

DENTISTRY AS ART – AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO AN ESP COURSE

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*Abstract: The experience of teaching ESP has been dramatically changed by the evolution of the world we live in today. ESP teachers need to focus more on interdisciplinary approaches that would use the English language as a tool to transfer knowledge about other fields that have relevance in the various domains students will be activating as future professionals. Thus, our paper wants to show how a text written by Woody Allen, the movie director, more than 40 years ago, can be used and exploited in class in order to make dental students understand notions that overpass the boundaries of the traditional ESP classes. Woody Allen’s text written in 1978, **If the Impressionists had been dentists**, is a fine opportunity to introduce our students to so many interesting topics that will be looked at from an interdisciplinary approach. Besides the old traditional approach of re-visiting specialized vocabulary, Woody Allen’s text gives us the opportunity to bring into discussion topics related to art and fiction. Students may get a glimpse on the impressionist art, on the idea of intertextuality (as the text alludes to Van Gogh’s letters to his brother, Theo), along with other concepts in critical theory, like irony or pragmatics, elements that become important in understanding communication better. Last but not least, the whole discussion may lead to the understanding of their future profession as an unselfish one that smartly combines science and art altogether. The paper will make reference to the experience of an ESP class with 1st year students in Dental Medicine at the “Grigore T. Popa” University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iași.*

Keywords: dentistry, arts, ESP, Woody Allen, critical theory.

It is no surprise anymore that ESP classes (English for Specific Purposes) have taken an interesting twist more recently, once foreign language teachers have come to realize that their job is to train their students to understand things beyond the traditional barriers established by the mere teaching of specialized vocabulary. We have discussed before about all these changes that have been brought by the changes of the world we live in, by the rapid development of technology and, consequently, by the necessity to take an interdisciplinary approach in almost any field today. Being able to have an overall perspective upon things enables us to understand the general context better, this being an important thing today, when we emphasize upon ideas such as diversity, inclusion, tolerance and globalization. Thus, any chance to bring our students in front of such opportunities that would enable them to have a better understanding of the real world, of their future profession with everything it entails, using foreign languages as a tool to deliver such information, should not be missed. On the contrary, we should spend enough time on these activities, in order to exhaust all the opportunities given, in order to discuss things our students may benefit from. One such opportunity is given by a text that was published by Woody Allen (writer and movie director) in 1978, **If the Impressionists had been dentists**, a text that may be used in an ESP class with 1st year students in Dental Medicine, in order to discuss with them about art, fiction, communication, their future profession, without losing the ties with the

traditional ESP methodology, i.e. making use of the traditional tools of practicing some reading and speaking skills or discussing specialized vocabulary.

The first step is to make students familiar with the text written by Woody Allen, a text that they may read in hard copy (on handouts) or online. Prior to the class, though, we can ask students to get some information on the Impressionist art. Not having any specialized training in this direction, students may get this information online, detecting the most important features of this trend in art, such as *what defines the Impressionist art, who are the most important Impressionist painters*. As we get to discuss Woody Allen's text, it will be important to know the main features of the Impressionist art. As we start discussing the text, though there may be several layers of interpretation of Woody Allen's text, it is important to have some pre-established directions in order to make it meaningful in the context we are in. Thus, a basic understanding of the Impressionist art is enough, in the sense that students may find it worth knowing that the Impressionist painters "were not trying to paint a reflection of real life, but an impression of what the person, light, atmosphere, object or landscape looked like to them. They tried to capture the movement and life of what they saw and show it to us as if it were happening before our eyes" (<https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/what-is/impressionism>). For the time being, it is essential for our students to keep in mind the idea of impression that the painters tried to capture or, otherwise said, the personal filter that they added to the reality as they could see it. Coming back to the text, the students are going to discover the ten letters written by Van Gogh, who is a dentist, to his brother Theo, describing the hardships and challenges he is confronted with, while dealing with his patients. In case students do not know about that, they should be informed that such letters that were written by Van Gogh, the painter, do exist. Theo, Van Gogh's brother was a real supporter of his brother and one of the few persons the painter stayed in touch with. Later on, when we exhaust the ideas we are mainly interested in, related to the text, we can go on further discussing about such notions as intertextuality, a technique that Woody Allen obviously made use of.

