

Challenges to the development of the academic writing skill in a 2019-2020 course in English for medical purposes

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Abstract.

The research presented in this paper was carried out based on 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.

The students were required to submit a portfolio of 3 written tasks completed as homework assignments in the genres of the academic essay or the academic summary. All written tasks were required to amount to 200-300 words, and they had to be relevant to the scientific field of Medicine.

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 task fulfilment.

These challenges led to a revision of 3 main teaching methodology components that are presented in this paper: 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.

The analysis relies on the actual observations, data, and examples collected by the lecturer during the course.

In conclusion, the paper presents an alternative teaching model that aims to address the encountered challenges and improve the teaching model applied in the discussed EMP course.

Keywords: writing skill, teaching, challenges, plagiarism, corrections.

I. Introduction to the applied method and collected data

The applied method under discussion in this paper includes the components of task fulfilment conditions setting, lecturer’s feedback focus, and achievement of the set task purpose, whereas the discussed collected data consists of actual feedback examples illustrating the extent of the achieved efficiency and effectiveness in the practical application of the analyzed applied method.

II. Analysis of methodological of component 1: task fulfilment conditions setting

It is important to discuss the setting of conditions for fulfilment of the writing tasks as a methodological component because the achieved results in the discussed teaching process suggest that the assignment of graded homework writing tasks is becoming less efficient as a teaching strategy in the digital era of freely and easily accessible online resources at the students’ disposal.

Currently, the students, just as everybody else, are granted free and unrestricted access to a myriad of different sources of reliable scientific information online.

On the one hand, this is a great advantage because it gives the students the opportunity to read and learn scientific information relevant to their field of study at all times anywhere – even from the comfort of their own homes.

On the other hand, this creates a number of disadvantages for the lecturers and the writing task revision process because it creates prerequisites for plagiarism that can be difficult or impossible to trace efficiently.

One such disadvantage is the fact that in a situation of a great workload of written tasks for editing and assessment, such as the total workload of 360+ written tasks, 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. Moreover, 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).

Another such disadvantage is that the created opportunity for plagiarism or re-assignment of the tasks to other people for fulfilment 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.

Possible solutions to the two problems outlined above are suggested and presented in the following section dealing with the focus of the lecturer's feedback as the second methodological component for discussion.

III. Analysis of methodological component 2: Lecturer's feedback focus

The provision of effective feedback to the students requires the lecturer's careful consideration because the final content and focus of the lecturer's feedback are among the most important means to attain the teaching process objective.

One might argue that focusing the lecturer's feedback on the issue of plagiarism (if present) and assessing the submitted written tasks solely on the basis of whether or not the students will finally manage to avoid the plagiarism issue after several revisions of the same tasks should suffice to ensure that the learning objective of developing the students' writing skills is fulfilled.

However, despite the doubtless fact that avoiding plagiarism is an important prerequisite to one's success in academic writing, there are other aspects of the writing process that this teaching approach fails to address because of its restricted focus on a single issue.

Thus, for example, the provision of feedback consisting of remarks focused only on the presence of statements copied word-for-word would give no clue to the students as to what paraphrase or quotation techniques they could employ to avoid the plagiarism issue.

Yet another disadvantageous aspect is the fact that this restricted focus fails to address issues like the suitability of the presented textual content with regard to the task topic, as well as the correction of linguistic and grammatical errors in the use of constructions that are typically employed in academic writing, which should be taken as the stepping stones preceding the teaching of the strategies for avoiding plagiarism.

Such an account should not be omitted as feedback because the correct use of the grammar and syntax of the language in which the students write their assignments is a crucial prerequisite to their success. If the students cannot express their ideas correctly in their chosen language of writing, their work would be at risk of not being recognized for its academic value because the linguistic and grammatical mistakes would make a poor impression on the readers.

