

Teaching English for Medical Academic Purposes at the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, Serbia

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Abstract

The Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, Serbia, has a long tradition of learning and teaching English for Medical Academic Purposes (EMAP). EMAP is considered extremely important for our medical students' academic and professional life. Our EMAP syllabus is based on an integrated approach to the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), although writing is emphasised as the most demanding and valuable skill.

Keywords: English, Medical students, Syllabus, Language skills, Writing

In many countries, English has become the *lingua franca* for science and technology; almost all important discoveries and most research results are now published exclusively in English. English has become so powerful that some linguists are seriously worried about the destiny of other, so-called *small* languages for specific purposes.¹ English for Medical Academic Purposes (EMAP) is an important and rather specific sub-group of English for Specific and Academic Purposes. EMAP has developed considerably over the last decade and is attracting increasing attention from the linguistic and medical fields.

EMAP is well developed in English-speaking countries, especially Great Britain, where there are many workshops and campaigns on the importance of English for Academic and Professional Purposes. Moreover, knowing EMAP is thought to help physicians make more precise diagnoses, establish better physician-patient communication, and reduce the number of clinical errors.² Thus, EMAP is important for health-care practitioners even in non-English-speaking countries.

EMAP at the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, Serbia

The Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, Serbia, has a long tradition of studying and teaching EMAP. Belgrade University focuses on helping its students to successfully manage the many academic and professional tasks they will face during their studies and professional life. At Belgrade University, EMAP is required during the first and second year of integrated academic studies, whereas it is an elective for students during their third, fourth, and fifth year of studies.

Medical students are required to take 60 hours of EMAP during their first two years. These classes are based on the textbook *English for Medical Academic Purposes*,³ which is intended for students with upper-intermediate and advanced knowledge of English. The textbook familiarises students with authentic medical texts. It also introduces students to the most important medical topics and gives the students the opportunity to practice skills that they will need in their future jobs. Furthermore, the book covers a variety of scientific areas, including biology, biophysics, biochemistry, social medicine, medical ethics, anatomy, physiology, systems of organs, and types of diseases. Each topic is followed by discussion points, a glossary, vocabulary, and grammar exercises. There are also many additional readings used in class.

Most students will attend international conferences and symposia and will need to communicate and exchange ideas with their colleagues from abroad. They may even work in another country. Accordingly, the EMAP syllabus for the first- and second-year students bases the classes and materials on an integrated approach to the four language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.⁴ Although each class usually involves all four skills, reading is the main activity during the first two

years because students need to be able to read and understand English texts in various fields of medicine, using different strategies, and according to context.⁵ Although listening is essential for following lectures, conferences, and formal meetings, in our classes, listening is mostly taught through interactions rather than by passively listening to monologues. Finally, the students often engage in role playing, where they act out physician–patient or physician–physician communication. This helps the students learn to interact with both patients and colleagues, the most important skill they need to give and receive medical information.

A focus on writing

In both General English and English for Specific Purposes, writing is often neglected, and it is the subject that most mystifies students. It is also often considered the most difficult language skill. To make matters worse, students are often poorly motivated to complete writing tasks, and both teachers and students are easily intimidated by writing in class.

In General English, a student's writing reveals how much progress they have made, and it allows teachers to provide feedback and to monitor students and diagnose potential problems.⁶ General English could therefore be called 'writing-for-learning'.⁷ On the other hand, in English for Specific Purposes, and especially in English for Academic and Professional Purposes, writing should be perceived as 'writing-for-writing' because the goal is to be able to write whole texts in English during the students' education and their later professional life.⁸

For medical students, it is especially important that they are competent in writing English because their career may depend on international exchanges and presenting and publishing internationally. In this sense, writing can be perceived both as a *product* and as a *process*,^{4,9} depending on the level at which it is practiced. Furthermore, unlike general academic writing, where essays are the principal genre and are written according to general academic conventions, in EMAP, writing is discipline-specific and influenced by medicine itself, borrowing its principles, strategies, and practices.¹⁰ Furthermore, medical students should be able to write in several genres, such as research articles, submission letters, conference abstracts, and PhD theses.¹¹

Although Serbian is the official language at Belgrade University, universities worldwide are becoming more bilingual,¹² so we need to ensure

that our students learn the necessary academic English writing skills even though they are not studying in an English-speaking country.

The EMAP syllabus: years 1 and 2

Our goal for the required EMAP classes, taught during the first and second year of medical school, is that students perceive English writing as an essential product and that they therefore practice it as a basic skill. This includes gap-filling (filling in gaps in text with grammatically correct words), note-taking, and paragraph (re)construction.¹³ At this level, writing tasks are strictly guided and teacher controlled. The students are introduced to medical genres and are later trained to reformulate and reconstruct texts. Because classes tend to be large (between 70 and 100 students), students usually work in teams of two or more for both pre-writing (writing drafts) and editing tasks. In addition, students have set writing tasks as homework, which teachers later comment on in detail. Summarising survey results is an advanced creative idea¹⁴ that we employ in these large groups. Another is 'writing to real people', where students are asked to answer an advertisement, such as a job listing for a physician or internship position in a foreign hospital. We also employ some medical websites and even some popular television shows (Grey's Anatomy and House, MD) to provide students with realistic context and vocabulary. Naturally, writing at this stage depends largely on the students' general knowledge of English and their ability to properly acquire other elements of EMAP that have a higher priority at this level. In other words, writing skills tend to progress faster in groups that contain the most talented, hard-working, and motivated students.