Once students get familiar with the text, that they may find funny, we can talk about any new specialized vocabulary they may have come across (the discussion is meant to take place with 1st year students in Dental Medicine, therefore there should be an emphasis on this aspect as well). Words such as X-rays, cavity, composition, root-canal, dental floss, oral prophylaxis, bite, bridge are worth being put down by students. The next level of discussion is to elicit their understanding of the text, by guiding the conversation towards the way Van Gogh, working as a dentist, perceives his work. Students may find it useful to broaden their view, by going back to the general information on the Impressionist art they got in the beginning. If the Impressionist painters were preoccupied with their own perception of reality, with their own ability to filter it, it will be easy for students to see that Van Gogh, describing his challenges as a dental practitioner basically does the same thing, i.e. takes a very selfish approach of a dentist's job. The first letter makes it clear discussing Mrs. Sol Schwinner's case: "Dear Theo, Will life never treat me decently? I am wracked by despair! My head is pounding. Mrs Sol Schwimmer is suing me because I made her bridge as I felt it and not to fit her

ridiculous mouth. That's right! I can't work to order like a common tradesman. I decided her bridge should be enormous and billowing and wild, explosive teeth flaring up in every direction like fire! Now she is upset because it won't fit in her mouth! She is so bourgeois and stupid, I want to smash her. I tried forcing the false plate in but it sticks out like a star burst chandelier. Still, I find it beautiful. She claims she can't chew! What do I care whether she can chew or not! Theo, I can't go on like this much longer! I asked Cezanne if he would share an office with me but he is old and infirm and unable to hold the instruments and they must be tied to his wrists but then he lacks accuracy and once inside a mouth, he knocks out more teeth than he saves. What to do? Vincent” (Allen 1978). The paragraph reveals the “dentist” ’s lack of empathy towards the patient’s needs, an essential element in our discussion as we need to focus on this important ingredient of the doctor-patient relationship. It is here, probably, the main connection to the Impressionist art, that focuses on the painter’s individuality, his / her power to filter and understand reality, but that without harming anybody, while, from the perspective of a dentist, lacking empathy, this becoming a disaster. Therefore, in letter number 4, Van Gogh describes how he has to go to court, being sued by one of his patients: Dear Theo, Have decided to share office with Gauguin. He is a fine dentist who specialises in bridgework, and he seems to like me. He was very complimentary about my work on Mr Jay Greenglass. If you recall, I filled his lower seven, then despised the filling and tried to remove it. Greenglass was adamant and we went to court. There was a legal question of ownership, and on my lawyer's advice, I cleverly sued for the whole tooth and settled for the filling. Well, someone saw it lying in the corner of my office and he wants to put it in a show! They are already talking about a retrospective! Vincent.” (Allen 1978). Likewise, in letter number 2, the dentist finds his work exhausting and chooses to leave his patient and escape to the sea: “[...] I ran from the office into the air where I could breathe! I blacked out for several days and woke up at the seashore. When I returned, she was still in the chair. I completed her mouth out of obligation but I couldn't bring myself to sign it” (Allen 1978).

This is probably one of the most important ideas that students will have to keep in mind, in order to develop good communication skills and strong relationships with their patients. Empathy is the key skill in doing that and probably there is no better way to develop it than understanding arts and humanistic sciences. On the site of the School of Dental Medicine, at the University of Boston, , a dental student shares her experience, describing how a course on visual training helped her to develop empathy: “As we go through dental school, it is often easy for students to lose sight of the fact that there is a human being in your dental chair, and not just another root canal or amalgam. This person is attached to a brain, a heart, a voice. The Isabella Gardner museum trip was a great way to instill the important value of observation. We looked at a few paintings and sculptures and tried to interpret the facial expressions and body language of the subjects and attach them to a feeling. This is certainly a valuable trait to develop not only as a future healthcare provider, but also as a productive member of society.” (<https://www.bu.edu/dental/2014/08/05/why-art-is-important-to-dentists-dr-neal-fleisher-explains/>). This is indeed one thing our students have to learn early in their

careers. As it has been shown already, with the introduction of medical humanities in the academic curricula of dental schools, this has had a great impact upon students' development. The contact with topics belonging to the humanistic sciences, future doctors (dentists) managed to develop better communication, observational skills along with empathy, a feature that becomes central in building a trusting relationship with the patient. With Woody Allen's text, dental students can go deeper into understanding more about the Impressionist art – the text directly names some important Impressionist painters (Cezanne, Degas, Gauguin, Toulouse Lautrec) whom they can go check online, becoming familiar with their most representative works. If time allows the foreign language teacher to have a guest in one of his / her classes, then an art critic who would be able to discuss this topic with them would definitely be the perfect sum up of such an interdisciplinary activity.

