

**Students' Perception about the Implementation of Medical Discourse
in EFL Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic
The Case of First Year Students at Biskra University, Algeria**

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Abstract:

The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought with it new knowledge of vocabulary; terms related to the virus. The present study attempted to introduce medical discourse to EFL learners to enhance their lexical competence at Biskra University. For this purpose, 20 participants were used in a qualitative study in which we took the preliminary results obtained from the questionnaire. The results emphasized that teaching medical terms have given students better opportunities to grasp more vocabulary and use them when communicating in different topics and succeed in their social interaction as well. It also rises their awareness about the pandemic, vaccination, especially during and post the COVID-19 era.

Keywords: Medical discourse; lexical competence; EFL learners; COVID-19.

Résumé :

L'épidémie de COVID-19 a apporté avec elle de nouvelles connaissances de vocabulaire ; des termes liés au virus. La présente étude a tenté d'introduire des termes médicaux aux apprenants EFL afin d'améliorer leur compétence lexicale à l'université de Biskra. À cette fin, 20 participants ont été utilisés dans une étude qualitative dans laquelle nous avons pris les résultats pré-primaires obtenus à partir du questionnaire. Les résultats soulignent que l'enseignement des termes médicaux a donné aux étudiants de meilleures opportunités de saisir plus de vocabulaire et de les utiliser lors de la communication dans différents sujets et de réussir dans leur interaction sociale. Il les sensibilise également à la pandémie et à la vaccination, en particulier pendant et après l'ère COVID-19.

Mots-clés: Le discours médical; compétence lexicale; apprenants d'EFL; COVID-19

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1. INTRODUCTION

The sudden COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has brought with it new kind of knowledge: new terms, new information and new concepts about diseases which have not been around in the recent history of humanity. Knowledge of vocabulary means new terms related to the virus, for instance, pandemic, epidemic, containment, lock down, etc. Vocabulary knowledge is of great significance to EFL learners' language proficiency as it may at times pervade all language skills. However, many EFL learners struggle to produce a piece of communication in topics related to crisis or health care as a reaction to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic whether in oral session or outside their class. This considerable educational issue goes back to their poor and not well developed lexicon.

We all have been affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic. During this pandemic, Algerian universities in general and Mohamed Khider university of Biskra in particular have transitioned from face-to-face learning to e-learning and blended learning. Nevertheless, its consequences are felt differently depending on our status as individuals and as members of society. In other words, the effects of the global pandemic urged people, regardless of their level of education, specialized in medicine or not, to have sufficient information and key terms about the topic. They usually tend to communicate exchange and debate about this area which is related to crisis, virus, pandemic, vaccination and many other topics related to medicine and health care.

Being a teacher at Mohamed Khider University, we try generally in oral expression to expose first year EFL learners to different topics in order to enrich their vocabulary and help them develop their lexical competences inside and outside classes. However, the current crisis of the COVID-19 has obliged us to tackle this area and search how to enhance their lexical competencies in topics related to health care since we have noticed that first year oral students were unable to discuss and exchange information about the pandemic.

2. Literature Review

The effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic urged us to a radical change in our way of teaching which has forced us as EFL teachers to shift from face-to-face learning to blended learning. Differently stated, we were obliged to find creative solutions in what, why and how we teach oral expression in a blended learning setting– new perspectives that surely may help us to enhance the student's lexical competence during the present crisis of the COVID-19 and in the post area. Hence, the present study is an attempt to show the importance of medical discourse in enhancing students' lexical competence at Biskra University. We find it necessary to expose first year students to medical discourse and later to know their perceptions through a post questionnaire.

2.1 Medical Discourse

No one can deny the fact that the importance of discourse and its crucial role in our communication. A discourse is a sort of “Identity Kit” which comes complete with the appropriate customs and instructions on how to act, talk and write. Discourses are always methods of expressing membership in a specific social group or social network (people who associate with one another around a shared set of interests, objectives, and activities) (via words, acts, values, and beliefs) (Gee, 1999, p. 23). This author thought that being trained as a linguist entailed learning to talk, think, and behave like a linguist, as well as recognizing others who do so, rather than simply learning a lot of information about language and linguistics (p. 23).

