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AN OVERVIEW OF THE VARIOUS APPROACHES TO THE SYLLABUS OF THE ENGLISH COURSE FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS

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Abstract: English is a complementary discipline in the curriculum for students from medical universities in Romania. If an advanced level of knowledge of English or other foreign languages is undoubtedly necessary for a professional in this field, the presence of the language courses in the Romanian undergraduate medical curriculum is sometimes a matter of debate. The interpretation of the medical students` needs is the teachers` decision, although the reasons for including this course in the medical educational programmes are the same and apply to all universities in our country. The English teachers from the Romanian medical universities have rather different approaches to the course syllabus. An overview of these variants may be relevant in order to find the best formula of this course, if possible with similar content and aims throughout the country.

Keywords: English teaching, medical students, syllabus, course purposes, assessment

The subject English included in any educational programme has, besides the proper objectives of that specific course or stage of learning, the core language education goals of the Languages in/for Education Project. These goals go beyond the institutional framework and refer to the development of the 21st century individual and international citizen. The coordinates of this development are professional, social, cultural, and even political.

The interest in a good command of English is enormous in countries where English is not an official language; therefore a lot of effort is invested to improve the teaching and learning of this language. The revision of existing models is a continuous process, and so is also the discovery of new areas of English teaching and learning, applicable from regular language classes to the level of national education policy. At the university level, a language course for adults is more likely to be regarded as an

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important tool for personal and professional development. But the perception of how the English course can respond to this need of medical learners differs from university to university and from teacher to teacher. In addition, teachers have to cope with a lot of different demands and they may devote less time and attention to teaching innovation and experimentation.

In the 90s, two very important projects were founded: ELP (European Language Portfolio) and CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).”The CEFR provides tools for the development of language curricula, programmes of teaching and learning, textbooks, and assessment instruments. The ELP is designed to mediate to learners, teachers and schools, and other stakeholders the ethos that underpins the CEFR: respect for linguistic and cultural diversity, mutual understanding beyond national, institutional and social boundaries, the promotion of plurilingual and intercultural education, and the development of the autonomy of the individual citizen.”[1] Actual syllabi must meet the demands made clear by the ELP, which may increase the learners motivation and help them understand the main purpose of a language course and its connection to their professional skills. Of course, the syllabus must adapt the ELP aims to the regional (national) specificity of supply and demand in the field of language learning and teaching. So the goals of a language course for medical students go beyond the syllabus, to the goals of the curriculum of the medical school and even further.

The Modern Languages departments of the medical universities in Romania offer English, and also French and German practical courses to the 1st and the 2nd year Romanian students, as well as Romanian as a foreign language to international students attending the English (or French) study programs. These courses constitute a compulsory discipline and are included in the curricula of all the specializations within the faculties of medicine, dentistry and pharmacy of these universities.

The syllabus for modern languages from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Bucharest includes a number of medical themes, specifically focusing on anatomy, physiology and pathology. Thus, it establishes the necessary correlation of the English

[1] Council of Europe. European Language Portofolio. Education and Languages. History of ELP Project. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/History_ELP/Story_so_far_EN.asp

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course with the targets of the general curriculum of the medical school, especially with the first-years academic subjects.[2]

The English syllabus proposed by the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iași for the medical students in their first year, addresses to learners who can start even from the level of basic knowledge (A2). The objectives focus on spelling, phonetics, lexicology, grammar and medical topics as tools for developing communication strategies in academic and professional situations. The time allotted for each semester is divided into eight hours of lecture and twenty hours of practical work.

The course syllabus begins with an activity of self-assessment of the individual level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The first lectures introduce the learners to medical terminology and approach different communication strategies applicable in the health care field, including medical academic. According to the ELP guidelines, the theoretical content and the objectives of the second semester are "negotiated" with the students. It is interesting to note the focus on a number of transversal competences: learning autonomy (of a foreign language), teamwork, use of information technology and communication, recognition and respect for diversity and multiculturalism, respect and promotion of the values and ethical principles of the medical profession etc., which demonstrates an interdisciplinary approach, challenging and exciting. The second semester adds debates about medical dilemmas and practical applications such as an application for a scholarship, attending a conference etc. The students have also an active role in drawing conclusions on the study themes. The academic year ends with a colloquy which consists in presenting the project developed by the student during the semester, with the presence and participation of colleagues. The final grade is determined based on the classroom activity, projects and other tasks. The bibliography actually contains authentic material from the press and other specific medical publications.[3]