Time is never on the ESP teachers' side, therefore he / she should be able to cover all the activities on his / her own. Therefore a further discussion should bring into the students' attention an idea that may have been emphasized before in the ESP classes. When studying with dental students about Academic Writing, with specific reference to application forms, we often find in samples of personal statements, prospective candidates who apply to Dental Schools and they find it important to emphasize on their artistic skills. At first sight this may have nothing to do with the field of dentistry, but in reality a dentist has to be endowed with some artistic qualities. ***If the Impressionists had been dentists*** is a text that fully allows us to tackle this heated debate around the idea that dentistry itself is art, as Dr. Nazanin Shahmolthy made an interesting observation about the text, "Woody Allen maybe onto something: dentistry is indeed art" (Shahmolthy 2013). We can discuss around this very nice topic which is quite new and relevant in the context, how dentistry gracefully combines both science and art. In an article from 2002, another dentist, Dr. Jeffrey B. Dalin, stresses upon the same idea: "The longer I practice dentistry, the more I realize that dentistry is every bit as much an art as it is a science. Color is something we work with on a daily basis. We are constantly matching surrounding tooth structure with composite restorations by layering different shaded materials to give them vibrancy. We have numerous porcelain systems available for our use when our laboratory technicians are called to action. We desire aesthetic excellence ... and our patients demand it!" (Dalin 2002). Many recent studies try to show the delicate relationship between art and dentistry. Indeed, dentistry, besides solving problems of the oral cavity, it also develops the side of aesthetics, understanding the functionality of beauty. There are dentists who chose to devote all their work and energy in this respect, taking into account the implications of aesthetic dentistry upon the life of a patient. A dentist from Central Park, New York, underlined the same idea in 2008, best summing up how art mingles with science in the field of dentistry: "Dentists know the biology and physiology of healthy and unhealthy dental structures, and through the use of imaging, observation, and clinical judgment, are able to make their diagnoses. While science clearly contributes to advancements made in dentistry, it is often the dentist's keen eye for detail that determines the quality of the final result. This is true in cosmetic treatments, periodontal procedures, or making adjustments to a restoration"

(<https://www.centralpark.dentist/new-patients/blog/2018/1/8/the-role-of-art-and-science-in-dentistry/>). Moreover, this topic has constituted the theme of a scientific article published by Robert L. Caplin in 2021, *Dentistry – art or science? Has the clinical freedom of the dental profession been undermined by guidelines, authoritative guidance and expert opinion?* The article shows this perfect mingling between art and science and their final impact upon the patient: “How much of a dental professional's work can be considered to be art and subjective, and how much can be considered to be science and objective? The interaction between a dentist and a patient essentially consists of clinical decision-making and the implementation of that decision. Clinical decision-making, by its nature, can be considered as professional artistry. Whereas some areas are underpinned by science and an evidence base (for example, properties of dental materials, caries management), many are not. Furthermore, the efficacy of treatments depends to a large degree on the skill of the operator, where skill is practical knowledge in combination with ability, cleverness and expertness. There isn't a probe that we can put on a particular tooth that will tell us what to do. Fill this one. Watch this one. Repair this filling. Put a post in that tooth. Extract this tooth. These are all decisions that are ultimately subjective, and therefore, the reason for the variations that we see in care plans between different dentists and even between the same dentist on different days and at different times. This very much leads to the conclusion that dentistry is more of an art than a science” (Caplin 2021).

Once we have discussed all these, students may better understand the other ideas that an ESP teacher may be putting forward. These may have to do more with the exploration of fiction, critical theory and even motion pictures. It may sound overwhelming in the very beginning, but knowing how to orient and balance the information provided, may actually have a good impact upon the dental student. The discussions will give them some clues that will help them in better understanding concepts related to the theory of communication (to be later discussed during 2nd year courses) and the activities as such will surely be enjoyed by the majority of students. Thus, we have mentioned in the beginning the idea of intertextuality as Woody Allen's text definitely alludes to it: “It seems Mr. Allen found an appropriate answer they would be... dentists! He wrote this piece that puts oral surgery in a whole new light, in Allen's distinctive style. The whole play deals with a parody on the life of Vincent Van Gogh, become a dentist and writing to his friend Theo to talk about his new life, much more exciting than a normal dentist and then an usual impressionist painter. Humour consists in keeping the impressionists' temperament as Woody Allen feels it and to apply it into a job where it provokes disasters. Indeed, this transposition of temperament makes impressionists very bad dentists, as we will discover it” (<http://topicsforessay.blogspot.com/2012/01/discuss-about-if-impressionists-had-05.html>). The format of Woody Allen's imagined letters take the same shape as Van Gogh's real letters to his brother Theo. Thus, besides the possibility of making students curious about getting to read these letters, they may also learn about intertextuality as a postmodern technique largely used by contemporary writers and not only. Intertextuality is often interpreted as belonging to postmodernism. In his book entitled