Discourse analysis for Crystal (1992) is a continuous stretch of spoken language, frequently comprising a cohesive unit such as a sermon, argument, joke, or tale (p. 25). He believes that all spoken conversation comprises coherent components. According to the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (2005), that medical discourse contains two important aspects; the oral and written. The former addresses issues related to doctor-patient communication, however; the latter one addresses the medical scientific ‘research article (p. xxxii). Hoye (2005) insists in his introduction that oral medical discourse is related to illness narratives, psychiatric interviews, medical conferencing, medical specialty encounters

whereas written medical discourse is put to “analyze the socio-historical construction of medical discourse and the evolution of the socio-pragmatic phenomenon of hedging” (p. xxxii).

Wilce (2009) in his article defines medical discourse in the broadest sense as follows “discourse in and about healing, curing, or therapy; expressions of suffering; and relevant language ideologies” (p. 199). For him medical discourse is the talk or speech offered by the doctor (physician) to the patient. This type of discourse is seen to be a form of therapeutic teaching, healing practices, and specialized relationships of in and past specific healing experiences.

Anspach (1989: 1) depended largely on previous studies of Fisher (1979), West (1983), Mishler (1985), and Drass (1983) when he stated that:

More systematic and detailed studies, often informed by conversation analysis and discourse analysis, have emphasized [...] the medical interview is a socially structured speech exchange system, organized hierarchically into phases (Drass, 1983) and sequentially into provider-initiated questions, patient responses and an optional comment by the physician (Fisher, 1979; West, 1983; Mishler, 1985).

According to Anspach medical discourse is tightly controlled by the doctor by asking questions about the needed topics and limiting the patients’ questions at the same time. In addition, he insists that medical discourse is shaped by the context in which it takes place. Moreover, Anspach supports the idea of subordinating medical discourse with the patient’s concerns, beliefs and personal life (1989, p. 2). We may say that if physicians focus in the consultation on the previous mentioned points, patients become more comfortable and can better describe their illness or disease. Hence, “medical interview may become a form of repressive communication which seriously compromises the quality of patient care” (Anspach, 1989, p. 2).

2.2Lexical Competence

Vocabulary is one of the most important concerns when learning a foreign language. If any EFL learner wants to be proficient in the English

language, a set of competences are required among them, lexical competence.

2.2.1 Approaches and Strategies to Develop Lexical Competence

Lexis is one essential component of language and language development. It is of great significance for language proficiency as it pervades all language skills. Lexical competence is defined by Garcia Velasco (2007, 2) as 'the ability to use words in appropriate and effective ways in verbal interaction'. This definition is based on Hymes's communicative competence (1972) who said that communicative competence includes not only the capacity to produce and comprehend linguistic expressions, but also the ability to utilize these phrases in acceptable and successful ways based on the linguistic community's verbal interaction rules. For Hymes, communicative competency permits speakers to comprehend their communication partners' speech as a function of the discourse's structural and referential features, as well as the social environment in which it happens (p. 278). This viewpoint is made up of several skills.

Some methods and techniques which have evolved in parallel with learning theories for the sake of developing the acquisition of vocabulary knowledge. According to Thornbury (2002, p.13, cited in Chelli, 2018, p.4) if an EFL learner spends his time in learning grammar and studying its rules, the student will not make development. However, when giving more attention to learn words and expressions. Hence, "you can say very little with grammar, but you can say anything with words" (Thornbury, 2002, p.13, cited in Chelli, 2018, p.4).

Schmidt (2000) classifies two strategies in developing lexical competences; strategies used to discover a word's meaning and strategies to consolidate a word once it has been learnt (cited in Chelli, 2018, p. 4). In other words, Schmidt claims that these classes contain determination strategies, social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive techniques are all sub-categories of each type. Learners rely on themselves to determine the meaning of words by guessing from context or grammatical context and using external resources, for instance, dictionaries. They can also engage in social activities such as conversing with peers or other experts. Furthermore, individuals may associate new

terms with prior information in their lexicon, or they can employ cognitive methods such as maintaining vocabulary notebooks and practicing repetitions. The last technique entails learners planning, monitoring, and assessing their progress. To sum-up, we have to bear in mind that these different strategies enable both EFL teachers and students how learning is taking place.

