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Academic genres in EFL medical educational contexts: the medical case-report

Abstract

In genre analysis literature medical case-reports can be said to be almost underrepresented when compared to other scholarly specimens that have been thoroughly researched, like the research article, the master's thesis or the doctoral dissertation. As a written academic variety little is known to English as a foreign language practitioners about the medical case report's format and about its use in language for specific purposes classes. The aim of this note is to offer a preliminary description of the case-report's main sections and to suggest some activities to be exploited in English as a foreign language classes. The hope is that these insights can call genre analysts' attention on this medical genre to develop appropriate research that will result in new educational texts.

Keywords: medical case report, genre analysis, academic genres.

1. Introduction

It is a widely shared assumption that today English is the international language of research and scholarship and the medium of election to spread scientific results (Tardy, 2004). Recent data confirm this situation and show that 68% of worldwide scholarly journals use English as their official language of publication; whereas more than 95% of the scholarly papers indexed in the SCI (Science Citation Index) are written in English, even by non-native speakers (Hyland, 2009: 5 and 179).

This English-driven situation impacts university syllabus design in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. 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” (Hyland, 2009: 47).

For educational purposes, and considering the high share English has in academia, the concept of text accessibility is of paramount importance to non-native-speaker students because they have to access domain-specific literature which is increasingly published by the English medium. To this end, in the last decades researchers have devoted their endeavours 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 (Hyland, 2009: 20).

The cornerstone of such scholarly research, which has helped a large cohort of non-English academics cope with the difficult task of having their papers published in scholarly journals, is undoubtedly Swales’ work on the research article and his move and step model (Swales, 1990; 2004). Swales’ results have also fostered investigation on the same research article in diverse academic fields and some scholars have begun to pay attention to different written examples of academic genres such as the master’s thesis or the doctoral dissertation, together with instructional specimens like the grant proposal (Bhatia, 1993; Hyland: 2006, 2009, among others).

One written variety that, to the best of my knowledge, has not received consideration, and is under-represented in genre studies, is the medical case-report (MCR); as a consequence, little is known to language teachers about this written variety and how to employ it in EFL classes. To fill in part this gap, this note wants to offer a brief description of MCRs as a genre with a distinct format, consisting of four different sections, and to suggest some activities to be used by language teachers in EFL medical contexts.

The database used to illustrate the MCR layout and its main sections is taken from the guidelines written by Aitken and Marshall (2007) for their medical students. These outlines are, then, compared with the instruction to authors in two randomly selected medical journals. The first is the *Journal of Medical Case Reports* (JMCR), an open access journal wholly devoted to this type of papers in human medicine; the second is the *Journal of Small Animal Practice* (JSAP), an important scholarly paper in the veterinary medicine field.

2. The medical case-report

In medicine and veterinary medicine, the MCR is a scientific genre used by medical practitioners to describe unusual cases worth reporting because of their atypicalness.

In the specific, the MCR deals with a clinical condition and its care (Aitken and Marshall, 2007: 133), new diseases or first reports of viruses' mutations and related therapies and prognoses (Vanderbroucke, 1999: 159-60), unexpected symptoms evidenced in patients' treatment (JMCR), techniques' descriptions or examples of best practices (JSAP).

Medical experts consider MCRs the "cornerstone of medical literature" (Vanderbroucke, 1999: 159) with a strong educational value in present day evidence-based medical practice, both for students and medical practitioners. They "can serve as early warning signals of adverse effects" in therapies (Kidd and Hubbard, 2007:1); they can provide "detailed accounts" (Mason, 2001:100) of "what can go wrong" (ibid.) in medical practice or they can offer a description of groundbreaking experimental techniques.

Although MCRs can facilitate the progress of medical science and students' education and medical practitioners' lifelong learning, MCRs are "perceived as an inferior form of publication" (Mason, 2001: 100) by journals' editors because the same are infrequently quoted in research articles (Warner, 2005: 93-94). This low quotation rate reduces the journals' impact factor and, as a consequence, MCRs are often rejected by editorial boards in favour of longer and more articulated research articles (ibid).

3. The medical case-report's format

MCRs are scholarly papers that accomplish their communicative and educational purposes with a limited number of words, generally not exceeding 1500-2000 (JMCR; JSAP). They can contain a small amount of figures (radiographs, ultrasound scans or photographs), few grids or tables containing biochemical data of analyses performed, to clarify the case presentation and to highlight the patient's conditions discussed in the MCRs' different sections.

