

# CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDICAL WRITING IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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**Abstract** - It is a widely shared opinion that the English language nowadays has taken a special place in the communication among the professionals of different countries. It is also a well known fact that "Writing for Professional Purposes" as part of the language learning process is a complex task and that among the four skills to be acquired in a foreign language, it is the most difficult one to learn and master, since writing in a second language requires both syntactic and semantic knowledge of the second language from the writer. For writing is considered to be closely related to the social and cultural aspects, the writer has to consider too many things like the style, the grammatical structure, the format and the lexical resource. The article with the title "Characteristics of Medical Writing in English for Specific Purposes" is closely related to the study of English Medical Writing and its teaching in professional linguistic contexts. It describes some key features of medical writing as part of Writing for Specific Purposes. It will also discuss how medical writing was considered at its beginnings, how it evolved and how it was taught through years. Like in all types of professional writing, medical writing is characterized from the use of professional terminology, medical jargon and the use of unfamiliar words in twisting grammatical sentence structure

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**Keywords** - Medical Writing, ESP, Writing for Professional Purposes, Linguistic contexts, Second Language

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Medical writing involves not only writing medical materials of different types which comprise regulatory and research-related papers, disease or drug-related literature, health-related magazines but also simple documents like case notes, case histories, clinical details, prescription sheets, consultation forms, order forms, patient evaluation forms etc. The second group belongs to the hospital daily routine.

The earliest medical books based on earlier tracts and different periods were closely connected to the thinking approach of making decisions. The question of what continued and what changed through different historical contexts remains central in the historical analysis of medical movements (Crombie, 1994. 6) [1]. While the oldest texts or materials were characterized by only the recording features, "the modern medical writing can be characterized by its lexico-grammatical features" (Halliday & Martin 1993)[2].

Consequently, these medical materials are an outcome of a long evolution, with texts building based on earlier ones in a continuum. This implies that the new generations based their studies on texts written by their forerunners; with gradual changes taking place within the old frame. The beginning of the 18th century saw dramatical changes in the way medical writing was conceived. A variety of writings in the medical field like experimental articles, anatomical observations, book reviews, miscellaneous articles and also daily hospital routine work materials started to emerge. Another way of classifying earlier medical writings may be adapted from the modern approach to ESP studies: the field of

studies is further partitioned into subgenres and the principles of writing are explored within them. It is evident that the creation of the principles of writing and the subgenres dynamics within professional language are worthy of special consideration. Case reports were the main subgenre taking into account the fact that medical teaching consisted of recorded data of typical cases

## II. MEDICAL WRITING IN ESP

Although the study of English as a second language is widely used in English language programs there are few applications of the Writing for Professional Purposes conducted to customize ESP language courses to suit the work environment which implies the same for Writing for Professional Purposes. The English language through the school curricula is mostly studied in the aspect of studying a second language and not in the aspect of studying English as a second language for professional purposes. The medical field represents this challenge since English is used as tool of communication among professionals of different countries.

The interest for the English language in the careers of medical professionals to acquire a good level of the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in different activities, and the perception of health professionals towards their English language preparation has increased over the years. In fact in last decades there has been a growing need to use the English language for the expression of information within specific professional fields. In response to this need, the teaching of ESP has become a major concern mainly in countries where English is taught as a foreign language (Gatehouse, 2001, 7-10).

It is a widely shared opinion that today English is the language of workplace and the academia world. In such learning contexts, in fact, language teachers have to consider the English texts “the learner has to produce and/or understand” (Dudley-Evans, 2001, 134) to enter his/her academic or professional community and to share field-specific “cultural assumptions and practices” [5]. Found in such situations, the researchers have committed their efforts to describe the main features of some specific written genres with the aim of studying how language functions in well defined contexts, be they academic or for the workplace [6]. Medical writing is one field in the ESP studies that needs to be treated in the EFL classes and for purpose in the recent years an increasing number of English language programs have adopted English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Writing for Professional Purposes approach in their English language courses. The purpose of these programs is to provide students with an English language knowledge that enables them to join the workforce in different countries since English has become a mean for international communication. Writing is the last and perhaps the most difficult skill students learn, if they ever do. In the past, writing is only seen as a way to reinforce oral skills [7].

In professional context, if working in an international work environment where the English language is the lingua franca, the most important thing is to deal with the patients data, as a result the kind of medical documents to be read and written are those related to the daily routine work like case notes, case histories, clinical details, prescription sheets, consultation forms, order forms, patient evaluation forms etc... All these reasons bring to the point that medical writing and the English language have to be considered as one piece. Consequently, medical writing should be part of the curricula at school so the professionals won't encounter difficulties if one day they have to use the English as a means of written communication

### III. CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDICAL WRITING IN ESP

The essential aim of the medical writing is to record data. Without a written record of the findings precious information may be lost. This negligence would adversely impact on the efficiency of sharing medical knowledge and doing the right thing at the right moment. In most of the cases doctors, nurses and paramedics need to communicate their ideas effectively. Their tendency while writing is to make use of unfamiliar words in weird grammatical constructions, particularly when writing reports, or make use of redundant words and phrases which occur again and again in medical papers. One of the main challenges of medical writing is to fit wide and intricate information into concise and well-structured

texts. It is a skill that involves the knowledge of the medical field and practice in writing as well. What we should take into consideration is the fact that medical writing differs substantially from literary writing. Whereas literary writing is an art based on principles of personal style and originality, good medical writing is a craft that builds on clear communication of facts. Good medical writing is centered on the ability to express complex concepts in clear words, thus pointing out the bulk of it without unnecessary decoration

