The english medclub: an integrated experience from a professional and educational dimension.

El medclub: una experiencia integradora desde las dimensiones profesional y educativa.

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ABSTRACT

Using language for real purposes and to serve social needs is a priority in the new policies of language learning undertake by the Cuban Ministry of Highest Studies. This work argues on the experience of an English club (MEDCLUB) created to promote the development of learning English with medical purposes and creating a profitable atmosphere for the teaching and learning of English at Sancti Spíritus Medical University.

After analyzing the experience outcomes, it was concluded that a MEDCLUB significantly impacted and influenced language development at the medical university by creating an excellent language - learning atmosphere in which English was used for real in a diversity of contexts (cultural, professional, etc.) while having a social projection. The work proposed methodological guidelines, so as some club activities. The proposal proved a significant didactic and complementary tool for language and cultural development. The club offered an opportunity to reinforce language competence through the integration of skills. Student's motivation to plan, perform and participate in MEDCLUB activities evidenced the didactic and methodological potentialities of the proposal. There was a moving forward in the effectiveness of the subject due to the interactional context of the club and the advantageous atmosphere created in the institution.

Keywords: Club, language competence, curriculum.

RESUMEN

El uso del idioma al servicio de propósitos y necesidades sociales reales es una prioridad del Ministerio de Educación Superior Cubano. El trabajo argumenta sobre la experiencia de un club inglés (MEDCLUB) creado para promover aprendizaje de inglés con fines médicos, así como crear una atmósfera propicia para la enseñanza y aprendizaje de inglés en la Universidad Médica de Sancti Spíritus. El análisis de los resultados de la experiencia concluyó que el MEDCLUB influyó e impactó significativamente el aprendizaje de idioma creando una atmosfera propicia para el aprendizaje, el inglés se usó de forma real en una variedad de contextos y a la vez se proyectó a nivel social. El trabajo propone guías metodológicas, así como algunas actividades para desarrollar exitosamente un MEDCLUB. La propuesta evidenció las potencialidades didácticas como herramienta para el desarrollo idiomático y cultural. El club reforzó competencias idiomáticas a través de la integración de habilidades. Las motivaciones de los estudiantes para planificar, ejecutar y participar en las actividades evidenciaron las potencialidades didácticas – metodológicas de la propuesta. Hubo un incremento en la efectividad de la asignatura gracias al contexto interaccionar del club y la positiva atmosfera creada en la institución.

Palabras claves: Club, competencia lingüística, currículo.

INTRODUCTION

We are living a historical moment for mankind, the world that we knew before COVID-19 will be told in past stories. The pandemic experience has meant death the psychological effect of family lost and isolation. COVID-19 forces us, not only, to reinvent human relations but also the way nations should globally connect one another. Nature, through a virus, has shown us we are vulnerable and weak; solidarity has also shown that in cooperation lay the foundations of our resistance and survival. In today's globalized misfortune, *Health Cooperation* represents a beacon of hope.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in 2017 released a sobering report indicating that nearly half the world's population suffered lack of essential health services and the cost of health services had been pushing nearly 100 million people into extreme poverty.

According to Bustillo (1), from 1960 on, Cuba has offered health assistance to more than 150 countries, sending more than 400 000 doctors, nurses and technical personnel. Medical brigades overseas have become a philosophy and a commitment to those in need. This milestone of Cuban health professionals has met no limits in spite of culture, ideology, distance or language – thanks to local translators – but it has been language indeed what mostly "limits" the essential dialogue doctor – patient.

Language is a weak point in this - patient to health professional - close contact relation can be offered a solution from many points of view but professional formation at university level, seems

to be the most suitable scenario. Thus today's context highly demand a more effective approach to language teaching, as Menéndez (3) emphasizes when refereeing to challenges not only in terms of knowledge self-management but the impact it should have on society, as a way to shorten the breach between high learning institutions and social necessities.

Some experienced authors (2) argue that the new role of knowledge is producing profound transformation in higher education, becoming an essential factor to face today's world challenges and social development. Núñez (8) in this regard identifies three elements which determine the strategic position of higher education in contemporary society and in internal functioning, the elements are pertinence, quality and internationalization.