The EMAP syllabus: years 3–5

Medical students in their third, fourth, and fifth years can choose to learn EMAP on a more advanced level. Students who do so will be equipped with a much better and a more applied knowledge of writing in English. In addition to improving English writing skills, one of the main aims of the EMAP classes is to improve knowledge in clinical medicine so that the students are more able to profit from the professional literature, to exchange their knowledge with others, and to write scientific and professional papers for international symposia and conferences. Introducing the students to the language of teaching is also emphasised because many will eventually become

teachers. Of course, the language of science is emphasised because students will write scientific papers with their teachers, including articles for their own journal, *Medical Youth*. Moreover, starting with the third year, students must read articles from contemporary British and American medical journals, follow the latest achievements in medicine (and form their own opinion on them), and use the Internet to find information on a variety of topics. Students are also expected to make both oral presentations and write projects, both individually and in teams, and they learn how to complete written projects, compose research articles and abstracts, write case reports, curricula vitae, formal letters, posters, and slide presentations. Thus, the EMAP syllabus for the third, fourth, and fifth years is adapted to the students' real needs.

The class sizes during the third through fifth years are much smaller than in the first and second years, so there is more space for creativity and feedback. In this way, writing can be approached as a process, not only as a product. There are 30 hours of EMAP per level during these last three years, and they are based on teaching using all four language skills. For example, the third-year students listen to recordings, watch videos, discuss, and later write about medical emergencies, transplantation, histopathological autopsy, and drug abuse. At this level, students are also expected to write abstracts, essays, a case report, and a large project on a patient, all of which are then discussed and critiqued by the student's teacher and peers. During the fourth year, students discuss topics such as chronic non-infectious diseases, immunisation, internal medicine, neurology, psychoses, and addictions. History taking, presenting graphs and charts, and writing research papers are emphasised, although students are also expected to make a poster presentation and to write a project on a patient. Finally, during the fifth year, students work on topics such as infertility and contraception, childhood diseases, surgery and emergencies, and endoscopy. They also practise taking patient histories in several medical disciplines and must make a poster presentation.

General principles

At each of these levels, students are first given clear instructions about writing in a particular genre.

Pre-writing and brainstorming are always done in class to help the students organise their ideas and learn the rules. Working in pairs and teams has proven to be very successful for such writing projects, as students join forces and knowledge. The result has been some truly enjoyable pieces of writing.

Conclusions

The EMAP syllabus at the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, Serbia, is based on an integrated approach to the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing). The first two years, which are required for all students focus on listening, while the three elective years focus on writing is emphasised, the most demanding and valuable skill both academically and professionally. Students themselves find such a syllabus useful and practical and are fully aware that the syllabus has been considerably and consciously adapted to fit their real academic and professional needs.

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Author information

Danka Sinadinović is a Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade. She graduated from the Faculty of Philology in 2001 and worked as an English instructor at the Institute for Foreign Languages for 10 years. She has published several papers and presented at various national and international linguistic conferences. She is currently working on her PhD thesis.

Sofija Mičić is an Associate Professor of English at the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, a Fulbright Scholar, a Salzburg Seminar Fellow, and a Morley Scholar. She is

an editor of the column 'Language of Medicine' in the Serbian Archives of Medicine and was also an English Language Editor for the journal. Sofija was an EMWA EPDC member from 2007 to 2009 and has led the EMWA Advanced Workshop 'Language and Writing' since 2007. Dr Mičić has been involved in the development of the international project on standardization of the English for Medical Purposes test (sTANDEM). Her latest book, co-authored with Zoran Čajka, MA, is entitled *Principles of Listening Comprehension in Language Learning*.

Medical Writing Jumble #7

1. Re-arrange the jumbled letters to get a meaningful word related to medical writing.
2. Next, take the circled letters from each word and make another word that will answer the

3. Use British English.
- riddle in the cartoon. *Hint: The answer is probably a pun.*

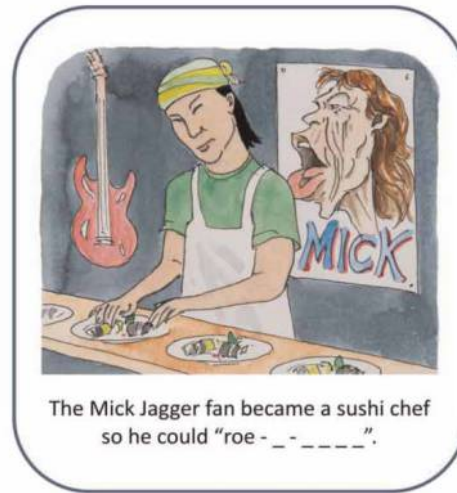
Medical Writing Jumble # 7

1. Re-arrange the jumbled letters to get a meaningful word related to medical writing.
2. Next, take the circled letters from each word and make two new words that will answer the riddle in the cartoon. Hint: The answer is probably a pun.
3. Use British English.

by Anuradha Alahari

Illustration: Anders Holmqvist

BNERUM	○ □ □ □ □ ○
BATTLE	□ □ □ ○ □ □
HOGUC	□ ○ □ □ □
PALMC	□ ○ □ □ □



Answer: roe - □ - □ □ □ □

by Anuradha Alahari | Illustration: Anders Holmqvist

See page 165 for the answers.