3. Method

This research study is qualitative in that it investigated introducing medical discourse to EFL learners to enhance their lexical competence. A questionnaire was administered to the participants to know their perceptions after the treatment.

3.1 Participants

The Department of English at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra consists of a population of about 445 first year students divided into fourteen (14) groups. A group under my charge composed of 30 students was selected randomly. However, only 20 of them were seriously attending the session. The choice of first year EFL learners was for the following reasons: first, they are asked to tackle different and a variety of topics in the basic modules; written expression, reading and oral expression. In the latter module, they are exposed to reading, listening and watching a variety of texts, audios and videos respectively. The aim behind listening and watching is to enrich their vocabulary from variety of topics, for instance, food, culture, shopping, travel, school, work, etc. However, the crisis of the COVID-19 have changed everything and affected even the way of teaching. Hence, we saw the necessity of involving topics related to health and medicine for this category of learners as a new way in oral expression in order to help them grasp new vocabulary and enhance their communicative competences.

The participants have received a treatment for almost two months in order to enhance their lexical competence. It was in a blended way, i.e., posting videos and texts about COVID-19 to them via Moodle platform. Then, different videos and text but about the same topic were used in class. In addition, they had a pre test and the post test; however the post test is not done yet because we did not finish our experiment, in order to measure the

development in their lexical competence. By the end of the treatment, students were given a questionnaire in order to know their attitudes towards introducing medical terms in oral session during the pandemic to enhance their lexical competence. Therefore, we have taken into consideration in the present study the preliminary results gained from the questionnaire.

3.2 Data Gathering Tools

To know the participants perception towards introducing medical discourse to EFL classes, a questionnaire was administered to them after the treatment. A qualitative analysis of participants' answers was made which reveals their attitudes.

3.3 Procedure

The participants received a treatment in a blended way, i.e., posting videos and texts about COVID-19 to them via Moodle platform to be watched or read outside for almost two months in order to enhance their lexical competence. Then, they were asked to discuss and exchange information and vocabulary about health, diseases, cure, medicals and vaccination. So that they can easily interact with peers and build sentences in a real context. In addition, different videos and texts about the same topic were used in class for the same reason. After the treatment, a questionnaire was administered to them to know their attitudes towards introducing medical terms in the oral expression session.

4. Data Analysis

The results of the questionnaire were statistically analyzed using percentages and then interpreted.

Item 1: EFL Learners' Interests in Medical Discourse and health care before the Pandemic

Table 1.Participants' attitudes towards Medical Discourse as an Introductory Phase in Oral Expression during the Pandemic

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Interested</i>	<i>Not Interested</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Participants	01	19	00
Percentage	5%	95%	0%

17 participants, who represent the majority (95%), were not interested in the area of medicine and health care since they were studying literary

stream, whereas two (2) participants, who represent the minority (5%), were interested in this area because they were studying in science and interested in medicine and pharmacy domains. However, there was no participant (0%) who answered by “neutral”.

Item 2: The Need to New Vocabularies Related to COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 2: Participants’ Needs to New Vocabulary related to Medicine and Health Especially during and post the Pandemic

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Needed</i>	<i>Not Needed</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Participants	20	00	00
Percentage	100%	0%	0%

All the 20 participants, who represent 100%, agree that they need new vocabularies related to medical issues and health care, especially during the present crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. None of them has answered for “not needed” or “neutral”.

Item 3: Participants’ Ability to Produce Vocabulary about Medical Discourse and Health Care

Table 3: Participants’ Ability in Tackling Science Topics; Medical Discourse and Health Care

SA: Strongly agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly disagree, &: and

<i>Statements</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I can communicate & perform food topic	25%	50%	15%	10%	0%
2. I can communicate & perform culture topic	30%	55%	5%	10%	0%
3. I can communicate & perform travel topic	15%	75%	5%	5%	0%
4. I can communicate & perform T.V program	20%	60%	5%	15%	0%
5. I can communicate & perform medical issues	0%	5%	50%	10%	35%
6. I can communicate & perform crisis like the COVID-19pandemic topic	0%	15%	15%	50%	20%

