embark and contribute to e-learning tasks, others may feel more accustomed to traditional methods of learning. Further studies and final results of this project will either support or infirm such findings.

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