New challenges in language teaching and learning demand new approaches from universities in their role of knowledge management in solving social phenomena. English teaching must transcend the classroom walls, the traditional chalk and talk and be projected as a real need of using it to solve society real world problems. The *English Club* is the opportunity to use English for real in a casual setting. Practicing your skills in the classroom is important, but it is not like real life. In an English Club, you get a chance to practice many different skills in a setting that is more like real life.

LEARNERS' NEEDS ANALYSIS

On search of applying new approaches, the department of English implemented a strategy to develop the new national policies of language learning. The experienced proposed through the following work, objectively derives from it. Thus, it is part of the necessity of complementing the Language Strategy and as the result of different instruments applied to students positioned at the highest level in the strategy placement test.

A comprehensive questionnaire was distributed a sample of 30 B1 students – according to Common European Framework Standard Placement Test – from 4th and 5th year aimed to assess the general attitudes using English for real, measure motivational level and linguistic needs. A survey and an interview were also applied targeted to compiling some information on the development of Medical English and General and Academic English as a field diary to keep record of direct observations of institutional students' language usage.

Based on preliminary results of instruments analysis, which indicates the need to promote the learning of English within a proper atmosphere combining General, academic and medical English. So as to offer B1 students a possibility to develop language usage for real with a social impact on the students' university community, the authors decided to create a medical English language club.

This work argues on the experience of an English club (MEDCLUB) created to promote the development of learning English with medical purposes and creating a profitable atmosphere for the teaching and learning of English at Sancti Spíritus Medical University.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXPERIENCE.

The findings may hopefully assist professors cognize the importance of English club in promoting the development of learning English with medical purposes and thus, creating a profitable atmosphere for the teaching and learning of English at Sancti Spíritus Medical University.

Through English club students and teacher are able to approach socio – educational phenomena of medullar interest and at the same time enrich the development of the pensum in a *realistic using* of language learning. Through language clubbing students learn, develop competences, make reflections and commit with social necessities. While doing so they do not only fulfil academic goals but develop their self-potentials and become responsible and cooperative social agents.

DEVELOPMENT.

The requirements needed nowadays from university graduated professionals demand to be competent at languages, especially English. In today's globalized socio-economical relationships, to competitively use English, whether as Lingua Franca or in some cases as Working Language is an imperative to be an active part of the world working market and international relationships. These requisites are a key goal in the educational process of medical universities in Cuba, taking into account the international collaboration agenda of the Cuban Ministry of Health, and the commitment of the island to the third nations world as part of the government foreign affair policy In Cuban universities the changing landscape of language teaching and assessment calls for a change. A paradigmatic transformation in the teaching and learning of English - based on adaptations to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) – was promoted by the Ministry of Higher Education.

With the new Cuban policies and approaches to the teaching of English – enunciated in 2016 – there is a call to meet the increasing socio – economic necessities of the country through scientifically and methodologically designing new courses and approaches to language learning, which improve not only undergraduate and postgraduate academic formation but objective language competences, which allow professional to use language proficiently in real contexts.

As part of these new approaches, university students were applied some tests based on Common European Framework standards, the results showed serious difficulties in terms of language usage. This situation motivated an urgent call for applying new approaches to meet international standards. The new approaches and methods integrated into general international standards, imperatively call to develop new teaching practices amongst Cuban professorate.

One of the new approaches, in our teaching experience, could be having our students participating in English clubs. In clubs, students explore their own potentialities, from the academic perspective but also from the social position. One of the most important aspects of clubs relays in student – student relation building, which generate a sense of empathy, cooperative solidarity and human connection – quite appreciated in this times of technology immersion – when addressing social,

ethical or professional questions. Empathy is one of the most important relations derived from the necessity of teamwork within the club framework.

TEACHING ENGLISH AT MEDICAL UNIVERSITIES.

In the field of medicine, we fully agree with Frînculescu (4) in considering that English language has achieved a status of lingua franca, most of international academic and scientific literature – magazine, articles, etc. – and contributions are published and issued in English. So, the learning of English has turned a vital question in transmitting and receiving professional information. As a consequence, there is an objective export of English into other linguistic cultural contexts.

The teaching of English at Cuban institutes of higher medical education has been a permanent issue in the educational agenda, which sustained the decision to introduce the learning of English - 5 years course period – as early as 1963. In the case of preparing health graduated to fulfill the country international commitments, English plays the dual role of Lingua Franca and Working Language.

