# MEDICAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF TECHNOLOGY–ENHANCED ESP WRITING – A BASIS FOR QUALITY LANGUAGE LEARNING

**Anisoara POP[1]**

## Abstract

*Exploration of technology-enhanced (TE) language learning has potential benefits pertaining to raising motivation levels and increased dynamics, cooperation, collaboration but at the same time student autonomy, authentic materials, flexibility of access to content and substantial extension of students' contribution time. However, technology-enhanced language learning can be perceived as time consuming and difficult by some of the students. Therefore, feedback from course participants (Feedback on teaching, FoT) is crucial in language learning as it is in any quality optimization endeavour.*
*The current paper will present the empirical results of ESP writing with second year students (N=36) in Dental Medicine of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures (Hungarian line) who contributed for one semester to an asynchronous English writing project (Blog writing – BR). Students' FoT perceptions based on variables such as convenience of delivery, strengths, challenges and preference of e-learning versus traditional activities have brought important insights for the design of TE writing practice and communication in the future as well as adjustments necessary for quality language learning.*

*Keywords*: Medical English, writing, blog, feed-back, perception.

## 1. Feed-back types and quality language learning

Feed-back and reflection are essential, learning-oriented and quality-based ESP learning evaluation strategies. Hill (2002) stated that "When students reflect upon their learning, they engage in a potentially transformative act of responding to, connecting with, and analyzing an experience, event, process, or product".

Students need constant feedback (FoL = *feedback on learning*) (Meder, 2009) in order to progress with language learning and face the challenges of confidence in speaking, writing and understanding, for which they need to be offered multiple opportunities of language exposure and production.

---
[1] Anisoara Pop, University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures, Romania, pop.anisoara@umftgm.ro

Therefore, teachers offer students FoL and suggestions for improvement but at the same time teachers themselves need feedback from students on their teaching method (FoT = *feedback on teaching*) in order to amend and customize approach, delivery, and materials. "Understanding students' learning experiences is a tool to help guide instructors in improving the design of learning experiences" (Hill, 2002: 99).

Feedback to (FoL) and from course participants (FoT) is a two way street, both formative (early) and summative, crucial in language learning as it is in any quality optimization endeavour. The ESP classroom alone is not the ideal environment, however, in terms of FoL as the teacher cannot meet the challenges of offering formal and informal feed-back on activity performance and outcomes for all the students, all the time.

Consequently, teachers may resort to "digital extensions", offering learners more time and opportunities to produce language outside the classroom while allowing themselves the time to give more detailed and individual feedback on learning to all the students. A further aim for involving students in technology-enhanced language learning activities is to make them more autonomous language users and assessors, able to eventually provide feed-back on peers (Feed-back on peers = FoP) and ideally and eventually, feedback on themselves (Feedback on oneself = FoO, through self-reflection).

In terms of FoT, assessing student satisfaction is a mandatory aspect in the process of enhancing educational outcomes in general and in the case of new approaches, in particular. Offering students a chance to reflect on their own language learning (strengths, weaknesses, awareness on how they learn better) serves the teacher's purpose of adjusting future learning experiences by focusing and further developing on successful activities.

This paper reports on feedback-on-teaching of 36 second-year students in Dental medicine of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures, on the role blog writing (BR) had as a supplement to classical Medical English learning. Important outcomes of the Technology-enhanced English for Medical Purposes (TE-EMP) writing project and feedback-on-learning and on peers are also presented.

## 2. The Blog-writing project in EMP

The purpose of the BR-EMP was:
   a) general:
   -    to activate and extend productive (writing) and receptive skills (reading and listening).

b) specific:
- to form medical writing sub-skills: counselling, arguing, narrating, offering information in patient-accessible language;
- to improve accuracy in paragraph writing and observe elements of cohesion, politeness, coherence ;
- to familiarize students with elements of other medical genres: e.g. patient information leaflets, abstracts, case studies and medical reports.

## *2.1. Project hypothesis and research questions*

Following needs analysis (introduction of new writing genres and sub-skills) and students' poor results in the written mid-term progress test, we hypothesized that offering optional technology-enhanced content delivery  and  opportunities for additional writing practice are likely to contribute to the  writing skill development while enhancing the students' satisfaction, attitude and motivation with EMP writing.

