

TEACHING ABOUT STANDARD FORMS OF WRITING: DOCUMENTATION NEEDED IN HEALTHCARE SETTINGS

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Abstract: It seems that in the context of teaching Academic Skills for medical students, ESP teachers have the tendency to overlook one important aspect of teaching writing skills. Though teaching about Academic Writing in the traditional way (starting from applications and application forms all the way down to longer essays and dissertations) is necessary training for medical students, few teachers think about other forms of writing documentations in healthcare settings that are equally important for the medical students' general training. These types of documentation that is mainly found in hospitals, when doctors may refer their patients to other healthcare professionals or when we simply talk about the amount of research that is equally carried out in hospitals, may be overlooked mainly because, up to a certain extent, these documents may be standardized (especially when we talk about medical certificates, case reports or letters of referral). Nonetheless, they become of the utmost importance when they are looked at from the perspective of dealing with them in a different cultural context. All these documents, used in English speaking environments, may be particularly challenging for non-native speakers, therefore we believe it is important to bring into discussion these types of documents as our students may find it useful to get familiarized with the terminology and the way in which they should approach them. The aim of this paper is to present some ways in which ESP teachers may deal with such topics in their classes. Most of the references will be in the context of ESP classes for Dental students at the "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi.

Keywords: teaching writing skills, medical documentation, research, medical terminology.

Teaching Academic Writing Skills for Medical students is a consistent part of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) training. During their English courses and seminars, students get a thorough knowledge of how to write all sorts of application forms up to the more sophisticated forms of writing such as longer essays or dissertations. Nonetheless we have come to realize that it is equally important for our students to become familiarized with other forms of writing documentation that is needed in healthcare settings. These types of documentation are usually overlooked when we teach writing skills. One reason for that may be the very fact that they are somehow standardized forms of writing that are found mainly in hospitals (prescriptions, medical certificates, discharge letters, letters of referral etc.), therefore we may say they do not necessarily represent an ESP teacher's main interest. However, if we consider things more carefully, we will discover that, when dealing with these documents in English speaking environments, they may become very challenging for the non-native speakers mainly because of the terminology used. Therefore, we consider it important to spend some time on some activities that would enable our students to get familiarized with this type of hospital documentation and with the terminology they use (mainly abbreviations). However, this is not the only direction that may be overlooked when it

comes to teaching writing skills. Academic research is not carried out only in universities, but also in hospitals. We have got used to the idea of teaching the traditional forms of Academic Writing, overlooking the kind of research that is carried out in hospitals, by healthcare professionals that choose to work in research as part of the pre-clinical topics. In this respect we can talk about a significant number of writing documentation (research papers, article and book reviews) that has to be produced by the academics: "It is essential that research findings are disseminated to the end users – dentists and patients, and, accordingly, the writing of research abstracts (for presentation at research meetings) and papers is central to the role of the dental academic. S/He may also choose to write review articles or books, usually on a subject on which s/he has particular expertise, as this is also a valuable method for dissemination of information" (Burke 11). Indeed, these are also important pieces of writing that could be useful in the context of a future dentist's training. Moreover, with the teaching of these forms of writing, we do not limit ourselves only to some standard hospital research documents, as these research papers may help the future dentist in others academic areas as well.

Thus, one important chapter that we will have to deal with would be the so-called case notes or case records, those medical certificates that refer to patients. The terminology and abbreviations that one may find in such documents is quite challenging and, in order to perform adequately in English-speaking environments, our students have to become familiarized with them: „The ‚case notes‘ or ‚case records‘, are the record of the patient's care, and these may be recorded and stored in handwritten or electronic form. Keeping accurate case records is an essential aspect of medicine, especially when a range of different doctors and other healthcare professionals may be involved in a particular patient's care" (Washer 26). There are all sorts of forms of documentations needed when doctors take the patients' medical history (patient clerking): "When you assess the patient [...] and include a record of the medical history you have taken, the examination you have carried out, your findings, a list of what you think the diagnosis or the diagnoses could be, and what you propose as a management plan" (Washer 27). One idea to first approach these topics is to get the students become familiar with the terminology and abbreviations doctors may use under such circumstances. Thus they could check a thorough list of such abbreviations used in case notes in Peter Washer's book *Clinical Communication Skills* that presents the most commonly used abbreviations in *taking the medical history* (PC – presenting complaint; HPC – history of presenting complaint; PMH – past medical history; DH – drug history; SH – social history; FH – family history), *medical prescriptions* (od – once daily, bd – twice daily; tds – three times a day; qds – four times a day; nocte – at night; mane – in the morning; prn – as required), *abbreviations used in general examination* (O/E or OE – on examination, T – temperature, P – pulse; bpm – beats per minute; R – respiratory rate; rpm – respirations per minute; BP – blood pressure), *abbreviations used in the systems examinations* (CVS – cardiovascular system; CVP – central venous pressure; HS – hear sounds; RS – respiratory system; BS – breath sounds; AE – air entry; exp – thoracic expansion on