In medical universities the subject English contributes to the general academic and professional formation of students. It is divided into two cycles, a first *General and Academic* cycle and a second cycle of *English with Professional Purposes*.

The teaching of English at medical universities – from the language point of view -demands students to develop competences at level B1 of the Common European Framework (CEFR). Thus, students should be able to competently and independently perform in the four basic communicative skills: listening and reading comprehension and also oral and written expression.

The medicine students differ from the rest of the students in the point that they are quite aware of what their future work will be. While a graduated from any other field of studies may end, after graduating, in a job not directly related to his/her field of studies; most of medicine graduated will become doctors. In this sense the learning of English is much more linked to their future professional practice.

Many expert authors from the health field (6) consider that Cuban medical international cooperation has become a cornerstone within the nation foreign policy and philosophy. When Cuban doctors work abroad, they are demanded to perform all of their professional task – reunions, presentations, lectures, and others – in English. The use of English extends to their contact and relation with coworkers, supervisors and officers of international medical organizations. Thus, it is a must, to be competent in using the language of Shakespeare.

Medicine students are trained in using the language in different academic tasks and activities, i.e. fallowing instructions, medical debates, lectures, scientific articles and textbook reading, interpreting charts and graphics, make bibliographic revision, writing reports and many others. This is valid for undergraduate courses and postgraduate courses.

In this CEFR context, it is also essential to pay attention to developing strategies allies to the communicative competences, as experienced authors (5) express it is vital to develop

sociolinguistic competences - so students can use language appropriately in different social contexts -, discursive competences - so they know and use the accepted patterns in the spoken language -, and strategic competences - so they count on a variety of language strategies to successfully communicate -. All these competences can be effectively developed within the language club.

In spite of some approaches to clubs - mostly at secondary teaching and less at university - in the last times in higher education, as some authors state (3), expresses we are not still taking advantage of all the potentialities of educational contexts for formatively influence the subjects participating of this club experience, in which formation, experience and real life combine.

WHY A MEDICINE LANGUAGE CLUB (MEDCLUB)?

We have a despair situation in our classrooms, some students are quite advance in the subject while others face lots of difficulties and limitations in producing the language. This situation may seem a hundred percent positive for the advance students, but is not so. Our advance students, have developed a good level of skills in language, but they don't know what to do with their knowledge of English, how to use it for good.

There is a great way to help our proficient students to find the best of uses for their English, to make them feel socially useful with the practice of their skills. The answer to this situation is the creation and participation in an English language medicine club, in our experience our English language medicine club was named "MEDCLUB".

The MEDCLUB is the ideal space for the interaction of both, the advanced students in English and those who face difficulties with it. The first ones – advance – find a vehicle to use their language to help their classmates, while reinforcing their knowledge and skills in mediating and interacting with others. For the second ones – those who face difficulties – it is an excellent way to receive a sort of tutoring assistance in a general way from their own peers, not only by receiving thematic chats and debates but participating in motivating cultural and educational activities, developed and lead by their mates, which being of same age share mutual interests, motivations and perspectives.

The club involves students in research and so in active learning. Braxton (7) states that research is significant in active learning for its contribution to building university students success. Chickering & Gamson (8) contemplate active learning as a key principle to achieve a good undergraduate education. Thus the activities and tasks students do at the club are the same kind of activities which potentiate active learning, i.e. debates, role-playing, discussions, among many others. It is evident, as Foubert & Granger (9) suggest, that the higher the level of learners' participation, the more experiences and skills they obtain from university, so, learners should be encouraged to join to achieve their own development.

THE CLUB

What is a language club? According to Marinova-Todd et al., (10), it is an organization of people with common purpose or interest, who regularly meet and take part in shared activities. Thus, it is a place to use English in a fun environment, to have the opportunity to practice language skill based on real contexts and situations; inculcating self-confidence and broadening students' communicative competence within socializing context.