The research questions were:

1. What is the level of student satisfaction with BR-EMP writing?

2. What is the link between quantitative project outcomes (including FoL) and students' qualitative feedback on teaching (FoT) regarding BR-EMP perceptions and satisfaction level ?

3. How does students' feedback on teaching (FoT) contribute to optimizing the quality of EMP writing practice design in the future?

The main purpose of this class-size research is, therefore, to reflect on the students' feed-back on teaching, their perceptions, attitudes and satisfaction  with blog writing as a means of enhancing EMP writing quality and if these are consistent with project outcomes evaluated through content analysis of students' productions, and to see how blog writing is an effective way of improving EMP writing.

## *2.2. Material*

A group of second year students in Dental Medicine from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures (N=36, Hungarian series) were exposed to Technology-enhanced English learning approach through optional, non-mandatory asynchronous blog writing in order to extend their writing practice and therefore optimize their writing skill, during the second semester of the academic year 2013-2014. The blog included 14 dentistry-related topics, i.e approximately one topic/week. Due to class size and time constraints, only writing was delegated to the online component and it was integrated with reading and listening.

## 2.3. Method

A 15-item questionnaire (closed, open-ended and Likert questions) regarding: convenience of delivery, strengths, encountered difficulties, and preference of e-learning versus traditional activities was administered to the participating students.

## 3. Project Outcomes

Content analysis of student writing reveals that BR was superior to in-class writing as follows (Pop, Fenton 2014, Pop 2014):

- students wrote extensively outside the classroom: a total of 772 comments, which represent an online potfolio of student contributions (genres: abstract writing, paragraph structure) on stomatology-related topics in English (subskills: debating, counselling, explaining, giving intstructions - Fig. 1 below);
- blog writing allowed the teacher to offer personal feed-back and error correction to all participating students (FoL) in a transparent way and contributed significantly to the extension of the learning and FoL time;
- presence of peer-to-peer feedback (FoP) ;
- with proper, individual feedback, many students were capable of self-correction (FoO) and therefore the quality of their writing improved;
- students took greater responsibility for their own writing;
- students became aware of the importance of successive revisions in the writing practice.

- more than 50% (N= 21) of the students engaged in most of the tasks, with active participants having more than one contribution (see the number of comments/post: 77 and 44, respectively, in Fig. 2 below), which demonstrates that by relinquishing control, the teacher makes students strive to rise to expectations.



**Figura 2 Number of comments by 21 students/post**

## *4. Survey Outcomes and Discussions*

Quality ESP writing should integrate the students' opinions and feedback (FoT) regarding the appropriateness of the enterprise set up by the teacher, if this has motivated them and made them more confident writers by addressing their specific needs (accuracy, grammar, discourse markers, politeness, genre).

FoT statistics showed that most students in the surveyed group (32 out of 36) had good class attendance (between 50-100%), however, only 3 students (8.3 %) had used the new technologies in formal education before, which is encouraging and indicative that they like to respond to new and challenging approaches. Novelty of this type of learning may also explain why 8 students (22 %) made no asynchronous writing contribution and 7 (19.4 %) contributed only around 20-30%

of the asynchronous activities. What remains significant, however, is that over 50% (N= 21) of the students engaged in most of the tasks.

**RQ1**: The quantitative analysis of student FoT also indicates that students were satisfied with the introduction of blog writing materials (see Chart 1 below):
- 22 versus 19 students considered blog writing materials excellent,
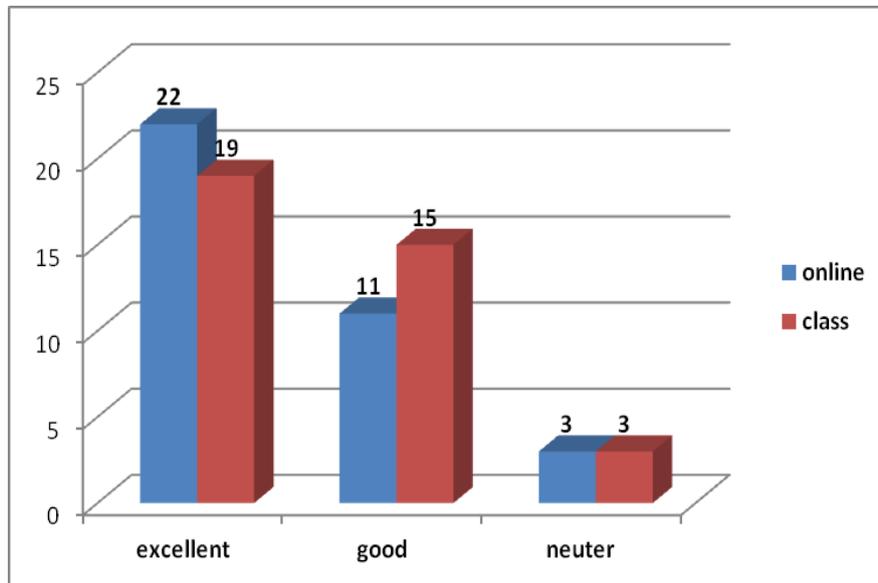- 19 versus 15 students thought blog writing was good and 3 students were neutral.



