



Conducting Online Three-Minute Presentation Sessions to Assess Medical Students' English-Speaking Abilities During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dear Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, resulting in the shift from traditional classes to virtual online classes, especially in Arab countries. Resorting to online learning and assessment was a fast solution to ensure continuing the educational process smoothly. Language learning is not an easy task; it rather requires a prolonged period of study that involves hard work, commitment, patience, and of course, regular practice. Our online language course offered a variety of multimedia tools that most students, as we live in the age of technology and social media, were interested in.

What problem was addressed? The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, resulting in the shift from traditional classes with a paradigm shift to online learning from an educational option to the only existing solution, especially in Arab countries (1). Most governments around the world temporarily suspended attendance in educational institutions to fight the spread of COVID-19 (2). Resorting to online learning and assessment was a fast solution to ensure continuing the educational process smoothly. "Technology can enable teachers and students to access specialized materials well beyond textbooks, in multiple formats and in ways that can bridge time and space" (3).

In the normal circumstances at our private college, the English-speaking test takes about 20 minutes. Students go to the language lab and use an online platform to record answers to ten questions about images of medical content. In addition, the students listen to ten sentences and record themselves repeating them. In any speaking exam, though students worry about their grammar or vocabulary prob-

lems and even their fluency or pronunciation, the real intimidating and overwhelming issue that affects the students on the exam day is overcoming exam stress and anxiety.

What was tried? Due to the lockdown during the peak of Coronavirus spread, shifting to online assessment was a must. Zoom™ (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., San Jose, CA, USA) platform was used to conduct presentation sessions to test the students' speaking skill for the whole batch as a comprehensive sampling (305 students at the foundation year). The students were divided into ten groups, and then they were assessed on different days by the class teacher using a unified and structured rubric scale. The procedure was explained to the students before the exam time. Each student in each group had to give a presentation about one of the seven suggested topics by the teaching team. All the topics were based on the themes of the English subject textbook units. Each student had to answer all the given prompts and provide enough examples to elaborate on these points. S/he was also asked to use in his/her powerpoint presentation enough illustrations, such as images and graphs, to support his/her ideas. Each presentation was three minutes long. At the end, each student was asked a couple of questions about the information s/he presented to test his/her understanding and comprehension of the topic. Moreover, the students were required to open the camera in order to make sure that the student himself/herself was presenting, and they were informed in advance that all the presentation sessions were recorded. Almost all the students were able to manage opening/closing their cameras and sharing their presentations smoothly. In addition, all necessary instructions

were announced and sent about 10 days before the presentation due date. The students were also shown two sample presentations as a template created by the teaching team to demonstrate to them the main points that the presentation had to include.

What lessons were learned? Language learning is not an easy task; it rather requires a prolonged period of study that involves hard work, commitment, patience, and of course, regular practice. Our online language course offered various multimedia tools that most students, as we live in the age of technology and social media, were interested in. Thus, most of the students were already intrinsically motivated to use online tools to search, and that was not a major problem for them. We found that some students stepped in to help weak students, and some suggested language learning channels and references. In other words, learning online fostered peer support and collaboration among our students. Also, it helped enhance students' autonomy as the students had to depend on themselves more in getting the materials, following up with the teachers, and searching for information. In such a learning environment, the teacher was present to monitor the students' performance and development as well as the understanding of the language being taught, yet the students themselves had to be actively engaged to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication that helped a lot in traditional classes. Their performance in the presentation sessions reflected their hard work in: getting accurate information from reliable sources, answering the given prompts with sentences/paragraphs that are mostly grammatically correct, and practicing giving the presenta-

tion with minimum pronunciation mistakes.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational processes all over the world, resulting in a shift from face-to-face classes to virtual online classes. Our online language course offered a variety of multimedia tools that most students, as we live in the age of technology and social media, were interested in. We need to guarantee the quality of this virtual English course by developing the appropriate quality standards for any online learning experience.

Footnotes

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