The Anxiety of Influence, Harold Bloom notices that, by the time we reached the '50s – '60s, our cultural memory had gained so much information that our individual minds could no longer process the numerous cultural elements. The postmodern writer, for instance, ended up developing inhibition or even fear towards the influence of the abundant cultural memory, therefore he ended up imitating previous fellow creators. A fear of the blank page had arisen, but it eventually pushed postmodern writers to “fight” against the cultural memory and resist its power through parody. They would take older texts and create new ones out of them, tackle traditional writings in a playful manner while making fun of certain attitudes, at times. This idea is important and if students are interested they can go further to some literary works (sometimes re-visit some literary works) that they can read now from a fresh new perspective. J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is an intertext of the old Scottish poem written by the poet Robert Burns, *Coming through the rye*. In our literature they probably already know the examples of the old ballad, *Mioritza*, and M. Sadoveanu’s novel, *Baltagul*. In order to illustrate the Romanian postmodernism, we can come with Mircea Cărtărescu’s masterpiece, *Levantul*, which few of them may know, is the second epic poem that we have in Romanian literature (there are today many students who are still taught that we have only one epic poem in the Romanian literature, Ion Budai Deleanu’s *Tiganiada*).

Another topic for a possible discussion will take us further to the field of pragmatics in order to understand irony. At the basis of the domain of pragmatics lies the simple statement “What is said is not what is meant”, this being the very definition of irony. The meaning is not to be found explicitly, at the level of words, but rather implicitly, through processes of deduction. All conversations or exchanges of messages involve some cooperative efforts from both interlocutors. It also helps for them to share as much common ground as possible, be acquainted with each other’s general attitudes, have a mental list of mutual people they know or of topics they have already discussed. Woody Allen’s makes good use of irony throughout the whole text (students may actually underline those sentences where irony can be found). This is to anticipate another discussion that will take place later, in the 2nd year, with reference to the way in which a message delivered to the patient may be undermined by the doctor’s intonation (paralanguage) or body language (nonverbal communication). Last but not least, as it has been shown in various articles and papers, that, for some reasons, dentists are not so nicely depicted in American movies, students may learn about the way in which Woody Allen chose to describe a dentist in one of his movies, *Blue Jasmine* (2013). Again, if time is on the ESP teacher’s side, the movie can be played in class, though the role of the dentist in the movie is not an important one. He is a bad guy, but he still mentions an important thing about his profession that allows him to guess the patient’s personality and lifestyle just by looking at their mouths: “I was just saying, you can tell a awful lot about people when you look in their mouths. Are they conscientious? Are they disciplined? Are they vain? Or careless? You have to know what to look for” (min 39, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2334873/?ref=nr_srsrg_0). If students are interested in watching other American movies where dentists are mostly described as villains, they can check Andrew Ryan’s recommendations: W.C. Fields played a tipsy tooth-puller in

the 1932 comedy short *The Dentist*, or they can watch *Marathon Man* (1976) where Lawrence Olivier was an evil incarnate as an ex-Nazi who tortured Dustin Hoffman by drilling a hole into one of his front teeth (Ryan 2013).

To conclude, we may say that the paper as an attempt to show, by and large, how ESP classes can be adapted to make use of interdisciplinary tools in order to deliver comprehensive knowledge to our students. The demands of the world we live in today are very high and our students have to understand they are going to be successful if they learn to adapt to these needs that are required by patients. Art and science are part of their future profession and therefore they should never say no to art, on the contrary, they should become familiar with all the benefits that come from its knowledge and use. The role of the ESP teachers, from this perspective, becomes even more relevant, as they are the most entitled, as it is the case with Medical schools, to introduce topics related to the large field of medical humanities.

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