[2] Universitatea de medicină și farmacie "Carol Davila" București, Programa analitică Limbi moderne, http://www.umfcaroldavila.ro/index.php/facultati/medicina-generala/89-facultati/medgen/departamente-discipline/630-limbi-moderne

[3] Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie "Grigore. T. Popa" Iași, Facultatea de Medicină - Fișele disciplinelor de studiu, http://www.umfiasi.ro/Facultati/FACULTATEA%20DE%20MEDICINA/Organizare%20si%20conducere/Pagini/Fisedisciplinedestudiu.aspx

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The English teachers from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Victor Babeș" of Timisoara conduct an extremely varied activity, meant "to maintain unaltered the spirit of universal culture". Thus, besides the courses of applied modern languages - medical language, the offer of the department staff includes lectures on culture and civilization, cultural anthropology, intensive language modules for trainees for academic mobility projects etc. For the English language discipline, the formation of study groups starts from an average level of linguistic competence. The main goal of the discipline is to familiarize medical students (years I and II) with medical language, to develop their abilities of drafting specialized texts in English, in order to use the language as an instrument for circulation and communication of ideas and innovations in medicine. Students acquire medical vocabulary and simultaneously study lexical and grammatical subtleties which enable them to produce (oral and written) communication in the medical field, in accordance with the descriptors set out by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The texts are selected from various sources created for educational purposes or authentic texts used as prototypes with the purpose of shaping the adequate medical vocabulary and the ability to work with basic notions from various specialties (preclinical: anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, pharmacology; clinical: internal medicine, surgery, cardiology, gynecology, pediatrics etc.). Courses are mainly interactive with audio/video support and power point presentations.

At the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Timișoara, in 2009, the language department introduced a course of cultural anthropology of the human body and of the health concept, first in the curriculum for the second year of medical studies as an optional subject, and then as an optional course for the first year, due to the interest shown by students. The course presents an overview on cultural anthropology, focusing on the anthropology of health concepts: body awareness and the attached symbolism, life cycle, a cultural history of diseases and their social consequences, aesthetic values of suffering, nutrition and adaptation, an anthropological view on the contemporary society.[4]

[4] Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie “Victor Babeș” din Timișoara, Facultatea de medicină- Disciplina Limbi Moderne și Limba Română, http://www.umft.ro/facultatea-de-medicina_2/disciplina-limbi-moderne-si-limba-romana_96

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The language teachers from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy ”Iuliu Haţieganu” of Cluj work in the Department of Modern Languages Applied to Medicine. The stated aim of their activity is the acquisition of language knowledge as well as the development of written and oral communication skills for general and medical purposes. Their teaching materials focus on the four language skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing) while employing communicative, interactive and multimedia teaching methods adapted to the students' needs. This means activities and projects carried out in class, which simulate real-life situations that the students will face in their future career, such as reading or writing various scientific texts, listening to a lecture, designing a scientific poster or delivering an oral presentation. Moreover, students can take part in tandem language learning, language student clubs and immersion language learning in order to facilitate their social and academic integration.[5]

The English course from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova is designed for beginners and then for advanced learners who want to develop and expand their knowledge of medical English. Therefore, the course provides notions of general English as well as medical terminology, which are introduced in specific medical communication situations. It also provides a revision of the morphology and syntax of the language integrated in the medical jargon. It is beyond doubt that these concepts are the foundation of any act of linguistic production in any area. Enlarging the vocabulary means, inter alia, acquisition of basic medical terms through properly selected and structured texts; use of that vocabulary in presenting and discussing a medical case, a medical interview, various treatments, procedures and interventions, as well as general communication situations like polite, formal and standard ways of accepting/rejecting ideas and proposals; summarizing and concluding in speech and writing. A central objective is the students` assimilation of medical terms allowing them to consult specific bibliography and draft scientific papers in English.

The course has a unique structure, first addressed to beginners, it continues with the intermediate level, ending with the advanced level. It should be noted that this course provides a balance between spoken English (communicative activities) and grammatical content, between active and passive vocabulary and ensures a systematic

[5] Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie ”Iuliu Haţieganu” din Cluj, Facultatea de Medicină, Department of Modern Languages Applied to Medicine, http://www.medicina.umfcluj.ro/en/informatii-med-uk/cautare-med-uk/itemlist/category/72-limbi-moderne

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improvement of the four main abilities: speaking, listening (understanding), reading and writing. It is also related to the subjects in the faculty curriculum: anatomy, cellular biology, biochemistry, biophysics, pathophysiology, informatics, biostatistics etc.