There are some principles which helped developing our experience:

- The club must be official within the college educational context.
- Regular attendance must be strictly regulated to developed responsibility.
- Cognitive pre-activities must be developed to fill any gap students may have before presenting their activities.
- Club members must receive an extra language training, so they reinforce and develop their skills at the higher level.
- Activities theme and topics must be chosen in regard to students needs and interests.
- Activities must combine cultural, educational and professional interests.
- A relaxed and functional language environment is key for students to use English.
- English usage must be casual, with no immediate corrective feedback.
- English language must be used while developing any club activity.
- Club must be student centered with professors only playing an orientating role.
- The club must be participant centered, not involving more than three professors.
- The club must play a social role within the university community.
- Activities must be objective, leading to learning something useful from the cultural or professional viewpoint.

The membership of the club, in our experience, was selective for our club conducted health related and cultural activities, which required a good language level.

MEDCLUB METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES

The MEDCLUB have a dual character in terms of objectives. On one hand, it aims at reinforce the members' language competences and skills; on the other it aims at reinforcing non – member students with language difficulties in the learning of the language by creating and getting them immerse in the right language atmosphere for these students.

The English club AIMED to help non - member students with language difficulties in acquiring the following objectives;

- 1. Creating an atmosphere of ease and relaxation to learn and practice English.
- 2. Helping learners use standard English in socio cultural real contexts.
- 3. Helping learners to use English for Specific Purposes (medicine) in real professional contexts.
- 4. Building confidence in producing the language (think and speak English).
- 5. Promoting peer feedback and correction.

- 6. Giving students free environment from conventional academic syllabi, exams and learning.
- 7. Integrating students' interests and needs within a flexible learning process.
- 8. Serving them to gain a public courage through different activities.
- 9. Providing opportunities to improve listening skills and practice speaking interactively.
- 10. Creating opportunities for students to express their opinions on a variety of topics in English.
- 11. Develop important language skills for external competitions.
- 12. Getting involve in cultural, academic, and recreational activities in order to promote the use of the English in and out of school context.

The English club AIMED to impact its membership in acquiring the following objectives;

- 1. Creating an atmosphere of ease and relaxation to practice and tutor English.
- 2. Helping advance students to apply English in socio cultural real contexts.
- 3. Serving students to use medical English in real professional contexts.
- 4. Building confidence in tutoring and teaching peers.
- 5. Promoting feedback and correction interactively.
- 6. Offering a free environment for language training.
- 7. Sharing academic and professional interests within a flexible context.
- 8. Serving them to gain auditory courage through different activities.
- 9. Creating opportunities for students to express their opinions.
- 10. To equip students with the necessary skills for external real competitions.
- 11. Developing cultural, academic, and recreational activities in order to promote the use of English language in and out the school context.

STARTING THE CLUB

Step1: Organizing the club basis:

- There was a meeting at the English department, where professors debated on the
 objectiveness of embarking on a language club aimed at their professional practice.
 Objectives were discussed so as those professors who would be selected to work with the club
 and the logistic.
- Stablish a limited number of members, according to the objective conditions of the institution. In our experience 24 students.
- Stablish the meeting schedule and place.
- Have a proposal of themes to be consulted with members.

Step2: Finding club members:

- Students were communicated the call for the club, so those who were interested could apply to participate as a member.
- As club has a professional impact (medical English) professor must make a selection from 4th and 5th year students.

Step3: Holding the first meeting:

- The first meeting is quite important. This is the moment where members are proposed no imposed the club objectives, the meeting schedules, and some themes and topics.
- It is important to listen to student's propositions of themes and opinions. It is a good moment to let the members know of their responsibilities (rights and duties) and that the club is students centered.
- There must be a simple and brief set of rules which guarantee organization and discipline.
- A club direction board must be proposed. No more than 3 members in charge of organization, publicity, etc.
- An identifying badge is a great ideal, for it gives them sense of identity and they feel proud to
 use it when performing the different activities of the club. It is better if they design and created
 it by themselves.

During the meetings with the MEDCLUB, after a work session when students were asked some suggestions to ground the basis of the club they request the following:

- Pedagogical basic training so they feel confident:
 - o when addressing a class in front of the board,
 - o at using some technique to transmit the info and knowledge they need,
 - o at using the English Lab for some activities,
 - o when using strategies and promoting a variety of learning styles.
- Access to different media resources to use them in the club activities: data-show, DVD player, English Lab, Specialized Classroom, etc.
- Language development workshops focused on grammar and pronunciation.
- Medical English thematic workshops based on curricular demands.
- Group Participation activation techniques.