Furthermore, it is important that the lecturer's feedback includes remarks about the suitability of the submitted text with regard to the topic of the written assignment, as well. Even if the submitted text makes excellent use of the techniques for avoiding plagiarism and the grammatical and syntactic rules of the chosen language of writing, the content also needs to be in line with the topic of writing in order to merit an excellent assessment.

A third disadvantageous aspect is the fact that the plagiarism-focused approach relies mainly on the "individual trial-individual error-individual penalty" teaching model, while a much more effective teaching model for achieving the set writing purpose would be the "preliminary classroom samples discussion-ungraded homework task fulfilment-graded classroom task fulfilment" teaching model. The students find it much more useful to be given an opportunity to discuss, ask questions and express their opinions regarding some samples of excellent academic writing before they are set their own writing tasks to fulfil than to be left to try fulfilling a task on their own and then get penalized for mistakes they have not been taught in advance how to avoid.

The examples in Table 1 below illustrate the practical results of the provision of lecturer's feedback focused not so much on plagiarism issues, as on linguistic errors concerning grammar, syntax, and terminology, content suitability and submitted text volume, textual coherence and cohesion, and academic writing style remarks, which the lecturer attempted to employ as her teaching approach in the working circumstances of requiring 3 written tasks to be performed as homework assignments in the EMP course under discussion.

Out of the 120+ medical students that have received feedback from the lecturer regarding their portfolios of 3 written tasks, a selection of 61 feedback samples was reviewed by the lecturer for the purposes of the current paper. The 61 feedback samples were all selected so as to contain remarks and guidelines aimed at

improving the students' linguistic (grammatical, syntactic, and terminological) means of expression in English and advising the students on how to achieve better topic suitability, coherence and cohesion of their written texts, while also complying with the text volume and academic writing style requirements. Some of these 61 selected feedback samples are provided as examples in Table 1 below, while their effectiveness for achieving the aim of developing the students' academic writing skills is discussed in the following section.

Table 1: Examples of feedback provided by the lecturer

Provided feedback category	Number of examples (out of 61)	Feedback examples (translated in English, as they were originally provided in Bulgarian)
1. Feedback on linguistic issues (grammar, syntax, terminology)	58 of 61	<p>1. "I am advising you to be more cautious with regard to the following 2 problems concerning grammar and terminology: the use of the definite and indefinite article; the use of the correct terminological forms (e.g. "tricuspid valve", "semilunar valves" – and not "tricuspidal" and "semilunary"). Please, read the grammar reference and perform the exercises on the use of the definite and indefinite article that are available as part of our Blackboard Grammar Practice resource. Please, also pay attention to my corrections concerning the addition of the ending "-s" to the 3rd person-singular present simple tense verb forms."</p> <p>2. "Please, pay primary attention to the corrected grammatical problems concerning the use of the present simple tense when we discuss facts established as general truths (as is the case in your sentence: "Their parents and their society manage to protect them from all the dangers that could kill them.")."</p> <p>3. "I am advising you to run the automatic spelling and grammar check in the Word program always before submitting electronic written tasks. It is a good idea that you yourself also check for spelling mistakes and typos before submitting your tasks because if you have made a typographical error, the typed result may be another existing word that the automatic check would not recognize as an error (e.g. you have omitted the "t" of the word "cached" that you have tried to type, thereby typing the existing word "cashed" in your essay). Furthermore, you should note that the correct past tense form of the verb "to catch" is "caught", and not "cached". Please, also pay attention that the correct English term for a person performing gymnastics is "a gymnast", whereas "gymnastics" is the correct term for the name of the sport."</p> <p>4. "Please, pay attention that the standard English syntax follows the "subject-verb-object" word order sequence. Therefore, it is unusual to construct a sentence such as "At the heart of the value system of every doctor should be the following regularities: ..." instead of starting your sentence with "The following regularities" as its subject."</p> <p>5. "I am advising you to pay attention to the grammatical corrections I have made concerning the sequence of tenses in a conditional sentence of the mixed type, as well as concerning the use of present participles for enumerating the symptoms of a disease (e.g. "feeling depressed", "feeling energized")."</p> <p>6. "Please, pay attention to the corrections I have made concerning the correct use and sequence of verb tenses: "He figured out that the mold prevented the culture from growth."; "The researchers up to now have been trying to develop new and new antibiotics..."</p> <p>7. "Please, pay attention to the corrections I have made concerning the correct plural form of the word "diagnosis" (which is "diagnoses"), as well as the corrections I have made concerning the correct syntax of the question "On what must they rely to be sure that the diagnosis and treatment are correct?"</p> <p>8. "Please, pay primary attention to the corrections I have made concerning the incorrect use of terminological forms (e.g. orthopedician, pediatrician), as well as concerning the incorrect use of verb forms (e.g. "proofed" instead of "proved"). Please, also pay attention to the difference between the terms referring to medical specialties and the terms referring to medical specialists: e.g. pediatrics (specialty) – pediatrician (specialist); orthopedics (specialty) – orthopedician (specialist); surgery (specialty) – surgeon (specialist)."</p> <p>9. "Please, pay attention to the corrections I have made</p>