Due to the fact that students have now the opportunities to study abroad through programmes like Socrates or Erasmus, the practical course aim is to train and develop students' ability to communicate in English. The texts were selected from specialty books and journals in order to introduce the scientific terms gradually, aiming at the same time at upgrading and enriching the general English language previously learned.[6]

At the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tîrgu Mures, the English course requires an average level of knowledge from students, a level usually confirmed by the initial assessment. The overall aim of the two-year study is the achievement of an advanced level of knowledge, together with the acquisition of medical vocabulary and other important skills which are necessary in their future professional and scientific activity. The specific objectives of the English syllabus are:

-reinforcing the grammatical structures of the English language and expanding the vocabulary in order to achieve an accurate and fluent use of English

-developing the following skills: accurate reading and comprehension of specialized texts (advanced level); listening comprehension and correct interpretation of audio messages; fluent, accurate speaking, using a wide specialized vocabulary, with an adequate pronunciation and intonation; correct writing, using an adequate medical vocabulary.

To these may be added sub-skills or academic skills like translating, elaborating and presenting a scientific paper, discussing a scientific topic by asking and answering to questions, argumenting, describing, taking notes, organizing information, labelling, matching etc. The methods include: lecture, repetition, dialogue, exercises, conversation, role-play, debate, power-point presentation etc. The assessment is done in writing, orally or combined, projects, online tasks etc.

The bibliographies attached to these syllabi show also many commonalities. The first common point would be the attention devoted to a thorough revision of the basic grammar structures of the English language. The revision of the knowledge in morphology and syntax at a higher level is an important component of the English

[6] Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie din Craiova, Facultatea de medicină, Limbi moderne- Programa engleză, http://www.umfcv.ro/medicina,programa-engleza-disciplina-limbi-moderne

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syllabus, being the basis without which we cannot conceive the building of an extensive and sophisticated linguistic structure. For the grammar part, most teachers use books designed for learners preparing for language examinations like Cambridge First Certificate, Advanced or Proficiency, which provide a comprehensive collection of grammar explanations and a great variety of types of exercises, from very simple to very difficult. We use, for example, *Advanced Language Practice*, by Michael Vince (Macmillan, Oxford, 2002), *Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Advanced Learners` Grammar* by Michael Foley and Diane Hall (Longman, Edinburgh, 2003) and other advanced grammar books.

With regard to the medical vocabulary selected for the English course, it cannot cover the variety of medical specialties nor does it try to do so. Learners in the first two years of their medical programme study a range of basic and auxiliary disciplines related to anatomy, biology (biochemistry, biophysics, cell biology, and microbiology), physiology and primary health care. This means that the students will also start their scientific research deepening their knowledge in these fields, preparing and presenting papers at conferences or publishing in medical journals. In many cases, students will be asked to write an abstract or even the full paper in English and present it also in English. Thus, familiarity with the specific vocabulary of these areas will become extremely important to them, as well as the acquisition of additional forms of communication needed in interactions that are established at such events, especially for those who received or intend to apply for an overseas medical elective. Therefore, our English syllabus proposes in particular topics from the field of anatomy, physiology, pathology and primary care.[7]

A close look at the books that appear in most bibliographies of these English syllabi is enlightening in terms of current trends in selecting content and teaching methods. These books which either focus on the development of general language skills, or are designed for the use of medical professionals, are written by English teachers, both native and non-native English speakers. While the expertise of a native English speaker teacher is very valuable, especially in what concerns the thematic content and vocabulary, a non-native speaker author may add his experience as a learner

[7] Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie din Tîrgu Mureș, Medicină - Fișele disciplinelor, https://www.umftgm.ro/fileadmin/medicina/Fisele_disciplinelor_LM_LR_ENG/44-01-11.1_Fise_discipline_Medicina_LR.pdf

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of English, which considerably improves the organization, staging and delivery of that content.