inspiration; GI or GIS – gastrointestinal system; LKKS – liver, kidney and spleen), PR – per rectum; NR – neurological system, CNS – central nervous system; PERLA – pupils equal and reactive to light and accommodation) or *other common abbreviations they may come across* (AXR – abdominal X-ray, CXR – chest X-ray, EMU – early morning specimen of urine, FBC – full blood count, IP – inpatient, LFT – liver function test; OP – outpatient) (Washer 30-1). Peter Washer's book is an excellent material that can be used in ESP classes to teach students about this topic as the editor further explains and exemplifies other forms of medical communication. Students could see a *referral and discharge letter*: "Apart from the patients' records, one of the most common forms of written medical communication is letters written between healthcare professionals, for example referring a patient from a GP to a hospital, and vice versa when an inpatient is discharged" (Washer 32). The author's suggestion is that, in such cases, in order to avoid misunderstandings, abbreviations should be avoided. Also, in the context of discussing about such letters, the author draws attention upon the controversy related to the fact that patients have access to this information (most of the times they receive copies of such documents) and, because of the medical terminology, they may have problems in understanding the information. Thus, it is important that doctors clarify, beforehand, any misunderstanding that may arise because of the above-mentioned access of the patient to this medical information. *The discharge letter* is needed when a hospital inpatient or outpatient go back into the care of their GP, "outlining what has happened to this person and what should happen next" (Washer 33). The author also mentions a good technique to keep in mind the kind of information that should be included in such documents. Students may easily remember the acronym *DOCTOR* that would stand for *Diagnosis and treatment, Options regarding treatment, Care plan and timescale to follow up, Told – what has the patient/family been told, Other agencies involved/referred to, Review – who where, when* (Washer 33). *Medical certificates* – those documents containing medical information that doctors are asked to provide in medical reports (Washer 34-5) – are also worth being studied as students will learn about the circumstances when such documents are released (confirming the patient's incapacity to work, when claiming welfare benefits etc.) and being aware that all this information about the patient is confidential, including the fact that they have been ill, and so the patient must consent to its release (British Medical Association).

Obviously, this kind of activities should not be limited to the mere information of students at the level of understanding what these documents are about and trying to find their way among specialized terminology. ESP teachers should try to find time to put all these ideas into practice, that is they should involve students in activities that would require them to produce such documents in writing. Students may be asked to write *case reports* starting from a list of questions that were asked upon the examination of the patient. Likewise, combining elements of grammar with these specific forms or medical written documentation, students may be asked to produce a letter of referral, practicing Present Perfect Tense and Past Tense in order to describe what has happened to the patient or what the patient experienced in the past. Practicing the new learned

terminology is undoubtedly a must. A good book that can be used for such activities in Sam McCarter's *Essential Skills for doctor-patient communication*. The Student's book contains such examples writing activities, while the Teacher's book may give some tips to the teacher who may need help on how to approach such useful activities, writing practice being designed in each unit "as consolidation and extension to the topic with structured, meaningful writing tasks" (McCarter. Teacher 5). A good example on how to deal with a case report can be found in McCarter's *Student's Book* where the author suggests a filling in exercise, by completing the extract of a case report written by a doctor after the consultation of a patient. By asking the student to insert the right forms of the verbs in the text, students get to practice both grammar and the newly learned written skills, by getting to read a doctor's case report (McCarter. Student 11). Another good exercise can be found in the chapter dealing with working in general practice, when students may also read such a letter of referral. The writing exercise will later require students to work in pairs by looking at the referral letter written by a GP to a specialist hospital for one of the patients. Students are asked to tick the features or points covered by the letter of referral (McCarter. Student 18). Students can also practice around various terminology related to these contexts from Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell's book of tests, *Test Your English Vocabulary in Use (Advanced)* that provide students with exercises focused around important areas of discussion: word formation (understanding the very principles of using abbreviations and acronyms), an entire set of tests focusing on the idea of *health* (health and illness).

