EDMODO - A PLATFORM OF CHOICE IN MEDICAL ENGLISH BLENDING

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Abstract: Edmodo can be used as a platform of choice for blending Medical English (ME) learning/teaching and ealuation. This paper will reflect on the features that make Edmodo an effective alternative to complement classroom interaction and will showcase several types of integrated ME writing, speaking and reading assignments that were established with first and second year students of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures. Edmodo SWOT analysis, quantitative and qualitative outcomes of the project, as well as the students' attitude and motivation are positive aspects to be considered by ME teachers when adopting a blended learning model.

Keywords: Medical English, Edmodo, blended learning

If you have wondered how to connect with your students, keep them engaged and involved beyond the contact hours while they are mobile or at a distance, how to offer them timely feedback on their questions and assignments while working in a safe virtual environment, you may consider using *Edmodo*.

This article will detail on some basic features of Edmodo - the leading social networking site, the "Facebook for Education" (Enriquez, 2014) - and provide some suggestions about why and how Medical English (ME) teachers could adopt and adapt it in their activity.

What is Edmodo?

Edmodo (edmodo.com) is a simple, versatile, and easy to use virtual platform thatcombines the power of social media with the safety and educational affordances that have been specially designed for this purpose. Edmodo was developed in the USA in 2008 and it reached about 62 million users in 190 countries in 2015 (Durak, 2017), being still free of charge, allowing easy membership for teachers, students and parents, and providing multi-language support. Its interface is similar to that of other social networking sites such as Facebook, My Space and Twitter, therefore, students immediately find working on it familiar and attractive. If other SNSs have also been employed for interactive language learning, they are not education-oriented, students can be exposed to potentially harmful content and teachers have to be more creative to compensate for their lack of important features that Edmodo has.

What features qualify Edmodo for EFL/ME?

Edmodo has many inbuilt functions that recommend it for a blended learning model, including ME, meant to supplement and enhance face-to-face language learning:

- a library for content uploading and sharing;
- assignments with pre-established deadline, possibility to lock the assignment after the deadline, and track learning and late submissions;

- embedding of multimedia content and offering written and oral feedback to students' work;
- alerts for urgent messages and polls;
- gradebook and monitoring of students' progress;
- automatically graded quiz creator for formative evaluation with a choice of including the results in the grade book or not. Different types of quizzes are possible: multiple choice, true or false, fill in the blanks, matching, and short answer. It is also possible to apply multimedia files and have a listening quiz, for example, and students will get instant feedback on their performance. Quiz questions can be randomized and a time limite can be set;
- capacity to establish groups and sub-groups for cooperation and collaboration;
- notifications, planner, an application store;
- help center and possibility to connect with other teachers or attend the EdmodoCon yearly congress on best practices, case studies and updates on platform development.

Unlike in Facebook, where posts are difficult to follow chonologically and therefore teachers have a hard time monitoring contributions, in Edmodo posts can be filtered by:

- author: teacher, student, latest posts, and
- type: assignments, quizzes, polls - which facilitates content tracking and gives the platform organization and discipline.

Language learning research has demonstrated that Edmodo can be an effective alternative to other virtual social networking communication and digital learning and so far it has been used to complement classroom interaction successfully in higher education and different ESPs (Al-Kathiri, 2015; Al-Ruheili, 2015; Enriquez, 2014; Shih, 2013; Pop, 2013).

What activities does it support?

Besides continuous asynchronous communication and informal discussions that take place in a group, practically any reading/writing/listening/speaking and their integration, that can be done in a virtual platform such as Moodle (Moodle for Teachers) or in the class, can be transferred to Edmodo. Below are several examples of activities carried out with Medical English students at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures, Romania, as part of a two-year blended learning project (Pop, 2015, 2016):

a) *Giving bad news* – group work: evaluating examples and then writing scenarios on giving bad news, with peer evaluation;

b) *Virtual poster presentation* – E-posters were created using Smore.com, and embedded in Edmodo. Virtual posters allowed integration of student speaking (Fig.1);

c) *Stories of illness* – oral accounts of leassons learnt from students' encounter with their first patients, illness, misdiagnosis were recorded and stored in the library;

d) *A week in the life of a hospital* – students' reflections on their first contact with the hospital environment (writing based on hospital vocabulary);

e) *Survey on local health aspects* reported on local population's knowledge and awareness of their blood group, glycaemia, use of medication, blood pressure, etc. The activity consisted in writing a short research paper which involved specific sub-skills: writing an abstract, administering questionnaires to the target groups, talking to patients after obtaining their consent to have the results collected and published, interpreting results and synthesizing, illustrating results on a graph, concluding;

f) *Healthy eating* - leaflet writing;

g) *Vocabulary and grammar quizzes*.

