

E-TESTING IN ENGLISH FOR PHARMACY

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to describe and share the experience of the first e-tests in English for Pharmacy at the MU in Varna. The process of designing separate interactive activities for training students to deal with the e-test components will be clarified. Some advantages and disadvantages will be analyzed concerning the implementation of e-testing as an integral part of contemporary English for specific purposes teaching and learning.*

Key words: *e-learning, e-testing, language and computer literacy skills*

Introduction

Pharmacists spend most of their time working with computers. They deal with e-prescriptions and are in constant contact with the Health Insurance Fund. This requires a high level of computer literacy and math skills that student pharmacists should possess. Thus doing online tests should be an integral part of the students' overall curriculum including the English for Pharmacy learning and acquisition.

In 2017 pharmacy students at Varna Medical University experienced their first Blackboard test in English for Pharmacy. The test components were five altogether, two comprehension-based listening activities: one T/F (true/false) and the other with MC (multiple choice) questions. Then there were two tasks focused on checking reading skills again one T/F and the other of the type Reading and Multiple Matching. The last, fifth component was a language-based gap-fill task with a focus on grammar and vocabulary.

Timing

The test was designed to last one hour, 60 min altogether. Since the computer rooms were currently occupied by students studying different disciplines, the time-slot when pharmacy students could sit the test was after 5 p.m. when the rooms were available.

Organization

The students were 57 in number, so three computer rooms were used simultaneously for students to sit the test. Three colleagues of English and a team of IT specialists helped the arrangement of the computers, headphones, etc. The overall environment before the test was rather stressful and nerve wrecking both for the team of teachers and the students as well.

Aims

The major aim of this first Blackboard test in English for Pharmacy was to allow future pharmacists to experience online tests in ESP since their colleagues – students of Medicine and students of Dental Medicine had already had such an experience. In order to evaluate and assess strengths and weaknesses of this online test, a questionnaire was administered during the seminar that students had in the week following the test. Here are some of the findings of this questionnaire.

Questionnaire English for Pharmacy

Out of 57 students who sat the computer-based test, 49, i.e. approximately 86 % answered the questions.

Question 1. List at least three things you liked about the computer-based test.

One of the things a number of students (9) found positive about the Cb (computer-based) test was the immediate feedback that they got after finishing each component, they also focused on the objective assessment of the test results. A lot of students (16) appreciated the quick and easy way to do the test just by clicking on the correct answers; 15 students pointed out that they coped without writing. Thus “it was easier to choose the correct answer because the possible answers have been given”. The fact that there were no tasks for writing allowed them to avoid messy answers, crossing out, etc., - 2.

A few students mentioned that the test was “innovative” and doing it was “a new experience” for them.

Students concentrated on the type of tasks incorporated in the test and basically many of them liked the **listening task** for various reasons: e.g. because listening was easier, it was supported by a video - 5. “We had headphones and could do the listening individually and the quality of the recording was better, clearer” - 3. Thirteen students appreciated that they could do the listening with a video more than once or twice, they thought it was helpful and more practical.

Some students liked the texts for reading, the contents of the material offered and the type of test component, e.g. True/False task, as well as the task for choosing the headings of given paragraphs.

Four students found the Cb test much more comfortable. They also appreciated the possibility to decide how to organize their time between different exercises.

They found the Cb test more interesting and diverse, they also liked the fact that they had **plenty of time** to do the test.

Three students didn't know what they liked about the Bb (Blackboard) test or simply left the space for answers blank.

Question 2. List at least three things you disliked about it.

Thirty students pointed out the technical problems that they experienced such as the fact that the first listening video task wouldn't start. The test had been tested and yet it turned out the video for the first listening activity was banned on the students' computers. The technical problems made students feel the Bb tests “a little bit unreliable” and that made the atmosphere a bit stressful. Two students mentioned that they found the listening and viewing activity too fast.

Another couple of students didn't like the time of day for doing the test and even found it boring because they did the test after 5 p.m. when it was dark and they were tired.

A few students found the whole test organization somewhat slow because students had to wait for the headphones to be arranged next to each computer since before that the computer rooms were occupied by other students who had regular seminars there.

There were some negative opinions related to the reading tasks as well, they either noted that the text on the screen “hurt their eyes” and one student emphasized: “I personally hate reading long texts on a screen”.

In the language-based gap-fill activity there were gaps for which more than one choice was possible. So some students disliked that task because “words were interchangeable at times and the computer accepted one correct answer only”, which by the way was not true. The computer was programmed to accept all correct answers.

One student commented that there were no activities testing the writing and/or speaking skills and obviously considered this a disadvantage.

Six students couldn't make up their mind as to what they disliked about the test, one stated s/he disliked everything and three of them on the contrary – they liked everything.

Yet another student pointed out s/he disliked the test because it was a new experience altogether: 'We hadn't done it before'.

NB This semester students worked individually on some special Self-study Practice materials that prepared them to do activities typical of computer-based tests. Thus the issue of complete novelty was dealt with.

Question 3. Which type of test component did you find most interesting to work on and why?

Seventeen students stated that they found the listening test component with True/False answers most interesting because it contained authentic language, it helped their concentration and because one could listen and watch the video many times. The video task was apparently considered interesting because they listened with headphones.