		<p>concerning the English expressions “on the one hand” and “on the other hand” – I have used them to correct the literal translations of the corresponding Bulgarian expressions – “on the one side” – “on the other side”.”</p> <p>10. “Please, pay primary attention that the contracted form “it’s” spelled with an apostrophe means “it is”, while the form of the 3rd-person-singular possessive pronoun is “its” spelled without an apostrophe.”</p>
2. Feedback on issues of textual coherence and cohesion	4 of 61	<p>1. “Please, include the answers to the task questions in a coherent and cohesively connected text, while avoiding the repetition of the questions as part of your text. Please, include additional information connected with the topic so that the volume of your final text equals at least 200 words.”</p> <p>2. “Please, support the claims that you make in your text with more arguments. On the one hand, you will create a more convincing basis for your claims; on the other hand, you will be able to fulfil the volume requirement for submitting at least 200 words of text. Please, separate your statements in shorter and coherently completed sentences (e.g. “Both men and women have pros and cons of being doctors, for example women as a doctor have better interaction with their patients on the other hand the men can be more rude. => “Both men and women have pros and cons in being doctors. For example, female doctors have better interaction with their patients. On the other hand, male doctors can be ruder.”)”</p> <p>3. “Please, pay attention to the corrections I have made in the sentences starting with “High testosterone levels of men include: ...” and “Low testosterone levels include: ...”, after which you have enumerated respective effects. In this context, a more suitable verb would be “to cause” instead of “to include” (because you are enumerating effects). If you insist on using the verb “to include”, you should start your sentences by clarifying that “The effects of the low/high testosterone levels include ...”, and then you should enumerate your examples of such effects.”</p> <p>4. “Please, pay attention to the additive and contrastive cohesive devices for starting a new sentence in a connected text in English rather than using “and” or “but” for this purpose.”</p>
3. Feedback on issues of content suitability and text volume	9 of 61	<p>1. “I am advising you to include a little bit more information from the original text in your summary so as to reach the required volume of at least 200 words. You could include the information concerning the use of different contraceptive methods (IUDs, vaginal diaphragms, condoms, steroidal contraceptives). You could also add other parts of the information that you consider more important. It is a good idea to rewrite the last sentence of your summary because the text mentions that the security of lactation as a contraceptive method is higher than the security of contraceptive pills only during the first 3 months after the woman has started lactating – and you have written that the woman is completely protected from getting pregnant throughout her period of lactation.”</p> <p>2. “The text you have sent me does not fulfil the requirement for amounting to 200-300 words in volume. A possible way for you to reach the required volume is by supporting your claims with further arguments.”</p> <p>3. “Please, pay attention primarily to my corrections concerning the use of meaningfully more adequate verbs instead of other more inadequately used verbs or long explanatory phrases (e.g. “demands” instead of “expects”; “worsening” instead of “developing from bad to worse”).”</p> <p>4. “Please, include some additional important information from the original text in your summary. Your written task needs to amount to 200-300 words.”</p> <p>5. “The text you have submitted does not amount to 200-300 words. I am advising you to research and include additional information on the topic in your written task. For example, an interesting fact about the “Da Vinci” surgical system is that it has already been tested at the UMHAT “St. Marina” in Varna by the Rector of our university personally. You could research the details about this event and include the information in your summary. You could also find additional details about the surgical system itself.”</p>
4. Feedback on issues of academic	4 of 61	<p>1. “Please, pay attention primarily to the corrected expressions and prepositions, as well as to the fact that in academic texts we do not use contracted forms (e.g. we write the full form “is not”</p>

