

CHALLENGES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC WRITING SKILL IN A 2019/2020 VS. A 2020/2021 COURSE IN ENGLISH FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES: A COMPARISON

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Abstract. The research presented in this paper aims to compare the results of the effort to develop the academic writing skills of 10 groups of medical students who attended the English for Medical Purposes (EMP) course during the first semester of the 2019/2020 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna with the results of the effort for development of the academic writing skills of 7 groups of medical students who attended the English for Medical Purposes (EMP) course during the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna.

In both courses, the students were required to submit a portfolio of 3 written tasks completed as homework assignments.

In the 2019/2020 EMP course, the students were given the opportunity to submit an academic essay or an academic summary, and they were presented with a number of suitable essay topics and texts for summaries for selection. They also had the opportunity to select an essay or research summary topic of their own interest. All written tasks were required to amount to 200-300 words, and they had to be relevant to the scientific field of Medicine.

In the 2020/2021 EMP course, the students were given the same writing genre opportunities with the addition of the opportunity to submit a medical referral letter for a patient as one of their writing tasks.

In the 2019/2020 course, the lecturer encountered 2 main challenges: the great total number of written tasks to edit and assess, and the problem of plagiarism resulting from the unsupervised and digitally unrestricted environment of homework task fulfilment. These challenges led the lecturer to a revision of 3 main teaching methodology components that were presented in a paper authored by the lecturer and published in 2020 (Vateva, Tsvetelina (2020). *Challenges to the Development of the Academic Writing Skill in a 2019-2020 Course in English for Medical Purposes*, Globalization: Business, Finance and Education, Ed. P. Stoyanov, ISSN 1314-4618, Vol. 10, pp. 3-12, Perun-Sprint Ltd.): the setting of conditions for fulfilment of the writing tasks; the focus of the lecturer’s feedback; and the achievement of the purpose to develop the students’ academic writing skills. As a conclusion to her 2020 paper, the lecturer suggested an alternative teaching model aiming to address the encountered challenges and improve the teaching model applied in the 2019/2020 course.

In the 2020/2021 EMP course, the lecturer tried to apply the alternative teaching model suggested in her 2020 paper to the best possible extent under the circumstances (considering the course was conducted entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and there was no opportunity for setting and fulfilment of the writing tasks outside the same unsupervised and digitally unrestricted environment of the students’ homes and personal computers as in the 2019/2020 course.)

Nevertheless, some of the improvements suggested by the lecturer in her 2020 paper were introduced and tested in practice successfully in the 2020/2021 EMP course.

The current comparative paper aims to outline these successfully introduced teaching methodology improvements, to present the 2020/2021 results from these introduced improvements and to compare them with the achieved results in the previous 2019/2020 EMP course.

Keywords: writing skill, challenges, improvements, results, comparison

INTRODUCTION

In her paper entitled “Challenges to the Development of the Academic Writing Skill in a 2019/2020 Course in English for Medical Purposes” , which was published in 2020, the author Tsvetelina Vateva identifies and discusses the following 2 main challenges encountered in her effort to develop the academic writing skills of 10 groups of medical students who attended the English for Medical Purposes (EMP) course during the first semester of the 2019/2020 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna: the great total number of written tasks to edit and assess (as all 120+ medical students from these 10 groups were required to submit 3 written tasks each) and the problem of plagiarism resulting from the unsupervised and digitally unrestricted environment of homework task fulfilment (as the 3 written tasks for assessment were completed as homework assignments by each student).

Two main questions are answered by the author’s 2020 paper entitled “Challenges to the Development of the Academic Writing Skill in a 2019/2020 Course in English for Medical Purposes” on the basis of the author’s practical observations and presented feedback examples: whether the required number of 3 written tasks for assessment is sufficiently adequate and efficient for both the students and the lecturer to achieve the set learning goal and whether the check and penalty for plagiarism in the digitally unrestricted circumstances of homework task fulfilment would have been a more effective feedback focus than focusing the lecturer’s feedback more on the linguistic and grammatical correction of the submitted texts.

