Scientific Conference:
An Authentic Environment to Assess Medical Students' English Communication Skills

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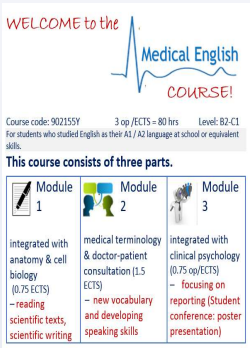
Introduction



Simulation is a common methodological practice in medical teaching using problem-based learning as a key element (Datta et al. 2012, Sørensen et al. 2017). Similarly its counterpart, role-play, is a useful tool in the language classroom (Livingstone, 1983). However, in the Medical English course at the University of Oulu we take simulation further; while simulation informs the overall course design, it is also used for assessment. A large-scale student conference (180-190 participants in two separate sections) marks the final phase of the course. Participation in the conference, a major assignment, aims to provide students with an immersion into working life practices. This poster presents the course design and outcomes of the task together with students' reactions.

Research design

Research questions:

1. How do medical students perceive language assessment in an authentic environment in the Medical English course?
2. What are their perceptions before and after their participation in the student conference? Does the experience change or affect their perception?

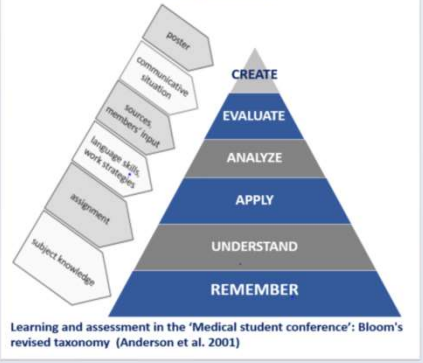
Sample criteria:

186 participants; first-year medical and dentistry students; B1-C1 language skills

Methodology:

The current research falls into the category of sequential explanatory design (Robson, 2011) since the respondents' answers to the open survey questions and the interviews enrich the statistical information (O'Leary, 2010). We used closed questions in the self-assessment to investigate students' perceptions of the authentic assignment. Their answers to the open questions and their narratives inform our research into language learners' feelings and thoughts concerning an innovative form of assessment.

Objectives



Learning and assessment in the 'Medical student conference': Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al. 2001)

Peer-feedback

Discussion

Simulation-based learning, the method that informed our ESP course design, aims to provide students with "correct attitude and skills to cope competently with real-life critical situations"(Datta 2012).

According to our data, problem-based learning and simulation seem to conflict with students' pre-conceptions of an ESP/EFL course. The conference, an integrated, communicative assignment was not initially perceived as a language learning and assessment tool.

As a result of the poster conference, however, around half of the sceptical students have recognized the value of a non-formal, authentic environment in language learning, and indeed 89 found confirmation regarding its potential use in their future careers.

Conclusion

Future research should investigate the reasons behind the sceptical attitudes. The challenges are twofold:

1. The authenticity of the task is perceived as 'messy' and lacking in instant gratification, a feeling often associated with conventional language learning tasks.
2. Language learning should not be perceived in isolation but the value of complex communicative tasks should be recognised as a tool for overall cognitive development.

In conclusion, raising students' awareness of what communicative competence is, must form an integral part of language education (CEFR, 2018). In higher education specifically, simulation of professional tasks should be used to promote students' competent language use and working life skills.

References

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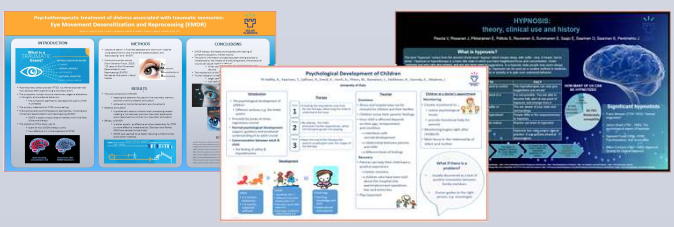
Student posters



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