

## TEACHING ENGLISH FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES TO FOREIGN STUDENTS

*Sažetak:* Ovaj rad bavi se izazovima i problemima u nastavi engleskog jezika kao jezika medicinske struke za studente medicine iz inostranih zemalja engleskog i drugog govornog područja. Rad je zasnovan na istraživanju sprovedenom u periodu od pet godina, od 2005. do 2010, sa studentima medicine za inostrane studente na Medicinskom fakultetu Univerziteta u Novom Sadu. Istraživanje je sprovedeno sa studentima druge godine medicine na engleskom jeziku iz Grčke, Kanade, Švedske, Izraela, Nemačke, Sjedinjenih država, Irana, Slovenije i Libije. Cilj ovog rada jeste da se identifikuju osnovni principi za izradu nastavnog plana i programa, uzimajući u obzir zajedničke kulturne obrasce i interese, kao i posebnosti svake države i kulture kojoj studenti pripadaju, kako bi se obezbedio uspešan kurs engleskog jezika za medicinske svrhe zasnovan na potrebama studenata. U prvom delu rada predstavljene su neophodne aktivnosti i procena potreba i interesovanja studenata koje je neophodno izvršiti pre početka kursa. Ovo uključuje upitnike, razgovore sa studentima i pružanje mogućnosti studijskoj grupi da odlučuje o temama od zajedničkog interesa kako na polju opšte kulture tako i na polju medicinske nauke. U drugom delu rada pokušali smo da predstavimo potencijalne kulturološke razlike i univerzalne vrednosti, koje je neophodno uzeti u obzir kako bi se obezbedio uspešan kurs engleskog jezika za potrebe studenata medicine zasnovanog na iskustvima stečenim unutar datog vremenskog perioda.

*Ključne reči:* EMP, interkulturalna komunikacija, analiza potreba, pristup zasnovan na potrebama

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the challenges, problems, common grounds in teaching English for Medical Purposes to students from different English and non-English speaking countries, and to provide ideas and possible methods to overcome those challenges and have a more successful course of EMP. The paper is based on a research conducted at the Medical Faculty of the University of Novi Sad, Serbia over a five year period from 2005 to 2010. The research was conducted with students of the Second year of Medicine in English, coming from Greece, Canada, Sweden, Israel, Germany, USA, Iran, Serbia, Slovenia

and Libya. As „the social and cultural background determines the students' views on culture and language“ (Ellis, 1994: 236) the research included questionnaires, interviews, group assessment and anonymous polls in order to gather information and students' views on various subjects in the field of culture, religion, common ideas, medicine, and to investigate their level of language competence as well as their theoretical knowledge of the English language. The purpose of the research was to identify the basic principles for curriculum design, taking care of the common cultural grounds and common interests, as well as of the specificities of each country and culture of origin in order to provide for a successful student oriented course of English for Medical Practice.

## 2. Curriculum Design

Preparing a well designed curriculum based on students' needs for a course of EMP is of essential importance. This is even more significant in teaching EMP to students from various foreign countries with different cultural and religious background, varying level of general language competence and medical knowledge and different general and professional interests. In order to do so, it is necessary to organize the course based on previous experience with similar international groups and also to gather the information from the actual group about their background and interests. This can be performed by group discussion on those issues, through questionnaires and interviews and by a continuous students' needs assessment. It takes time and effort to establish mutual respect and companionship among the study group and to get the students to know each other, respect their differences and establish a common basis for understanding. Therefore, a part of the course of EMP is to be organized as communication practice, both on medical issues, medical ethics and general cultural, religious and common life topics. It is necessary to have the number of such communication practice classes defined in the curriculum, and to determine the fields to be discussed, both strictly medical and those more general, in cooperation with the actual group. Also, once the the fields of interest are determined, the topics within those two fields – professional and general – need also be determined according to students' needs and interests. The prevalence of general, cultural, religious or other topics strictly depends on the structure of the study group, i.e. on the countries of origin of students themselves. Previous experience with students from the same countries should be taken into consideration in the design of these topics for discussion, but is not to be seen as definitive as each student has to be seen as an individual and their collective identity need not necessarily be identical. Generational differences need also be taken into account in this respect.

### 3. In the Classroom

Teaching EMP to an international group of students from several English and non-English speaking countries poses numerous challenges and difficulties on the basis of their general English language competence, theoretical and practical grammar knowledge, professional medical knowledge and field of interest and general cultural background and identity. It is characterized by a two way information gap (Robinson, 2009 : 34), and by a distinctive language, professional and cultural gaps.