In addition to the courses written by the teachers from the faculties of medicine, some publications addressed to medical professionals have proven to be a useful tool in teaching English at many universities in the country: Glendinning E., Holmstrom B., *English in Medicine*, Cambridge University Press, 2007; Glendinning, Eric H., Howard, Ron, *Professional English in Use*, Cambridge University Press, 2007; James, David V., *Medicine. English for Academic Purposes Series*, Prentice Hall, London, 1993; Riley, David, *Vocabulary for medicine*, Peter Collin Publishing, 2000; Dobrovici, V., Bostaca, Ioan, *English in Medicine*, Polirom, 1999; Dănilă, Viorica, *Engleza pentru medici*, Coresi, București, 1994; Mandellbrojt-Sweeney, M., *Limba engleză pentru medici și asistente*, trans. by Simona Stoleru, Polirom, 2006. To these we added some newer titles such as *English for Medical Purposes: Doctors* by Virginia Allum (2012), *Good practice. Communication Skills in English for the Medical Practitioner* by Marie McCullagh and Ros Wright, Cambridge University Press, 2008, and a remarcable book written by two Spanish medical practitioners, Ramon Ribes and Pablo R. Ros - *Medical English*, Springer, 2006. These Spanish authors, who are also physicians, give us a very interesting perspective from within the medical world, where English is a tool without which professional evolution cannot be imagined. Those who lose the battle with the English language come to be professionally (self) marginalized, say the authors.

Dr Javier Lucaya, who wrote the foreword for this book, explains very clearly, in just a few words, the necessity of introducing English as a compulsory subject at medical schools (which is not the case in Spain): „Whenever I attend international medical meetings, and see how some colleagues struggle, not only in trying to converse with their English-speaking counterparts but also in trying to understand their lectures, I strongly feel that we should try to do something to prevent this from happening in future generations." (Ribes, Ros, 2006). The authors strongly agree with US President Bill Clinton who said, on a certain occasion, that in the future, mankind could be divided into „educated and non-educated people", and that the imaginary boundary that would separate the two worlds would be knowledge of English and computers.[8] Marie McCullagh and Ros Wright consider that an English course for medicine is a meeting of

[8] Ramon Ribes, Pablo R. Ros , Medical English, Springer, 2006, p. 6.

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two experts in different fields, the English teacher being that of expert in the field of communication skills and the English Language.[9] (McCullagh, Wright, 2008, p. 4)

Professional English in Use. Medicine by Eric Glendinning and Ron Howard is a very comprehensive course book designed for students or professionals in the medical field, although the authors, modestly, classify it as a „supplement" for more general course books. It may be considered a model for a medical English course syllabus. It was designed to help „those who want to read medical journals and textbooks more fluently", medical students preparing for an elective attachment in an English-speaking country, medical professionals preparing to work in English or to take part in conferences conducted in English. The book has 60 units, of which 46 are thematic, covering medical topics: Basics (parts and functions of the body), Medical and paramedical personnel and places, Education and training, Systems, diseases and symptoms, Investigations, Treatment, Prevention, Ethics and research. The remaining 14 units cover communication skills: Taking a history, Examination (physical and mental), Explanation (diagnosis, treatment, giving bad news), Presentations (research articles, abstracts, conference and case presentations).[10]

A very good book, even if older, which deserves a re-rating is *Nucleus. English for Science and Technology - Medicine* written by Tony O'Brien, Jeffrey Jameson and David Kirwan, published by Longman in 1980. The vocabulary is extremely well selected and structured, the exercises are varied and challenging and the book has accompanying audio materials, with corresponding activities. These books were donated to the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tîrgu-Mures by the British Council and were very useful nearly two decades, but now they are in a physical state which no longer allows use. Maybe we will find a formula to recover and reuse them because this work is still an extremely valuable handbook. At some universities, the texts used during the English classes are original texts translated after being taken from the specialized courses designed by the teachers of those subjects.

The forms of assessment, in general, provide verification of the four basic skills, sometimes opting for a greater diversity of these forms (written tests, oral exams, discussions, peer-review, projects, online tasks etc.) The weight of the formative or

[9]Marie McCullagh, Ros Wright, Good practice. Communication Skills in English for the Medical Practitioner, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 4.
[10] Eric H. Glendinning, Ron Howard, Professional English in Use. Medicine, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.8.

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summative assessment varies from one university to another. At our university, we opted for the formative evaluation of the four skills plus the academic skills, during classroom activity or assessment of homework (including online) and one final evaluation at the end of each semester: in the first semester, written test and the second - oral examination, with equal weight in the final grade.

We do not claim to have found the ideal formula syllabus in Tirgu Mures. Students, their knowledge and their needs change continuously, and we teachers need to keep pace with these changes. In this respect, the aim of this paper was to provide an overview and create the premises for a better cooperation and experience exchange that would enrich the educational activity of all the staff teaching English in the faculties of medicine in Romania. In the end, the syllabus is a description of the course which is always subordinated to the targets of the professional development of these specific learners and whose content must be used flexibly and imaginatively by all the teachers, according to their professional personality.

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