writing style	<p>instead of the contracted form “isn’t”). Please, try to avoid repetitive ideas or words within one sentence or in close sentences (e.g. expressions such as “in relation to” – “related to”; “the previous” – “precedes”).”</p> <p>2. “Please, pay attention that in academic texts we do not use contracted forms such as “don’t” and “can’t” – we write the full forms “do not” and “cannot”.”</p> <p>3. “Please, pay attention to the corrections I have made concerning the use of more suitable verbs of the academic register (e.g. “discusses” instead of “talks about”).”</p> <p>4. “Please, pay attention to the corrections I have made concerning the replacement of certain verbs and expressions with more suitable verbs and expressions of the academic register (e.g. “It has been established” instead of “It has been seen”; “depends on” instead of “relies on”).”</p>
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**IV. Analysis of methodological component 3:
Achievement of the set task purpose**

As it is evident from the data included in Table 1 above, the samples of feedback on linguistic issues concerning grammar, syntax, and terminology merit the highest incidence within the total number of 61 selected feedback samples for analysis. This fact comes to suggest that the majority of the medical students whose written tasks’ feedback was selected for analysis by the lecturer demonstrated problems with the English grammar, syntax, and specific medical terminology rather than issues of plagiarism or troubles with the academic writing style requirements.

Therefore, the lecturer’s strategy of focusing their feedback mainly on the linguistic issues seems to have been adequately applied. However, the question of whether or not (or to what extent) the set task purpose of developing the students’ skills for academic writing was achieved still remains.

The digitally unrestricted homework assignment conditions of fulfilment of the 3 written tasks still leave the question of whether or not the submitted written tasks were fulfilled by the students alone without a certain answer. And if there is no certainty as to the students’ authorship of the discussed written homework portfolios, there is also zero certainty as to the actual achievement of the purpose to develop the students’ academic writing skills.

Even if the students’ final grades on their written tasks are taken as a marker of the successful fulfilment of the written tasks, the need for a different approach to the writing task fulfilment conditions setting still remains evident as the homework environment for task fulfilment in the era of countless digitally available information databases renders pointless the whole effort on the part of the lecturer to check and correct digitally submitted written homework assignments in general, and moreover – to check and correct a total number of digitally submitted written homework assignments as high as 360+ per 1 semester – if the purpose of setting these homework assignments is an attempt to develop the medical students’ academic writing skills.

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: 6) 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: 47). Moreover, the students not only need to develop their academic skills in order to fulfil their assignments successfully, but they also need to “build their understanding of how these assignments will check their learning” (Carroll, Zetterling, 2009: 6). In other words, “the students need to be taught and required to use an accepted citation and referencing system, as well as other necessary skills such as how to locate and judge sources, or how to summarize others’ ideas” (Carroll, Zetterling, 2009: 15) before they are left to fulfil their own writing assignments. And while it is the teachers’ job “to give the students the information, guidance and feedback they need to understand what the phrase “do your own work” really means” (Carroll, Zetterling, 2009: 9), Carroll and Zetterling further point out that “the students also need to be encouraged to ask for this type of help from their teachers when needed” (Carroll, Zetterling, 2009: 9).