Twelve students mentioned they liked the T/F reading task while four students stated that the second reading task was most interesting: "because you have to think and understand the meaning of the text" and "it involved naming the paragraphs". One student admitted s/he thought the proper headings activity most interesting because s/he "liked this type of task".

Two students found all test components interesting while three students replied that they didn't know and they couldn't make up their minds as to which test component was most interesting. Two students simply gave no answers to this question and one commented: "It was a test, the level of its interest is immaterial", obviously expressing the idea that a test is supposed to be a test checking students' psycholinguistic knowledge and skills without itself being interesting or boring in any way.

Question 4. Which type of test component did you find most difficult to work on and why?

Twenty-five students thought the gap-fill task most difficult for a number of reasons, e.g. there were some unfamiliar words; or some words could be used more than once and some words were synonymous so they found it hard to identify their place in the text.

Eleven students found the second listening test component most difficult for various reasons such as: "I don't comprehend the words when they talk quickly", "I don't like listening", the video itself, or "It was noisy in the room".

Three students found the first reading task especially difficult because there were misleading and confusing statements and one admitted s/he disliked reading from a screen.

Nine students reported that "Nothing was too difficult" and "Everything was easy" while six more students preferred not to answer this question at all.

Question 5. Did you have enough time to do the different parts of the test?

Forty-eight students out of 49 who filled in the questionnaire answered that they had sufficient time to do the test and some of them even replied that they had a lot of time, more than enough. Only one student found the time for the Bb test insufficient.

Question 6. How would you compare the blackboard and the paper-based test?

The better part of the students out of the nineteen students who answered this question point out that the Bb test has more advantages in comparison to the paper-based, traditional test. It is more comfortable, it is easier to fill in, there is more time because you don't have to write. They appreciate the immediate feedback, "the online test was in some respects easier, faster" and "we finished it more

quickly”. It is less demanding, the texts are more topical, contemporary and modern. The Bb test itself is more innovative, it helps students make tests faster and more easily.

According to thirteen students the paper-based test is more comfortable and easier to do: “I can concentrate better; it’s my type of test because I’m used to paper-based tests and sometimes the old methods are better”.

Four students agreed that both types of tests have their advantages and disadvantages while two students considered them basically the same.

Question 7. Which type of test do you prefer and why?

On the whole thirty students (63 %) state that the Blackboard test is more interesting, faster and easier to do, and that is why they preferred this online test, it is different from the conventional testing and provides immediate feedback.

Eighteen students would prefer to do a paper-based test because they think they can do it faster and more easily. They think the organization of a paper-based test is better and they are used to this type of traditional test. No technical problems can occur and the Bb test is “a bit confusing”.

One student argued that “Neither test is stressful”.

Fourteen students chose not to reply to this question, two more students answered: “I don’t know” and/or “Can’t decide”.

Another student admitted “It doesn’t matter” and yet another was frank enough to write “I prefer to have a 6”.

Question 8. Would you like to do part of your tests in English for Pharmacy online? Give reasons to support your answer.

Twenty-five students agreed they would like to do Bb tests on a regular basis. Some of them wrote that “not every component is suitable for an online test”, e.g. writing. But the immediate results that these tests provide, the fact that they are less time-consuming to do make them attractive and basically students these days find it much easier to work online.

Ten students gave a negative answer. They would prefer paper-based tests entirely because “they had problems while trying to log into their account” (4), “there are lots of issues that are interrupting us” - 2, “it is easier” - 2. One student admitted that s/he didn’t like the internet and yet another preferred the traditional test because his/her English is not so good.

One student commented that ‘Some tests should be on blackboard but others should not’.

Half a dozen students answered “I don’t know” and another group of 6 students answered evasively with “maybe”. Six students refrained from answering question 8.

Question 9. What recommendations would you give for improving the online test in the future?

Twelve students think the equipment (computers, head phones, etc.) should be checked in advance and the system should be improved because technology can’t be trusted fully, many computers were very slow and they crashed. Four students proposed “To test the test because the problems were annoying” although the test was really tested a number of times but on a teacher’s, not on a student’s computer.

Four students underlined that everything should be organized in a better way, including the test itself. “It would be great if there were no technical problems, e.g. make sure all computers work”. In terms of overall organization of the test one student suggested “to separate the groups of students because it is too noisy when there are more groups”.

Some students recommended more components for the e-test that would include more grammar and vocabulary tasks, as well as a focus on checking the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Seven students chose not to give any recommendations, maybe they didn't have enough confidence, or felt tired of answering questions and analyzing, while two students admitted: "I don't know" or evasively replied "I can't think of any".

There were two students who were extremely positive about the e-testing experience and shared "The platform is ideal" and "It was super!"

Conclusion

Technology-enhanced teaching and testing will hopefully prepare Pharmacy students more adequately for their future profession. The e-skills they possess and use in learning other university disciplines are applicable to foreign language teaching and learning as well. Especially appropriate seem to be the listening and viewing activities when they are based on authentic videos from *You Tube*. They allow teachers to devise more creative, communicative online tasks as language test components.

In the approach pursued, student writing is also important so additional paper-based test components should also be used. The e-learning activities help students into guided discovery of how language works and train them in experiencing some new self-assessment tools. Last but not least e-testing in Pharmacy will ultimately enhance future Pharmacy graduates' employability.

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