#### 3.2. Bridging the Language Gap

It is often the case that students from English speaking countries, native speakers of English, despite having a superior overall language competence lack firm grammatical grounds and theoretical knowledge. This potentially would not have to be an obstacle in teaching them a successful EMP course, but in a mixed group of students with non native language speakers with a firm theoretical insight into the grammatical structure of the language often is. Most frequently students from Eastern Europe come with a solid grammatical basis as EFL courses and methodology in those countries is based on thorough grammatical teaching. Therefore, it is often the case that these two groups, native speakers of English and non-native speakers, have different views on the most significant areas of language teaching and express different needs of a language course, be it EFL or ESP.

#### 3.3. Bridging the Medical Gap

Students' general medical knowledge and specific field of interest is even more individual, so it is very hard to determine the common interests and needs. These differences are not only present in the student : student relation, but also in a student : professor relation. A teacher of EMP is usually a teacher of EFL with additional training and expertise in the field of general medicine. However, it is not seldom the case that in terms of some specific medical field, a student of Medicine in English may have more extensive knowledge not only in relation to other students in the study group, but also in relation to the teacher. This fact is not to be neglected in preparing and teaching an EMP course.

#### 3.4. Bridging the Cultural Gap

Different cultural and religious background, different views on the role and rights of the sexes, issues of individual and collective identity, views on general human rights, liberties and duties, moral and ethical considerations – these are some of the questions which inevitable have to be taken into consideration in teaching an EMP course, especially to international study groups. Even though, as mentioned above, all these need be taken into consideration in curriculum

design with detailed assessment of student's views, needs and interests, it is also necessary to orchestrate a continuous assessment and monitoring of those issues within the group during the course. Only then the students will have a chance not only to develop their language competence but also cultural awareness and intercultural competence and tolerance (Byram and Feng 2005 : 913) Otherwise, there is always the possibility of conflict within the group, be it verbal or non-verbal, which could shatter the already established homogeneity, mutual respect and companionship necessary for

#### 4. Post Course Assessment

Post course assessment in teaching EMP to an international study group is valuable both in terms of reminding the students on the acquired knowledge, reaffirming their language and medical knowledge and competence and as a basis for future EMP courses. Information gathered in discussion with students and in anonymous questionnaires is invaluable, direct and precise. It can upgrade the professional and language competence of students and help the teacher to identify potential obstacles and provide them with ideas to overcome them in future. Open communication in this respect gives the students an opportunity to better understand each other and their cultural background, to break free from common prejudices and become better informed and more tolerant to ethnic, cultural, religious, political and any other diversity. Post exam assessment is also highly recommendable, as it is pressure free and provides most sincere information, even though it is not always easy to conduct it due to students' often crammed personal and professional obligations. It is of essential value for the students to use the target language only in this process (Kovačević 2009 : 2009).

#### Conclusions

Teaching a course of EMP to a group of international students is a highly challenging and an equally rewarding and dynamic task. In order for such a course to be successful it is necessary for it to be based on students' needs and oriented towards their interest. It must be planned, conducted and assessed in cooperation with the students themselves, and it has to be diverse both in terms of subject matter and teaching methodology. Such a course needs a flexible design, as the composition of the study group often changes significantly on an annual basis. The role of the teacher in such circumstances is even more prominent than in case of general ELP course or regular ESP course in a homogenous group of students. As one of the basic roles of teaching is to establish values and democratic education (Byram and Feng 2005: 911), both the curriculum and the teacher need to take into consideration, at any time, the highly diverse language, professional

and cultural background of any individual student inside the group and to treat all those differences in an unbiased and open way. Only then can the course be successful and rewarding, both for student and the teacher.

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## НАСТАВА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ КАО СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА ЗА СТУДЕНТЕ МЕДИЦИНСКЕ СТРУКЕ

*Сажетак:* У овом раду разматрају се проблеми и изазови које носи настава енглеског као страног језика и језика струке у области мадицине, на темељу искуства у настави са различитим студентима, са енглеског говорног подручја и ван њега. У раду је представљено истраживање спроведено са студентима током 5 година (од 2005. до 2010) на програму „Медицина за стране студенте“ на Медицинском факултету Универзитета у Новом Саду. У истраживање су били укључени студенти друге године Медицинског факултета, из Грчке, Канаде, Шведске, Израела, Немачке, САД, Ирана, Словеније и Либије. У овом раду циљ је да се идентификују основни принципи које треба применити при креирању курикулума, имајући у виду заједничке културне елементе и заједничке интересе студената, али и специфичности сваке од земаља и култура, како би се направио успешан курс енглеског језика као језика медицинске струке, у коме би студенти били у фокусу процеса учења.

*Кључне речи:* Енглески као језик медицинске струке, интеркултурна комуникација, процена потреба, приступ оријентисан према студентима