Furthermore, there is yet another impediment to the lecturer-student communication and the establishment of the authorship of the students’ written works that is a direct result from what Ivan Merdzhanov calls “виртуализация, водеща до пълна или частична деперсонификация на контакта между студентите и преподавателя” (“a virtualization leading to a complete or partial de-personification of the lecturer-student contact”) (Мерджанов, 2016: 160) in the increasingly digitalized learning environment. As Ivan Merdzhanov has put it forward in his paper entitled “Електронното обучение между индивидуализацията и деперсонификацията” (“The Electronic Learning Between the Individualization and the De-Personification”), “участниците в електронното обучение (студенти и преподаватели) функционират като виртуални личности – профили или акаунти (понякога със снимка или друг аватар) – които извършват определени

дейности в електронната среда” (“the electronic learning participants (students and lecturers) function as virtual personas – profiles or accounts (sometimes with a picture or another avatar) – who perform certain activities within the electronic environment”) (Мерджанов, 2016: 161) and “липсва реална представа кой стои зад съответното потребителско име – един акаунт контактува с друг акаунт” (“there is no real proof of who stands behind the respective username – one account communicates with another account”) (Мерджанов, 2016: 161). Thus, “когато преподавателят постави задача на групата си в електронната платформа” (“when the lecturer sets an assignment to their group on the electronic platform”), Ivan Merdzhanov continues, “не знае със сигурност дали отговорите действително са генерирани от студентите, или са преписвали един от друг също във виртуалното пространство; същото се отнася и до дистанционното изпитване – ако то не е в зала с квестори, сигурността на изпита не е гарантирана” (“they cannot be sure whether the answers are really generated by the students, or they have copied their answers from each other within the electronic environment; the same applies to distant learning – if an exam is not conducted in a physically supervised classroom, the security of the examination cannot be guaranteed”) (Мерджанов, 2016: 161).

Therefore, a maximally effective approach with a view to overcoming these impediments was sought in the process of drafting a proposal for improvement of the “individual trial-individual error-individual penalty” teaching model for developing the students’ skill of academic writing discussed so far, and this new teaching model improvement proposal is presented in the conclusive section below.

V. Conclusion

One possible suggestion for improvement of the “individual trial-individual error-individual penalty” teaching model for developing the skill of academic writing, as noted earlier, would be the application of a “preliminary classroom samples discussion-ungraded homework task fulfilment-graded classroom task fulfilment” teaching model, which should achieve a better effectiveness due to the restrictions on the use of digital resources that it aims to introduce and due to the employment of a preliminary classroom samples discussion that aims to give the students a better idea of what they are expected to do.

As suggested by its name, the “preliminary classroom samples discussion-ungraded homework task fulfilment-graded classroom task fulfilment” teaching model would entail a preliminary classroom discussion of some academic writing samples and the fulfilment of 1 ungraded homework exercise and 1 graded classroom task on the part of the students.

The advantages of this teaching model would include:

- a better effectiveness of the classroom samples discussion as the lecturer would have the opportunity to discuss and give the students some actual samples and to pay attention in advance to all the necessary academic writing style techniques, plagiarism avoidance strategies, grammatical, syntactic, coherence and cohesive devices, as well as other academic writing requirements, while the students would have the opportunity to ask questions and to express their opinions during the discussion, and this would improve the students’ preliminary preparation for fulfilment of an academic writing task on their own;
- a better usefulness of the ungraded homework exercise as the lack of a grade would create less stress for the students, while the single number of the homework writing exercise would require fewer checking and correcting and no grading efforts on the part of the lecturer;
- a better control over plagiarism and a better opportunity to set, review, grade and provide feedback on a limited number of topics would be ensured for the lecturer by the assignment of a single graded classroom task, which would also give the lecturer a better opportunity to assess the actual development of the students’ academic writing skills as demonstrated by their supervised practical application of the academic writing techniques and strategies discussed during their course in EMP.

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