The workshop was the main training form used to prepare the MEDCLUB members taking into account the possibilities it offers to work on the solution of the difficulties previously identified through diagnostic and students own claiming.

The workshop experience constituted an essential learning source for club the membership, who as some pedagogues (11), state, apart from appropriating from new ways to do and interact with a group of people they have the possibility to incorporate new didactic resources which help in planning and performing a range of tasks and activities in the club.

A PROPOSAL OF ACTIVITIES FOR MEDCLUB

The following proposal is based on those activities planned and performed by the MEDCLUB at Sancti Spíritus Medical University.

- General Morning Assembly for both students and teachers, combining cultural, educational and political sessions.
- Classroom chats (15 minutes) on topics of interest: epidemiological campaign, sanitation programs, health preoccupations at the moment, socio political debates, etc.

- Activities at the University Cultural Festivals.
- The English language Fairs: participation and interactive cultural activities.
- Postgraduate Training Cooperation Courses. MEDICAL ENGLISH PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES COLLABORATIVE TEACHING.
- Postgraduate Training Cooperation Courses. MEDICAL ENGLISH THEMATIC CHATS.
- Undergraduate course health practical activities for introducing medical English elements in General English lessons.
- Complementary teaching aids and material creation.
- Language Day activities.
- Movie Show: Presentations and discussions of selected movies in English.
- Karaoke and Song copying in English.
- Graphic Book Literature (Classic Illustrated) presentation and Reading.
- School Radio Station programs (run by the MEDCLUB)
- The English Journal: cultural, political, sports news.

EXPERIENCE FINAL THOUGHTS

The MEDCLUBS can assume different forms, formats and serve many different purposes. The following steps may help a successful experience.

- A Club must be member centered.
- Give club members the opportunity to creatively express themselves in English.
- Offer them the chance to explore visual communication, art (singing, dancing games). It must be fun
- A club plays and important social role and has responsibilities.
- Club members must be given freedom and trust to do.
- A good English club is fun

Supervising professors must be flexible, relaxed and intuitive embracing the sharing of new experiences with youngsters.

Reflecting on MEDCLUB outcomes, authors' experience predicates on behalf of MEDCLUB performance and activities, for they have significantly impacted and influenced on the members language development, so as helped creating an excellent language - learning atmosphere in the institution. It has also offered students - members and non-members - the possibility to use English for real in a vast diversity of contexts (cultural, professional, etc.) and at the same time they have felt socially useful.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

The designated scaffolding club activities met students' needs, helped 100% of students acquiring self-confidence while using their English skills for real and to socially cooperates in the institutional

creation of a profitable atmosphere for the teaching and learning of English at Sancti Spíritus Medical University.

Reflecting back on MEDCLUB outcomes, it could be said that activities have significantly impacted and influenced language development at the medical university by creating an excellent language - learning atmosphere in which English was used for real in a diversity of while having a social projection.

Furthermore, Club work has offered the university a chance to get students enjoying a wide range of activities in a favorable context to motivate language learning.

100% of club members favored the experience, appraised being in charge of their own learning and using their English to promote others learning. They all highly appreciated the freedom granted to design, create and perform activity according to their motivations and interests. Adding to it, 100% members confessed enjoying team and collaborative work within a context of commitment.

CONCLUSION

Establishing an English MEDCLUB at Sancti Spiritus medical university was of a highly influential effect on students' attitudes and motivation to language learning. It offered the opportunity to promoting the development of learning English with medical purposes while creating a positive atmosphere for the teaching and learning, appreciating language used for real in a variety of contexts. The club have also played a social role at university community level, encouraging students to language learning. The methodological guidelines and didactic – skill integrating activities proposed help successfully developing a MEDCLUB with positive impact on students cultural and language competences. MEDCLUB has also helped in increasing awareness to English essential role in the nation collaborative and economic perspectives and their own professional careers. Based on the experience results authors recommend implementing a MEDCLUB within the English Language Strategies at Medical Universities.

Through the MEDCLUB experience it is concluded that:

- students feel motivated to learning and using authentic English which coheres them within a frame of real life situations.
- it helps students getting free from language anxiety (affective strategies) and traditional in classroom boring routine.
- students appreciate learning while having fun.
- there is a positive enhancement of student student engagement, within a student centered approach.
- the club membership fosters self-confidence and self-esteem in learning.

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