In order to arrive at the answers to these questions, the author analyzes 3 components of the teaching methodology applied in the discussed 2019/2020 EMP course: the setting of conditions for fulfilment of the writing tasks; the focus of the lecturer’s feedback; and the level of achievement of the set tasks’ purpose. Based on the author’s observations and presented data, the answers to both questions come out to be negative, as due to the “great workload of 360+ written tasks for editing and assessment, which comes in addition to the workload of their required weekly teaching hours, the lecturer may not be left with the necessary available working hours to check and penalize all of the written tasks for both plagiarism and linguistic errors” (Vateva, 2020), while “even if the lecturer attempts to proofread and penalize all the written tasks for plagiarism, they may not be lucky enough to find the sources of all plagiarized texts despite their best efforts, or even despite the use of plagiarism detection software (as the relevant original texts may fall out of its scope)” (Vateva, 2020). The author further points out that under the homework task fulfilment conditions, besides the created opportunity for plagiarism, there is also a “created opportunity for re-assignment of the tasks to other people for fulfilment, which significantly lowers the usefulness of the written homework assignments as a teaching strategy unless the lecturer manages to provide the most appropriate feedback that achieves the objective of developing the students’ writing skills at least to a satisfactory extent under the set circumstances” (Vateva, 2020).

The author defines the teaching methodology for developing the skill of academic writing applied in the 2019/2020 EMP course as following the “individual trial-individual error-individual penalty” teaching model, since the students were assigned to submit their 3 written tasks fulfilled as homework without a preliminary detailed classroom discussion of the guidelines for writing academic essays and summaries (available as part of their main textbook – Dokova, A., Trendafilova, S., Angelova, V. (2009). *English for Medicine*, Varna, STENO Publishing House.) and without being provided with excellent essay and summary samples for reference or an opportunity to fulfil an ungraded writing task and receive feedback on their own writing prior to fulfilling their tasks for assessment.

Therefore, as a conclusion to her 2020 paper, the author suggests an alternative teaching model aiming to improve the teaching model applied in the 2019/2020 course by introducing the aforementioned elements of a preliminary classroom discussion of the guidelines for writing and some excellent writing samples, as well as an ungraded homework task fulfilment for feedback, while reducing the students’ final graded writing to a single writing task fulfilled in class.

The author’s intention was to try to apply this alternative teaching model as presented in her 2020 paper in the next EMP course that she taught to 7 groups of medical students during the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated all courses taught during the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna to be conducted entirely online, and this impeded the author’s intention to restrict the final graded task fulfilment environment to the physical classroom. The intention for reduction of the final number of graded tasks to a single graded task was also impeded, as the department head insisted on continuing to require 3 written homework tasks for assessment from each of the students.

Thus, in the 2020/2021 EMP course, the author had the opportunity to introduce only the following improvements to the teaching model applied in the 2019/2020 course:

- a preliminary detailed online-classroom discussion of the guidelines for writing academic essays, academic summaries and medical referral letters for patients;
- a preliminary detailed online-classroom discussion of excellent samples of academic essays, academic summaries and medical referral letters for patients and provision of the discussed samples to the students for reference;
- a provision of detailed instructions for fulfilment of each individual assignment;
- a provision of detailed feedback on both linguistic (grammatical, lexical and stylistic) corrections and established plagiarism (including examples of the successful application of some of the preliminarily discussed strategies for avoiding plagiarism).

The particular improvements listed above and the results from their application in the 7 groups of medical students who attended the English for Medical Purposes (EMP) course with the author Tsvetelina Vateva as their lecturer during the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna are presented and discussed in detail in the following sections.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to draw a comparison to the results achieved in the EMP course taught by the same lecturer during the 2019/2020 academic year and to confirm or refute the lecturer’s conclusion about the potential advantages of the improved teaching model

suggested in her 2020 paper “Challenges to the Development of the Academic Writing Skill in a 2019/2020 Course in English for Medical Purposes”.

METHODOLOGY

The applied methodology for development of the academic writing skills of the 10 groups of students in the 2019/2020 EMP course included the following activities: assignment of the 3 written tasks to the students for fulfilment by presenting the students with a number of suitable essay topics and texts for summaries for selection, as well as with the opportunity to select an essay or research summary topic of their own interest; pointing the students to read the guidelines for writing academic essays and summaries (available as part of their main textbook – Dokova, A., Trendafilova, S., Angelova, V. (2009). *English for Medicine*, Varna, STENO Publishing House.) on their own and encouraging them to ask the lecturer questions (should any questions related to these guidelines arise); collecting, editing and assessing the students’ portfolios of 3 fulfilled written tasks; providing feedback that contained comments on the necessary linguistic (grammatical, lexical and stylistic) corrections, as well as comments on the plagiarism issues (if detected), to each student regarding each of their 3 submitted written tasks for assessment. In the 2019/2020 EMP course, the check for plagiarism was performed only manually by the lecturer to the best extent possible under the circumstances, and the lecturer performed this check using either just the help of the most popular internet search engines, or by comparing the students’ texts with the original source texts used (when the lecturer had those texts at their disposal to perform a manual comparison).