With the other forms of writing with which future doctors (dentists) may be confronted with, as they begin their work in the hospitals, we indeed move closer to the territory of Academic Writing as such, but, as many ESP teachers will notice, research essays, book or article reviews, literature review or reports are frequently overlooked when it comes to the topics we select to present to our students. All the above-mentioned pieces of writing represent important parts of the research one may carry out, showing progress. With the number of ESP classes for medical students, it will probably be difficult to talk about such topic during seminars (it will be even more difficult to ask students to produce such papers), but we can try to talk about all these types of research papers or documents in one course that may offer students useful hints on how to approach these topics. *Research essays* may be overlooked simply because the ESP teacher may say that speaking about essays in general, and mentioning several types of essays, is enough. However we believe that research essays, as part of the research progress are important, as they could later on help the researcher build new chapters in their longer dissertations or theses. With the understanding of the research essays (that, up to a certain extent, may resemble argumentative essays), students may more easily understand the very idea of developing an argument, a thing which is fundamental in one's progress with his or her research. Such discussions may help the student understand how important is to have a position as you carry out your research, and how you will define the sources that support your argument. Thus, getting to learn how to write an effective research essays, students will be able to learn more

easily how to define important concepts and how to lay out a position. It is not so much about the structure of an essay (because students already know how to organize an essay), but about the understanding of the scope of such an essay in the context of academic research.

Book and article reviews are still an important part of academic research. When they are rightly done, if stored somewhere in a data base, they could constitute a real help for other researchers that could use these resources to check what kind of information they could use in their own research. In making such reviews, students should know that they are not necessarily required to lay out their position regarding the book or the article, especially in the beginning, or as part of their research, such reviews should be an objective description of the useful information contained by the book or the article. However, if they are invited to write such a review for a journal or for a scientific event, they could state their own opinion, stressing upon the relevance of that study in the context of the broader specialized literature. They should also emphasize upon the usefulness of the articles or books in that field of research. House officers or Senior House Officers will frequently be required to complete such reviews as part of their academic research in the hospital. In order to get used to these reviews, students may be required to write such reviews as part of their final assessment (if we choose to discuss such topics as part of their ESP course training).

Literature review is equally important form of academic writing that needs to be discussed. This will cover a significant stage in the research process of a PhD student. But students may also regard this as part of their training for their future BSc thesis. Literature review refers to the students' attempts to read and review all the research material in the field, once they have decided upon a research topic. What has been written before, trying to define the most important concepts and themes, is a key stage before starting to write on your own. Also, along the process, young researchers should be able to identify the most important authors in the field, being ready to use their works as a bibliographical material. When we speak about years of research in a specific field, students should know that they could focus on the most recent materials, being able to identify, though, who are the main important authors in the field. Students should also know, at this point, that literature review will be a compulsory part of their theses. Sometimes they will include literature review as part of the introduction, while in case of PhD theses, literature review may represent a whole chapter (usually the theoretical chapter) whose focus will be exactly on the theories that have been put forward up to the moment of present-day research.

Likewise, *reports* may also be included in this type of academic texts. Students will need to know that there are several types of reports and, depending upon the context they are in or the needs of the research, they will have to discuss with their supervisor about the way in which such a report should be structured and organized. Most commonly, though, they will be asked to produce reports to show progress in their research. If they apply for research scholarships or for all sort of fellowships (including the postdoctoral ones), from time to time they will be invited to submit a report to

present their progress. These types of reports will include research essays, literature review and reference to any kind of publications they managed to have up to the moment of the presentation. Sometimes they will be asked to carry out some specific tasks in the research program, that will need to be completed within some strict deadlines. Therefore, their reports will be required to focus on the completion of these tasks.

As we discuss about these forms of writing, it is important to make sure our students understand something more about the complexities of researching and writing for academic purposes. Though they may be challenged with these previously discussed formats later on in their careers, it is important for them to understand that the entire process of producing academic writing is made up of two stages: the first one is about “generating ideas and the other one about composing these ideas into a written text that meets the needs of a reader and efficiently communicates the author’s message” (Hamp-Lyons 11). These types of writing definitely have to do with the first stage of the process. Nonetheless, we recommend that they should be taught in class after teaching the forms of academic writing that are part of the composing stage. They are like to better understand the process of research after they learn about the various forms of academic writing traditionally included as topics of discussion in ESP classes.

To conclude, we may emphasize the importance of the need to constantly adapt and update our ESP courses and seminars in order to meet the needs of our students who must be prepared for their future profession. There could always be details that may be overlooked, though they might represent real challenges in our students’ future careers. One of the reasons for which we have tried to bring these topics into discussion is the fact that these forms of writing and documentation are rarely discussed in ESP classes. Nonetheless, at a closer look, we can very clearly see that they are not easy to deal with, unless guided or supervised, therefore their inclusion in the ESP curriculum will surely bring benefits to medical students in their training for their future careers.

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