Guide for authors – English for Medical purposes: Activating teaching methods

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a time-consuming process which cannot be acquired by mere passive reception of information. It must be acquired by a practical activity (Komenský 1938: 41–281, Beneš 1970: 218). Therefore, in terms of both general English and English for Specific Purposes, it is better for instructional methods to contain activating teaching methods.

Activating teaching methods can be characterized as methods that have the potential to transform a passive recipient of information into an active participant in the learning process. These methods can transform static instruction into dynamic instruction and can enhance student interest in the subject (Kotrba, Lacina 2011: 47–55). Such methods can enrich learning through various forms of interaction within the classroom. Traditional teacher-student interaction is complemented with interaction in pairs and groups. Additionally, these activating teaching methods positively contribute to the individual development of students by forcing them to focus on thinking, responsibility and creativity (Maňák, Švec 2003: 106).

In the literature concerning methodology, we come across terms such as **'warm-ups'** (activities which are used at the beginning of instruction), **'ice-breakers'** (activities used at the beginning of the course for getting to know each other and establishing a friendly atmosphere), and **'breaks'** or **'fillers'** (activities that are used between two demanding phases of the lesson), (Ur, 1996, Wright 1986 Scrivener 1994). As in ESP or EMP, the biggest workload focuses on the acquisition of professional vocabulary activating the language skills speaking, typology of **didactic games**, **situational games** and **role-plays** are discussed. Activities lasting 10–15 minutes are included but methods requiring longer time do not meet the criteria for inclusion.

1   Activating teaching methods—typology

The typology of activating teaching methods within the context of specific examples of activation implemented in a course titled Medical English comprises the initial part of this work. Included are didactic games, role-plays, and situational methods.

2   Didactic Games

From a psychological point of view games are characterized as a basic form of human activity. They prepare the person for work and for life. Games can help to ease tension in stressful situations (Čáp, Mareš 2001: 183). When teaching professional English it can also serve as compensation for monotonous work. Harmer (2007: 102) states that games are an important part of the repertoire of every teacher, not only for the fact that they enable a foreign language to be practiced but also for their therapeutic effects. Some scholars state that games are free activities which have no specific purpose or goal, the goal and value being the game itself. However, when implementing a didactic game, it is important to keep the objectives in mind and to define rules and content clearly. Failure to set goals and clear rules and a lack of feedback might be one of the reasons why some students and scholars regard games as a waste of time.
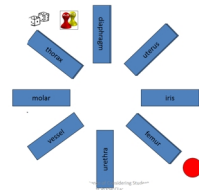
2.0.1   A Sample of Didactic Games—Activity Magic Circle

Activity Magic Circle
Objective: revision of vocabulary from previous lessons concerning body parts
Aids: cards with words, dice, counters
Procedure: Student A rolls dice, counts the cards and describes the word. If correct, s/he takes the card, if incorrect, s/he leaves the card in the circle. The activity ends when there are no cards in the circle.

2.0.2   A Sample of Didactic Games—Ping Pong

Activity Ping Pong
Objective: revision of vocabulary from previous lessons useful areas to be practiced: synonyms, antonyms, abbreviations, grammatical areas
Aids: none
Procedure: Students are divided into 2 lines. The teacher stands in front of both lines. The teacher says a word, e.g. myocardial infarction, the first students in the line must come up with, for example, a synonym (heart attack). The first two students from each line go to the back and the game continues. The team which gets more points is the winner.
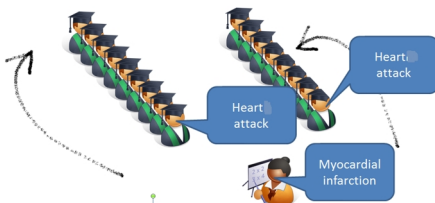
2.1 Role-plays

These methods require certain social roles to be performed in simulated situations and students can benefit by deepening their professional knowledge. They can improve in the understanding of human relationships, acquire appropriate ways to respond in certain situations, and develop communication skills.