The applied methodology for development of the academic writing skills of the 7 groups of students in the 2020/2021 EMP course included the following activities: assignment of the 3 written tasks to the students for fulfilment by presenting the students with a number of suitable essay topics and texts for summaries for selection, as well as with the opportunity to select an essay or research summary topic of their own interest and the opportunity to submit one of their texts for assessment in the additional writing genre of a medical referral letter for a patient; devoting 3 teaching hours for preliminary detailed online-classroom discussions of the guidelines for successful writing (available as part of the students’ main textbook – Dokova, A., Trendafilova, S., Angelova, V. (2009). *English for Medicine*, Varna, STENO Publishing House.) for each of the required genres of academic essays, academic summaries and medical referral letters for patients and preliminary detailed online-classroom discussions of excellent samples of academic essays, academic summaries and medical referral letters for patients before setting the deadlines for submission of each particular task; provision of the discussed excellent writing samples at the students’ disposal for reference; provision of detailed instructions for fulfilment of each individual assignment, which were also at the students’ disposal at all times; collecting, editing and assessing the students’ portfolios of 3 fulfilled written tasks; provision of detailed feedback on both the necessary linguistic (grammatical, lexical and stylistic) corrections and detected plagiarism issues (including examples of the successful application of some of the preliminarily discussed strategies for avoiding plagiarism) to each student regarding each of their 3 submitted written tasks for assessment. In the 2020/2021 EMP course, the check for plagiarism was performed automatically by relying on the SafeAssign plagiarism checking tool that is integrated in the online teaching platform used by the university, as well as manually by the lecturer when it was necessary and when the lecturer had the relevant original texts at their disposal to perform an additional manual comparison.

The introduced differences in the 2020/2021 EMP course succeeded in improving the teaching methodology for academic writing applied in the 2019/2020 EMP course for the following reasons:

- the preliminary detailed online-classroom discussions of both the guidelines for successful writing and some excellent samples of academic writing (that were subsequently left at the students' disposal for reference) ensured that all the students were acquainted with the guidelines at least once and that all the students' attention was directed towards the examples of the successful practical application of these guidelines at least once during class before they were assigned to write their own writing tasks for assessment; otherwise, as it had become evident from the 2019/2020 EMP course, if the students are only left to read the guidelines on their own, the lecturer can never be sure that all of them would actually read the guidelines and few students would be prompted to turn to the lecturer with questions about these guidelines even when they have read them;
- the use of an automatic plagiarism checking tool definitely sped up and improved the plagiarism checking process for the lecturer; however, the results from its application also practically proved that automatic plagiarism checking tools do not identify all instances of committed plagiarism (as there can always be original texts that fall out of their scope) and there will always be cases when the lecturer's manual plagiarism check could establish plagiarism where the automatic tool has registered a 0% result, as well as cases when neither the plagiarism checking tool, nor the lecturer would be able to establish a case of plagiarism (if, for example, the homework task has been re-assigned for fulfilment to another person who has not published their submitted text anywhere previously);
- in the cases of detected plagiarism, the low grades and the provided detailed feedback informing the students that plagiarism was detected in their assignments and containing examples of the successful application of some of the preliminarily discussed strategies for avoiding plagiarism managed to guide nearly half of the students away from resorting to plagiarism again in their next tasks; however, the remaining half of the students were not prevented from trying to resort to plagiarism again (which re-confirmed the previously established need for a supervised physical classroom environment for the fulfilment of writing tasks for assessment).

The practical results presented in the following section illustrate and come as evidence of the improvements and drawbacks outlined above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 7 groups of medical students who attended the English for Medical Purposes (EMP) course with the author Tsvetelina Vateva as their lecturer during the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year at the Medical University Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov – Varna included a total number of 85 students. Each of these 85 students was required to submit 3 written tasks for assessment. Therefore, the total number of written tasks that were submitted for editing and assessment to the lecturer in the 2020/2021 EMP course equaled 255 written tasks.

Out of this total number of 255 written tasks edited and assessed by the lecturer, there were 78 written tasks (equaling about one third of the total number of 255 written tasks), in which plagiarism was detected either by the SafeAssign plagiarism checking tool, or manually by the lecturer.

The 78 written tasks with detected plagiarism were submitted by a total number of 48 students (more than half of all 85 students attending the course), and the plagiarism issues were distributed among them in the following way: there were 25 students with detected plagiarism in 1 of their 3 written tasks and there were 23 students with detected plagiarism in 2 or 3 of their 3 written tasks.