Fig.1.Participants' Ability to Produce Vocabulary in Medical Discourse and Health Care

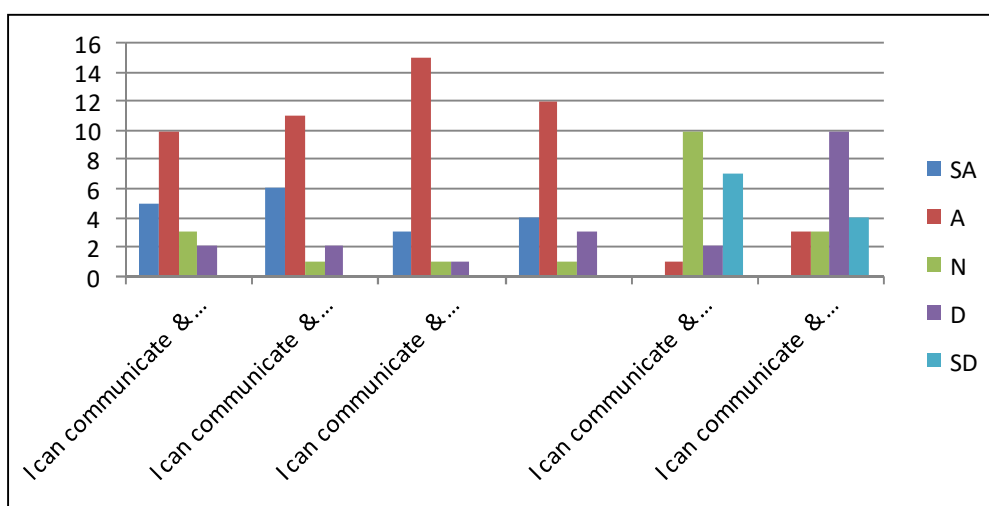


Table 4 and figure 1 represent participants' ability to produce vocabulary, communicate and perform when dealing with different topics inside the class. Most of participants do agree with the first four designed statements; food, culture, travel, and TV programme. Accordingly, in statement (1, 2, 3 & 4) which is about their ability to produce vocabulary, communicate and perform in food, culture, travel, or TV programme topics; 50%, 55%, 75%, 60% respectively. As we see the respondents which represent the lowest portion strongly disagree with the previous first four statements 0%. While the opposed view "neutral" and "disagree" with 50% when dealing with medical issues or crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic respectively. The other participants displayed strongly disagree response 35% and 20%.

Item 4: Participants' Feedback to Introducing Medical Discourse

Table 4: Participants' Feedback to the New Phase in Enhancing their Lexical Competences

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Effective Phase</i>	<i>Not effective</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Participants	19	00	1
Percentage	95%	0%	5%

The participants entirely agree on the importance of the introducing medical discourse and health care as an effective way in enhancing their lexical competences. Only one participant who prefer to be neutral

Item 5: Participants’ Self-Assessment to the Development of their Lexical Competence by the End of the Treatment

Fig.2.Participants’ Self-Evaluation to their Lexical Competences (End of the Treatment)

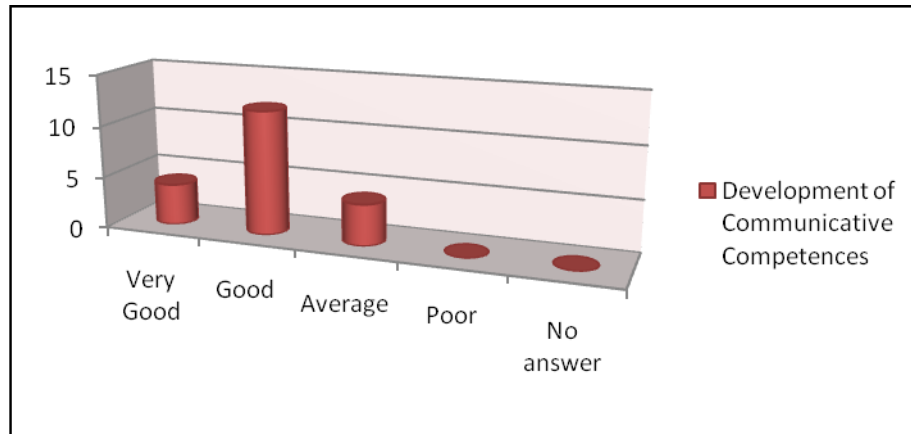


Figure 2 indicates most participants’ self-evaluation (12 participants) to their lexical competences after being exposed to the treatment have developed and reached “good” (60%). The results indicate that the rest of the respondents (8) declared that students’ abilities to produce, communicate and perform in medical issues and health care have reached “Good” and “very good” (20%).However, none of the participants reported that his/ her lexical competences are “Poor”.