**Chart 1.  Student satisfaction with online vs class materials**

- 20 (55.6 %) versus 16 (44.4 %) preferred online and both approaches rather than only class activities (see Chart 2 below). The fairly large group of students in favor of class activities may indicate that either students felt more comfortable with speaking than writing (expressed preference for speaking in English rather than writing in English) or that they are not yet fully prepared or aware of the importance of independent writing practice in EMP.
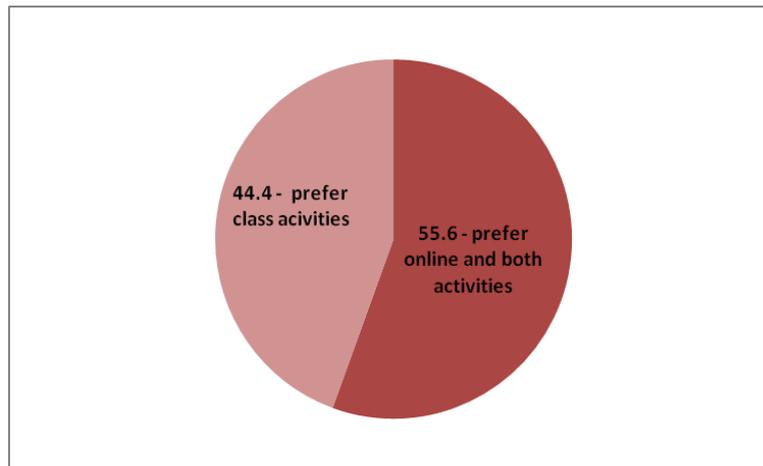
**Chart 2: Student preference of class vs online + both activities**

Students' expressed reasons for engagement (see Chart 3 below) in the optional asynchronous writing activities ranged between external factors (final grades) but also intrinsic motivation:

▪ learning more dental-related vocabulary as, invariably, students found the professional terminology difficult to master (deep learning, in terms of quality criteria; Meder, 2009),
▪ being exposed to genuine English for Dental medicine podcasts,
▪ improving writing accuracy (grammar) and fluency.

Among expressed reasons for non-engagement were: lurking and learning from others (passive learning), tight schedule as well as lower proficiency and a different learning style (oral and kinesthetic).

| Reasons for engagement in e-writing | Reasons for non-engagement in e-writing |
|---|---|
| External motivation (final grade); | Tight schedule outside commitments |
| Intrinsic motivation: learning dentistry-related vocabulary, listening to authentic podcasts, improving writing accuracy | Lower proficiency Different learning style |

**Chart 3. Students' expressed reasons for engagement/non-engagement**

**RQ2**:

As demonstrated in RQ1 above, BR-EMP is likely to enhance writing but if ME writing needs are to be relevantly and qualitatively addressed, FoL and results of this project should corroborate with qualitative data of FoT.

The students' perceptions and satisfaction levels as reflected in FoT. helped us assess the effectiveness of the writing tasks. FoL and FoT results overlap to the largest extent in that the majority of students appreciated the materials as stimulating, topical and relevant for their future writing needs. Students wrote and learnt extensively but not without effort in mastering professional vocabulary and collaborating. Therefore, in designing future projects we should not underestimate the fact that lower level students can be de-motivated and therefore resistant to BR-EMP as they find it difficult and time-consuming

**RQ3:**

Students' satisfaction with the online materials was prevalently excellent (N =22) and good (N = 11), and only 3 students expressed no opinion. This indicates that using both types of approaches instead of just one (either classical or online) managed to satisfy the students by covering more learning styles and preferences while at the same time extending the time they spent in a professionally relevant linguistic environment.