The MCR overall format resembles the research article (see Swales, 1990 and 2004) as it consists of the following sections: abstract, introduction, case description, discussion and conclusion (see tab. 1 for a synoptic description).

The abstract is a brief case overview (Aitken and Marshall, 2007: 134) whose aim is to inform and to attract readers' attention when scanning medical indexes. It can include the following sub-sections (JMCR): introduction, where the case under discussion is briefly presented; case presentation, where details on the subject/patient are given; conclusion, where the clinical impact or the importance for further studies can be stressed.

The introduction is the section which "sets the scene" (Aitken and Marshall, 2007: 134) and gives readers the general overview on the topic by describing the medical

conditions or the main disorders peculiar to the case under discussion, together with hints on previous literature to contextualize the case (ibid.).

The case presentation section is a well developed part. It must contain clinical details of the patient's health or his/her family history and a description of the clinical tests carried out and information on the care (ibid.).

The discussion & conclusion section is the most important component for medical readers because it aims at putting the case into the right context (JMCR). It must comment or critique the care (Aitken and Marshall, 2007: 135) by explaining treatment decisions (JMCR), by outlining the importance of the case (JMCR) and its future use in everyday medical practice or by stressing the educational message (Aitken and Marshall, 2007: 135-136) authors want to convey to their reading audience.

The medical case report	
ABSTRACT	Brief overview: why the case is important, case details, clinical impact on literature. It should stand alone and attract perspective readers' attention.
INTRODUCTION	Setting the scene: general overview of the condition (disorders, relevant clinical signs to introduce the case), brief review of literature to contextualize the case.
CASE PRESENTATION	Description: relevant background info (health history, family history, current problems, disorders, clinical signs relevant to contextualize the case, care details: tests, drugs).
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION	Commentary: put the case in context to explain results and medical decisions, recommend future care based on present results, state the educational message.

Table 1: Synopsis of the MCR and its sections (Aitken and Marshall, 2007; JMCR)

4. The use of MCRs in EFL settings

To date, available literature on MCRs can be said to consist of "how to" tips written by medical educators for the medical audience interested in producing exemplars to be published in scholarly journals (e.g. Vanderbroucke, 1999; Wright and Kouroukis, 2000). No attention has been paid, to the best of my knowledge, on describing the MCR's template for EFL study purposes and on designing activities to be used by language teachers in their EFL medical classes.

The following section wants, therefore, to try to fill in part this gap, by suggesting some exercises to be employed in medical classes. The activities originate from the

MCR model discussed above and have been designed to boost text's overall comprehension, to call attention on some language expressions likely to be met in medical written texts and to foster note-taking and summarizing skills.

The suggested exercises can be used with undergraduates or freshmen and serve the purpose of revising grammar items like the function of adjectives employed to describe care results, the use of tenses to describe the subjects' medical or family history, biochemical tests or care results after drugs administration. The same exercises can also be applied in English for academic purposes classes and serve the purpose of introducing the communicative functions of the different MCR sections.

5. Language exploitation activities

The first proposed activity, namely a guided comprehension, can help learners focus on the message brought out by each section:

Guided comprehension	
By drawing on the synoptic table [fig.1], read the MCR and highlight the main topics discussed in the different sections:	
ABSTRACT	
INTRODUCTION	
CASE PRESENTATION	
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION	

The second activity wants to highlight some formulaic expressions likely to be met in the MCRs different sections to implement medical English proficiency (some examples are given):

Language exploitation	
Read the MCR and take notes on the main formulaic expressions you can find in the different sections:	
ABSTRACT	<i>The aim...is...</i>
INTRODUCTION	<i>This condition is ...</i>
CASE PRESENTATION	<i>The case presented...</i>
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION	<i>Results show...</i>

In the last activity presented in this note, MCRs can be used to develop note-taking skills by reporting the MCR's contents; the template can also be used as a model to give oral presentations:

Read the MCR and take notes on:	
Number of subjects involved	
Medical signs	
Familiarity/ Medical history	
Treatment Routine tests Drugs	
Results Positive Negative	

6. Conclusion

The aim of this note was to offer some insights on an under-represented written medical variety and on some activities to be used in medical EFL settings. Further research is necessary to contextualize MCRs' use among medical experts and to elicit the moves within the different sections and the formulaic expressions employed by medical researchers when using this type of written communication to spread their research results. The suggested activities need refinement to be applied to different educational contexts. The discussion brought out by this note should, therefore, be intended as a preliminary research aimed at filling in part the gap in genre literature and as a means to call attention on this medical variety.

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