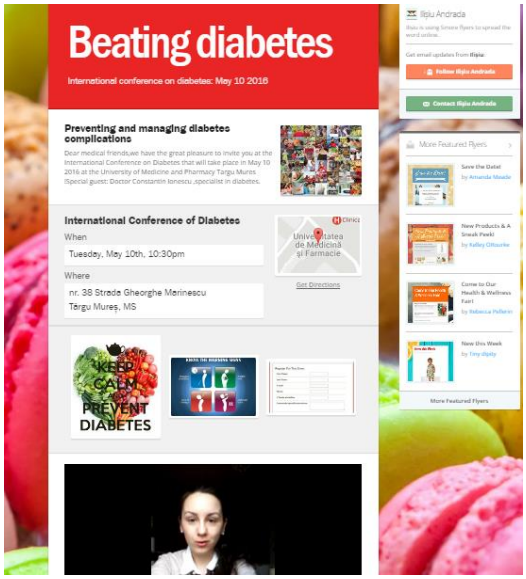

Fig. 1 E- poster allows integration of student speaking

Such activities were developed as assignments with integration of skills and detailed instructions on development, deadline, as well as the possiblitiy to lock the assignment after its due date, receiving reports on late submissions, and grading overview for each task. The added value of Edmodo writing and speaking assignments is that the teacher can see how many revisions the final submission has passed through, after the student has received timely feedback. Successive revisions are evidence that learning takes place and progress is made. Besides, Edmodo keeps track of each student's performance through the online gradebook – a progress table for each assignment, with calculation of an overall percentage score (Fig.2).

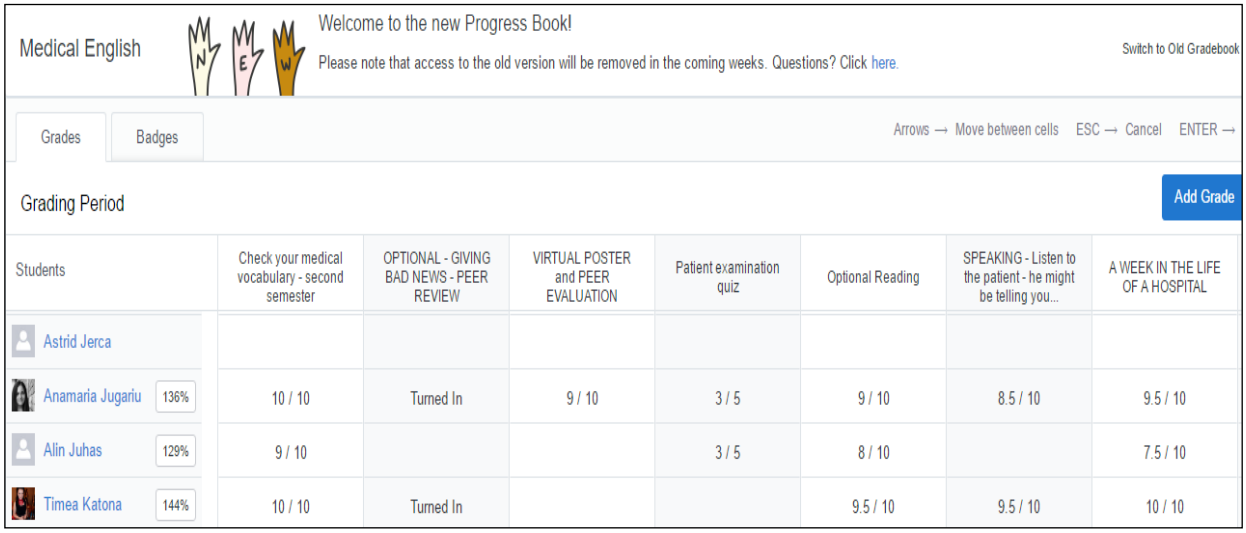

Fig. 2 Edmodo gradebook

Students' overall quiz performance is depicted as highest scores and in the form of pie charts with question breakdown (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Overall quiz results with question breakdown

SWOT Analysis of Edmodo

Strengths:

- Edmodo presents all the amenities of a learning management system: administering assignmens and quizzes, making announcements and sending alerts, collecting files and links in the library, giving oral and written feedback;

- Individualized feedback and learning – group members cannot see the other students' contributions unless the teacher decides to make them visible;
- No need for tutorials as students are familiar with the platform.

Opportunities:

- Edmodo can be used on mobile devices and smart phones;
- It can be used in ESP and ME;
- Medical English teachers could connect with other teachers, share materials internationally and students can work together on joint projects across borders.

Threats:

- students may not visit as often as they connect on FB as Edmodo is not part of their daily routine. Unless learners check their email notifications regularly, they may miss important information and deadlines.

Weaknesses:

- lack of the video lesson feature of MOOCs;
- lack of transparency – individual contributions remain private and it is up to the teacher to make them public;
- there is only one group for Higher Education in Edmodo and several others for English language learning but no group for ME, actually our application of Edmodo to Medical English was a pioneering endeavour.

Conclusion

Social networks are now part of our students' everyday lives and if we want to engage them in communication on a regular basis, we can decide to meet them there with meaningful language learning activities. Edmodo is one such social learning network customized for educational purposes, its large array of features and supported activites outweighing certain limitations.

Our pioneering attempt to use Edmodo in Medical English demonstrated positive results that pertain to offering individual feedback, autonomy, engagement and significantly improved output both quantitatively and qualitatively. Students' attitudes were positive: they appreciated Edmodo for its ease of use, multiple ways of commenting (written/oral) and replying to comments (e.g. like, share, follow), availability of course materials and especially constant communication with the class and teacher.

Undoubtedly, however, the key to success in enriching adult students' language learning experiences, as in any face-to-face ME learning, are ultimately motivation and relevance.

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