2.1.1 Sample of a role-play—At the endocrinologist

Activity: At the endocrinologist
Aim: to engage in dialogue with patients with hyperthyroidism, including history-taking, explanation of investigation methods and potential treatment.
Aids: handout
Procedure: Students work in pairs. Student A plays the part of a doctor, taking the patient's history. Student B plays a patient responding to the doctor's questions.

2.2 Situational games

Situational methods are based on solving a transparent problem. They are mostly conveyed in text and therefore have a static character. The goal of these methods is to determine the cause of the problem and find alternative solutions. The phases which address problem-solving situations are the choice of topic, familiarization with materials, custom case studies, solution proposals and discussions.

2.2.1 Sample of a situation game—Case presentation

Activity: Case presentation
Aim: to present a patient in a medical environment, figuring out all the medical information, with a follow-up discussion to diagnose the patient.
Aids: handout
Procedure: Student A presents a patient to student B, including all information provided, using adequate phrases for a case presentation. Both students discuss the potential diagnosis.

William Henry Hudson, AGE 65   SEX: M
MARITAL STATUS: W   OCCUPATION retired postmaster

c/o   Headaches for 4 mths. Wt loss. Headaches feel like a heavy weight.
NO nausea or visual symptoms.
No appetite.
Diff. starting to PU. Nocturia x3.

3   Positive and negative aspects of activating teaching methods

In the previous section many benefits of activating teaching methods that positively affect education and contribute to the development of personality were outlined. As for personality development, activating methods have an effect on critical thinking, character independence, responsibility and creativity. They encourage the student to take an active role as a learner. Activation also allows different types of interaction. From traditional teacher-student interaction, which is widely used in frontal teaching and allows the teacher to be in full control of student responses, activating methods enrich the instruction by means of interaction in pairs and group, allowing the creation of a student-centred environment. Pair and group work encourages students to participate and to share opinions, experience or solutions to problems.

The disadvantage of activating teaching methods is the time spent by the teacher in detailed preparation of materials and organization, as well as the time required for implementing the game, including feedback (Harmer, 2007: 151). If an activation method is not well-prepared, well-organized, implemented, and supported by feedback, it can easily turn into a chaotic waste of precious time. That may be the main reason why some students are not willing to participate in various types of activities.

4   Research

Research concerning activating teaching methods was carried out at the Charles University Faculty of Medicine to find out to what extent the activating teaching methods can help students in the acquisition of professional vocabulary. A total number of 84 third-year students studying the subject of Medical English participated in the research. Since the main feature of professional language teaching is based on the needs of students, the initial stage of the research involved a student need questionnaire focusing on subject areas and language skills students were keen on to improve. The next step was the implementation of activating methods in instruction. The study year was divided into 2 groups according to their level (B1 and B2). Each group was further divided into 2 subgroups (one research group, the other the control group). A list of 50 items of professional vocabulary was created. A set of 10 activities focusing on the acquisition of professional vocabulary, including the items from the list, was created and implemented in the classroom for each level, but only for the research subgroups. As it is difficult to instruct control subgroups without activating methods, activities that deliberately did not include any item of vocabulary used in the list of 50 items were created and implemented for the control subgroups. The third level of the research represented two sub-tests focused on the acquisition of vocabulary practiced during activating methods. At the end of the course all groups completed a final language

test measuring listening and vocabulary acquisition which contained 10 items from the list of 50. Upon completing the course, students received an questionnaire asking them to evaluate the instruction, including the implementation of activating methods.

Conclusion

The aim of this work was to outline some aspects concerning activating methods used in English for Medical Purposes. For a better understanding of such activating teaching methods, these methods were divided into didactic games, role-plays and situational games and supplemented by specific samples implemented in a course titled Medical English. Consideration of both the advantages and disadvantages of activating methods was offered. If we make use of their potential, activating methods can become a unique means to involve students in the instruction.

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