

Conference review

**CURRENT TRENDS IN TEACHING LANGUAGES
FOR MEDICINE AND RESEARCH**

**An overview of the international conference *Languages in Medical Education*,
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English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has given rise to a number of independent branches of English in professional domains, which have become well-established areas of teaching and research. English for Medical Purposes is definitely one of such areas and the recent international conference *Languages in Medical Education* has clearly demonstrated a worldwide interest of ESP practitioners to teaching English for healthcare and research¹.

The key reports of the conference indicated three vast areas of research and practice concerning languages and medicine: humanitarian issues in medical education, linguistic aspects of current healthcare discourse and pedagogical approaches to clinical communication teaching in non-Anglophone settings. John Skelton, the University of Birmingham, the UK, in his talk “Medical Humanities: Teaching Students to Think”, thoroughly discussed the role of humanity courses in medical schools’ curriculum. Professor Skelton argued that medical education can significantly benefit from medical humanities which have enough pedagogical capabilities for developing empathy in medical students, for making them thinking independently rather than looking for the ‘correct answer’. Liberal arts including languages prepare medical students for coping with ambiguity of the real world – the world of their future patients – and develop ‘ambiguity tolerance’ which implies the ability to understand sophisticated feelings and motives often left unspoken.

Tanya Linaker, King’s College London, UK, brought up the issues of multilingual crisis communication. Her talk “Language challenges of COVID-19” explored the markers of the racist discourse, generated and perpetuated by the current coronavirus pandemic. The references to the new virus as to ‘Chinese’ is one of the most obvious illustrations of racist discourse being now followed by the ‘British mutation’ or ‘British variant of coronavirus.’ The speaker pointed out that while healthcare vocabulary quickly became part of global media discourse and everyday communication, “a combination of language barriers and low levels of trust in official communications have made minority populations particularly vulnerable to misinformation and fake news”.

The third pedagogical area of the conference agenda was represented by Michael Guest, University of Miyazaki, Japan. In his talk “How can studying clinical English discourse be beneficial to medical students not living in Anglophone settings?” about teaching English to medical students in Japan, the speaker gave a thorough review of

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modern approaches that ESP teachers use in medical educations. According to Mike Guest, they include ‘retrieval approach’ based on the concept that medical English can be used in multicultural professional encounters; ‘taxonomy approach’ with the focus on medical vocabulary and terminology; ‘academic skills approach’, ‘humanist focus’ approach and ‘cognitive washback approach’ which the speaker advocates for. ‘Cognitive washback approach’ involves, as Mike Guest puts it, ‘higher order features’ of professional discourse or ‘forms and processes’ of certain clinical speech events such as clinical case reports or history taking. The speaker believes that this approach makes learners more aware of clinical discourse and develops communicative skills essential for professional discourse management.

The headlining talks indicated the most urgent points for discussion which then were explored and developed in section reports. Conference participants – modern languages educators, researchers and practitioners – raised the issues of traditions and innovations of teaching Latin and medical terminology to students of medicine, benefits and challenges of using English as medium of instruction in a medical classroom and many other subjects.

Naturally, the current pandemic impact on higher education was also discussed. Conference participants shared best practices in dealing with challenges of distance learning. Language instructors from North-Western State Medical University, St. Petersburg, Russia, delivered a speech representing their ‘model’ for ‘language training in force-majeure’ combining online and offline technologies in language learning. The speakers empathized that e-learning is not merely a technological transformation of language activities into a virtual classroom but a conceptual move into a novel paradigm of methodological approaches in language teaching and learning. This fundamental problem which language instructors, applied linguistic and humanities academics now face has yet to be solved in the near future.

The international conference “Languages in Medical Education” has also demonstrated a significant contribution of professional societies and associations of language teachers to medical education. Along with influential and multidisciplinary IATEFL, TESOL, and other international and national associations, the European Association of Language Teachers for Healthcare (EALTHY) has taken a leading position in promoting the fundamental importance of effective communication in healthcare since 2013.

While the basic academic results of “Languages in Medical Education” are published in the collection of conference proceedings, the feelings of inspiration, motivation and creativity aroused by the conference will be a valuable and longstanding support in daily practice of language-for-medical-purposes instructors.

ⁱ You may find conference videos at <https://medicine-and-lang-vsnu.jimdo.com/>