There is a large number of students who are not fully prepared to be completely independent as they still prefer classroom activities (writing including) and reliance on direct FoL. Consequently, a blended approach to writing is more likely to meet most of the students' preferences, learning styles, and satisfaction requirements, while for less proficient students, extended scaffolding can be offered.

More specifically, teachers can consider designing two level writing tasks, encouraging less proficient students to participate so that they benefit from receiving FoL outside the contact hours

## 5.Conclusion

The paper has introduced the notion of multiple types of feedback that function organically in any quality language learning process: feedback on learning, on teaching, on peers and on oneself (through self-reflection). In the case of ESP writing, students depend on teachers' feedback especially when new practices (blog writing) and notions (medical English genres and sub-skills) are introduced.

As statistics and quantitative data do not always tell the whole story about how the students learn, any quality language learning should allow course participants to reflect on their learning and teachers should build on these qualitative findings in their future course design. Therefore, it is equally valid that ESP teachers depend

on students' feedback (FoT) so that the former can customize and optimize the syllabus, methods, delivery and materials.

Quantitative analysis of the BR-EMP project outcomes showed that we can experiment with alternative technology-enhanced delivery in order to offer students a chance to develop their EMP writing and to contribute to extended practice necessary for the formation of the writing skills.

Qualitative results on students' perceptions of BR-ESP through FoT, including the variables of convenience of delivery, strengths, challenges and preference of e-learning versus traditional activities provided interesting insights as to possible optimization of strategies and activities for the promotion of the writing skill in future enterprises. Contributing students were satisfied and intrinsically motivated to accept the challenge of investing constantly in topical and field-relevant technology-supported EMP writing beyond the limited class practice.

However, some students engaging in online activities many not be fully prepared to face the challenge of complete autonomy and are dependent on direct FoL. Blending class and TE-ESP writing seems to be the solution that suits most preferences, satisfaction and learning styles. At the level of TE writing material design, teachers can also consider designing two or even multi-levels of difficulty, encouraging lower proficiency students to participate as well so that they can have the chance of improving their writing skill by receiving FoL.

FoT is equally beneficial to students as they become more reflective learners, growing aware of how they have learnt best and becoming more prepared to provide FoO in the future. FoT makes students aware and confident that their point of view is important for the curriculum development and they are partners and active participants in their writing skill development.

To conclude, students' perception is an important quality assessment tool in the EMP writing practice that can offer important insights for the design of future EMP writing practice, whenever new methods and concepts are introduced.

---

### *References and bibliography*

**Hill, J.R., Song, L., and West, R.E.** 2009. Social Learning Theory and Web-Based Learning Environments: A Review of Research and Discussion of Implications. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 23 (2): 88-103. http://files.adulteducation.at/uploads/Guidlines.pdf

**Meder, E. and Iske, S**. 2009. Quality assurance by RQCC: how quality is attributed to the relation between learner and e-learning environment. *Proceedings of EDULEARN09 Conference*, Barcelona, Spain, July 6-8, 2009.

**Kung, S.-C. and Chuo, T.-W**. 2002. Students' Perceptions of English Learning through ESL/EFL Websites. *TESL-EJ*, June 2002, Volume 6, Number 1, retrieved June 2015 from http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume6/ej21/ej21a2/?wscr

**Nazara, S.** 2011. Students' Perception on EFL Speaking Skill Development, *Journal of English Speaking*, 1(1).

**Pop, A. and Fenton, J.** 2014. Offering Individualized Feedback in English for Medical Purposes through Asynchronous Writing. *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Virtual Learning* (ICVL), Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti: 495-501.

**Pop, A.** 2014. E-Writing in English for Dental Medicine. *Proceedings of the International Conference GIDNI*, vol. I, Arhipelag XXI Press, Section Language and Discourse: 630-635.

**Vonderwell, S**. 2003. An examination of asynchronous communication experiences and perspectives of students in an online course: A case study. *Internet and Higher Education* 6 (1): 77–90.

*The Author*
**Anisoara Pop** is an Associate Professor, PhD, at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures, Romania. Her main research interests include curricular reform and communicative Medical English language teaching as well as exploitation of emerging technologies in order to make language learning experiences more authentic, autonomous and motivating.