These results indicate unambiguously that the lecturer's detailed feedback informing the students that plagiarism was detected in their assignments and containing examples of the successful application of some of the preliminarily discussed strategies for avoiding plagiarism managed to guide nearly half of the students with detected plagiarism away from resorting to plagiarism again for their second and third tasks. However, also nearly half of these students were not prevented from resorting to plagiarism again for their second and third tasks and they ended up submitting 2 or 3 of their 3 required tasks with detected plagiarism after having received the lecturer's warning feedback at least once.

These results provide an indisputable – and certainly alarming – indicator, which once again confirms the need for the fulfilment of such writing tasks for assessment in the supervised environment of the physical classroom (when the circumstances allow the teaching process to be conducted in the physical classroom), since in the physical classroom environment, it would be possible to ensure a 100% freedom from plagiarism a priori by design.

Another indicator revealed by the discussed 2020/2021 results also relates to the application of an automatic plagiarism checking tool as an aid for the lecturer. This indicator once again confirms that the use of automatic plagiarism checking tools cannot ensure a 100% plagiarism detection on its own and the lecturer still needs to resort to a manual plagiarism check in some cases (e.g. when the plagiarism checking tool has registered a 0% result and the lecturer's manual check still establishes plagiarism), while in other cases it remains highly possible that neither the plagiarism checking tool, nor the lecturer would be able to establish a case of plagiarism (e.g. if the homework task has been re-assigned for fulfilment to another person who has not published their submitted text anywhere previously). In precise figures, this indicator was revealed as follows: out of the total number of 78 written tasks with detected plagiarism, there were 28 written tasks with plagiarism detected manually by the lecturer after the SafeAssign plagiarism checking tool had registered them with a 0% result.

CONCLUSION

As the presented and discussed results in the previous section indicate, the first conclusion to be drawn from the research presented in this paper is that it once again confirms that the homework environment of writing task fulfilment has become inefficient for both the students and the lecturer because a significant number of students continue their attempts at plagiarism in this environment even after being warned about it and even after knowing that a plagiarism checking tool is being utilized by the lecturer.

The second main conclusion that stands out is that the presented and discussed results also once again confirm that it is inefficient and wasteful for the lecturer to invest so much time and efforts in providing feedback after feedback stating that plagiarism has been detected and warning the students to avoid this practice in their future tasks instead of focusing their time and efforts on avoiding the plagiarism issues altogether by simply requiring the students to fulfil their writing tasks for assessment in person in the physical classroom where the supervised environment would ensure the submission of 100% plagiarism-free written tasks.

A third important conclusion to be drawn from the results of both the 2019/2020 and the 2020/2021 EMP courses is that the inefficiency of the lecturer's efforts to assess homework writing tasks is even further boosted by the number of 3 required written tasks from each student in a course of around 100 (+/-20) students. It is simply pointless to require 3 written tasks completed as homework assignments from each student of such a great number of students, many of whom will provenly continue their attempts at plagiarism even after being warned about this practice and getting a low grade on their first assignment. It is also as much pointless to give these students the same feedback 2 or 3 times over instead of placing them in the supervised environment of the physical classroom where they will have no other choice but to write in their own words and receive a more useful feedback and a more real assessment of their actual academic writing skills.

Finally, the homework environment also entails the created possibility for re-assignment of the writing tasks to other people for fulfilment, which is a prerequisite for potentially numerous cases of plagiarism that would be virtually untraceable and unprovable for both the lecturer and any automatic plagiarism checking tool.

Therefore, we can only be hopeful that the COVID-19 pandemic will at last retreat soon and give us the opportunity to return to our physical classrooms because the online classrooms and the homework environment for written assignments can never provide us with the necessary face-to-face contact and supervision to ensure 100% plagiarism-free students' written production.

Just as Jude Carroll and Carl-Mikael Zetterling have put it forward in their book entitled "Guiding students away from plagiarism": "the students need to know what the teachers expect them to do" (Carroll, Zetterling, 2009) before they actually do it, while the teachers "should not set assignments that require the students to use skills before they have been taught to use them" (Carroll, Zetterling, 2009).

And in order for this teacher-student interaction to be as efficient as possible, as the results presented in this paper indicate and confirm, the supervised environment of the physical classroom and the teacher-student face-to-face contact seem to remain the best possible environment to conduct the teacher-student interaction successfully.

References

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