### IV. LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDICAL WRITING IN ESP

The plain language movement like in some other ESP fields has found a wide use even in medical writing. The movement emphasizes the benefits of writing clearly and concisely, in a reader-focused style that avoids wordiness, cliché, and jargon. The main purpose of it is to write in a style that allows the target audience to readily comprehend the message taking the readers' knowledge of the subject into account. What the plain English implies in ESP contexts is a logical organization of the text, the use of common everyday words (except for necessary technical terms), the use of active voice and short sentences. This is what the writing piece should resemble. But, what are the real characteristics of medical writing?

**Long and Complicated Sentences:** Unnecessary words leading to redundancy and superfluous ornamentation of medical statements which obscure the key messages. Hence, it will be difficult for the readers to comprehend what is written. Even though the nowadays guidelines continuously stress the importance of brevity in this type of writing the idea that quantity comes before quality has not yet been eradicated. Many hold the ideology that sentences overcrowded with information add value to their message as a result what they get is the opposite. This problem is mostly encountered and clearly more pronounced among those whose mother tongue is other than English, in other words among those people who have studied English as a second language.”

- **The Original:** The potentially superior antiplaque and better surface-active properties of amine fluoride and stannous fluoride containing mouth rinses were carefully investigated in a well-designed double-blind, crossover study in 10 healthy volunteers.[8]
- **Plain English Version:** We investigated the antiplaque and surface-active properties of mouth rinses containing amine fluoride and stannous fluoride in a double-blind, crossover study in 10 healthy volunteers. [8].

**The result is clear:** the quantity will never substitute the quality, nor will it disguise the vagueness as a result of incomplete concepts

**Misused or Wasted Specific and Basic Terms:** The wrong use or waste of specific and generic terms gets is one of the obstacles for an effective communication. One category of words or phrases that should be avoided is that of the collective nouns since they over generalize the ideas.

**Overuse of Passive Voice:** The hesitation to use first person pronouns in writing in most of the cases would lead the writer to overuse the passive voice. The use of the passive voice mostly derives from the old medical texts. At a certain extent the passive voice is inculcated in the minds of the writer. Nowadays, most grammarians or linguists do agree on the fact that the use of the passive makes the sentence redundant. In an era where briefness, effectiveness and precision are of crucial importance in writing and where there is no place for ambiguity the passive cannot be used since it is the active voice which aids in keeping the idea lean and clear.

- **Original:** The investigation of the cytochrome P450-dependent drug metabolism was carried out using a microsomal preparation. [9]
- **Plain English version:** We investigated the cytochrome P450-dependent drug metabolism in a microsomal preparation.[9].

**Tendency to Turn Powerful Verbs into weak Nouns:** There is the tendency to use weak nouns derived from verbs instead of the verb itself in those cases where the verb would have a stronger impact than that of the bulky noun. Some words that belong to this category are examination, analysis, investigation, study, and performance, among many others. The previous example of the passive voice is the perfect example to show that the word investigation is overused, and that the second sentence in plain English has a greater effect than the first. Another fact is that in the previous sentence there are three rules of the plain English broken; the misused generic term, the passive and the use of the noun instead of the verb from which the noun was created.

**Medical Jargon:** The medical jargon is another element of the medical writing. It is characterized by the use of different types of abbreviations, Latin words and jargonized writing. The types of abbreviations used are **True abbreviations** like Temp., Prof., approx. **Units of measurement** mL, h, s, m, km **Acronyms** AIDS, ELISA, NATO, ANOVA and **Initialisms** HPLC, WHO, ATP, DNA. **The double negatives, tautology and the doubling prepositions** create the so-called jargonized writing. Its first element is that of the double negatives like in the following sentence: Diabetes is not uncommon among hypertensive patients. The best way to express this idea would be:

Diabetes is common among hypertensive patients. The second element is tautology or differently known as repeated and redundant words which involves the repetition of words with similar meaning like adequate enough for adequate (or enough); future predictions for predictions etc. The last one is the phenomena of double prepositions for the same function in the sentence which may result in a clumsy writing like in the sentence below; “The test mice remained **inside of** their cages during the entire experimental period,” the correct form of which is “The test mice remained **inside** their cages during the entire experimental period.” [10].

## CONCLUSION

Firstly, medical writing includes not only the scientific writing of the books and the medical research articles but also the daily routine writing in working day in the hospital, and it developed through years into the modern writing of nowadays. Secondly, there are different criteria of classification according to the subgenres and the kind of language it belonged that of the ESP. Thirdly, what can be considered as a well-written piece in medical writing is the one that is understandable, efficient, clear and simple. Another important point treated in the article is the language used and more explicitly the characteristics of the language used in writing. The language that should be used is that of the plain English which is characterized by the use of the short sentences, the use of the active voice, use of familiar words. However, what is noticed is the fact that the long and complicated sentences with awkward grammatical structures, the misuse of the specific and generic words, the passive structures, the tendency to use derived nouns from verbs instead of the verbs themselves and the medical jargon are actually the main characteristic of the medical writing.

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