

**THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN  
HEALTH SCIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITAT INTERNACIONAL  
DE CATALUNYA**

**EL PAPER DE L'ENSENYAMENT DE L'ANGLÈS EN CIÈNCIES  
DE LA SALUT A LA UNIVERSITAT INTERNACIONAL DE  
CATALUNYA**

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### **1. Point of departure**

In few other contexts is the need for English more tangible than it is in the health sciences where the use of English is a key tool in carrying out an Evidence-based practice. The evidence-based paradigm involves accessing, appraising and applying the best evidence available to very real questions that arise in a clinical practice. A working knowledge of English is essential for this process – a fact that is widely recognized by the international health sciences community as the vast majority of research is published in English. The Universitat Internacional de Catalunya acknowledged this defined role of English by allowing the *Servies d'Idiomes* to play an important part in the development of its health sciences curricula. As a result, all undergraduate and graduate health sciences programs include courses designed to address this specific use of English in these areas.

## **2. Objective**

The language program aimed to help students acquire a base of English necessary to prepare them for a future evidence-based practice. In concrete terms, this means providing a context in which students can enhance relevant language skills, especially those of reading and listening, to enable them to read and appraise evidence they will ultimately apply to their everyday clinical decision-making.

## **3. Context**

The setting of this experience is the health sciences campus at the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya. The students are Nursing, Physical Therapy, Dentistry and Medical students in different years of their degrees.

## **4. Development, teaching strategies and materials elaborated or used**

Students from each degree program are divided into level-dependent groups of approximately 20. The levels are determined on the first day of class by means of a level test designed by our department. The content is common to all levels but is approached in different ways and at different paces. The content that is covered across all the disciplines is related to introductory concepts of research methodology and genres. Degree-specific topics serve as a backdrop to this material and maintain coherence to all the related activities. Such themes are introduced by means of authentic university textbook, original article sections and lectures, all which provide the students with the language, skills and knowledge needed to understand research in their areas of study. Whenever possible, topics that can be shared among the disciplines are targeted. For example, the topic, the cardiovascular system and health, is relevant to several departments, like Nursing, Physical Therapy and Medicine. In this case, virtually the same preliminary material can be used across the different programs. Upon studying research in cardiovascular health, however, relevant literature specific, and therefore unique, to the role of the health science professional, is examined.

The nature and amount of language support provided throughout the courses mainly depends on the language level of the class as well as on the type of tasks assigned. In particular, language structures that have the potential to impede students' comprehension of research literature are identified and adapted to level. Therefore, a false beginner class, for example, may need to learn to recognize the present tense whereas near-native students might require a brief review of punctuation used in advanced structures. Again, the language focus here is intended to improve efficiency in reading and understanding research. All of the classes are introduced to high-frequency vocabulary and genre format present in scientific literature. More active skills (e.g. writing and speaking) are practiced with the aim of recycling and consolidating knowledge. While the type of teacher and student participation varies according to class needs, the lessons are designed to be conducted in English. Class activities include lectures, student presentations, group work, cooperative learning activities and guided reading, listening, speaking and writing tasks. Further language reinforcement can be attained in the language department's Self Access Center.

Evaluation is continuous and involves assessment of students' individual and group presentations, writing assignments, exams and quizzes. As our evaluation takes into account the students' improvement from baseline, all students have the potential to receive respectable (as well as low) marks regardless of their language level on arrival. Nevertheless, students with an advanced level do have an advantage initially.

## **5. Evaluation and conclusions**

The feedback from students has tended to be positive. It is commonly reported that the courses are difficult but useful. We have also received positive feedback from other department heads, and their commitment to our efforts is reflected in the number of ETCSs our department was assigned when the Bologna process was implemented. Overall, our staff is motivated by the challenging aspects of our program and the opportunity to collaborate in further development of our material.

## **6. Proposals for the future**

While student feedback has been positive, the time needed for them to fully embrace the objectives and methodology of our program has sometimes created obstacles in their progress. Students often expect our program to be similar to their previous language learning experiences in secondary school or academies. One solution has recently been piloted in the Medicine department: the name of our courses have been changed from *Scientific English* and *Medical English* to *Basic Concepts in Population-based Research* and *Basic Concepts in Experimental Research*. This innovation seems to have helped re-orient the expectations of the students and in turn their participation in class. Such a practice may be warranted for other courses that bear names referring to the English component of the course.

Despite the encouragement expressed by other departments at the university, our staff feels a need to work more rigorously on interdisciplinary collaboration. The unique position of our department, in that it participates in all the departments, along with the small size of the university is conducive to such an endeavor.

From the teachers' point of view, this program has the potential to be either a highly interesting and rewarding teaching experience, or one that requires excessive preparation time, sometimes leading to a feeling of insecurity in the classroom. More efforts towards developing systematic training for incoming teachers are needed.

Above all, our full-time team members strongly feel that our courses constitute a rich setting for empirical research in CLIL in higher education, and such research is currently being planned.