The research findings show that EFL learners were not familiar with medical issues and their vocabulary, unable to produce vocabulary or perform in an easy way when dealing with these topics, and face a lot of breakdowns in communication if they were asked to develop a conversation and perform it inside EFL classes.

5. Discussion

The questionnaire revealed the awareness of first year EFL learners to the importance of introducing medical discourse as a new way in oral expression to enhance their lexical competence due to the recent crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected everyone’s life and way of

communicating with each other. In order to enrich, learn, discover, and produce new lexicon easily in medical issues and health care topics. Introducing medical terms in EFL classes proved to be valid and reliable. The introduction of medical discourse helped first year EFL learners to learn new vocabulary about medical issues and health care, classify them into: nouns, verbs and adjectives, and build conversations about these topics. Then, they perform / have role play about them. As noticed from participants' opinions, the vast majority of them are in favour with introducing medical terms to EFL learners which enhance their lexical competences. The findings indicated that first year EFL learners have learnt different and new vocabulary about medical issues and health care which enhanced their lexical competence and paved the way for a good communication inside or outside EFL classes. However, after watching videos and reading texts which are related to COVID-19, medical discourse or health care, participants have enhanced their lexical competence which we have noticed through their oral performances in class.

The results obtained from the present study revealed that the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic has brought new era of knowledge: new terms, new facts, and new notions concerning diseases that have never been seen before. New terminology relating to the virus, such as pandemic, epidemic, containment, lockdown, etc synonyms and opposites were introduced through this study. Hence, we found that vocabulary knowledge is extremely important for EFL learners' language competency.

The research findings show that most first year EFL students were unaware of the importance of medical terms and this was reflected in their debates and discussion about this topic in class with their peers. Hence, introducing teaching medical discourse in EFL classes to enrich their vocabulary and develop their lexical competences inside and outside their classes during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post era.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study, which is about students' perception of the implementation of medical discourse in EFL classes to enhance their lexical competence during the COVID-19 pandemic, has answered the two raised questions which are 1) To what extent can introducing medical discourse

enhance EFL learners' lexical competence? And 2) How can medical discourse which is related to COVID-19 engage students in a formal conversation? The treatment seems to have enhanced first year EFL learners' lexical competence and raised their awareness of pathologies, crisis, pandemic, and many other vocabularies related to this specialized area of interest. Moreover, the study has encouraged EFL learners not to be attached only to literary topics but also to scientific ones, for instance medicine and health care, is an interesting area to be explored and to be familiar with, especially the COVID-19 pandemic. Last but not least, the research has raised EFL learners' awareness of medical terms and familiarized them with new terms that have come with COVID-19, such as, pandemic, epidemic, containment, lock down, vaccination, etc. it turns out that EFL learners seems to be happy with this new approach.

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6. Appendices

Learners' Questionnaire

1. Being a 1st year learner in EFL classes, did you like the topics you have dealt with during the 1st term in oral sessions?
2. Have you ever thought of tackling science topics like medical discourse?
3. Did you like the idea of receiving videos/ texts related to medicine and health care outside the class?
4. Do you agree that there was a sudden and urgent change in our live because of COVID-19?

5. Do you agree that most people (if not all) communicate about the pandemic?
6. Were you interested in medicine and health care before the pandemic?
7. To what extent do you agree/ disagree/ with the following statements:

SA: Strongly agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly disagree, &: and

<i>Statements</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I can communicate & perform food topic					
2. I can communicate & perform culture topic					
3. I can communicate & perform travel topic					
4. I can communicate & perform T.V program					
5. I can communicate & perform medical issues					
6. I can communicate & perform crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic topic					