

Lost in translation? Found in ESP! Medical English making strides in Okinawa

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Abstract

April 1st, 2014 marked the beginning of the first Medical English Education Program to be established in Okinawa. The Okinawa Prefecture Northern Area Hospitals MEEP is currently based at Hokubu Hospital. The prefecture plans to make Okinawa a center for medical tourism. In order to realize this dream, it is vital for the doctors, nurses, medical technicians and other hospital staff to develop at least basic communicative competence skills in English because most patients/clients from overseas will know English, either as a first or second language, but will invariably not know Japanese.

Following comprehensive, in depth needs assessment and intensive review and evaluation of existing materials available in EMP (English for Medical Purposes), those relevant to the needs and appropriate for the skill levels of the personnel, are being selected and utilized. Additional materials continue to be created according to changing needs and improving skill levels.

Key words: EMP, medical tourism, communicative competence

I. Okinawa Prefecture MEEP Background

In 2012, the Okinawa Prefecture Northern Area Hospitals made the bold move of deciding to create the first Medical English Education Program in Okinawa. Their first step was to begin negotiations with the presenter, who studied medicine at the University of Vienna, Austria and is a recognized expert in t

The field of teaching English to speakers of other languages and doing teacher training in the field in several countries during the past 40 years.

Agreeing to become the director and first professor for the MEEP, which is currently based in Hokubu Hospital, Nago, Okinawa, the presenter began work on April 1st, 2014. Initial steps included the administration and evaluation of a detailed needs assessment for all the hospital staff (doctors, residents, interns, nurses, aides, medical technicians, et al.) relevant to their departments and areas of specialization. Primary respondents to the needs assessment have been doctors and A&E/E.R. nurses.

There followed intensive research, review and evaluation of existing EMP (English for Medical Purposes) materials which are currently available in order to ascertain which materials to utilize which would be most suitable for the needs and English language communicative skill levels of the many varied participants. The presenter has also been creating and developing many additional materials which seem to better suit the needs and skill levels of the participants than many of the existing materials.

Additional factors which have been taken into account in developing or selecting materials have been intercultural differences and cross-cultural sensitivity regarding not only language use but also nonverbal communication, including gestures, body language and even facial expressions.

As the program has progressed in the ensuing months, it has been undergoing many transformations in order to meet the changing needs and improving skill levels of the various medical staff members. Several of these materials are being shared during the poster presentation at the 2nd International Symposium of Innovative Teaching and Research in ESP, held February 14th, 2015 at the University of Electro-Communications, Tokyo, Japan. Additionally, interested parties may contact the presenter via the above email for samples of the newly-created materials.

II. Classes

A. Classes for A&E/E.R. nursing staff

Weekly classes are being held on a regular basis for the A&E/E.R. nurses on Thursday afternoons. Many of these classes involve role plays and dialogue practice of typical Q&A interactions between nurses, doctors and patients. We have also done activities, some from texts and others which have been developed by the presenter, to compare medical versus lay terminology, including many variations in the ways an illness or injury may be described.

Due to the random, unscheduled nature of arrivals of new A&E/E.R. patients, the nurses come to class when available. Also, it should be noted that, due to the location of Hokubu Hospital, where the MEEP is currently based, A&E/E.R. receives a greater number of foreign, non-Japanese-speaking patients. The northern area of the main island of Okinawa has the greatest concentration of resort hotels, which regularly attract overseas visitors from around the world. These visitors often have accidents or become ill while here and are brought to Hokubu Hospital. This makes it imperative that the A&E/E.R. staff be able to communicate in English.

B. Classes for hemodialysis nursing staff

On Fridays classes are held weekly for the hemodialysis technicians and nurses. Although they do not have many non-Japanese-speaking patients, they are eager to improve their basic conversation skills. Consequently, the classes consist primarily of oral communication activities, with some materials based on medical and lay terminology, just in case they treat a foreigner.

C. Classes for pediatricians

The English classes for the pediatricians (doctors, residents and interns) are held twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. The majority of the classes involve oral, written and power point case study presentations given by the participants on a rotating basis. These presentations are then followed by discussion of the contents, the format and the use of English. Following the class, written and power point presentations are emailed to the professor for final revision and returned to the presenter.

Additional activities in the classes include a variety of relevant pediatric case materials, role plays, etc. many of which are adapted from several texts, which are listed in the references following this brief manuscript. International guests who do not speak Japanese are periodically invited with their children to visit the class to participate in the role plays.

III. Individual tutorials

A. Doctors, residents, interns

These individuals come for advice or practice, either by prearranged appointment or just whenever they have some time during the regularly scheduled MEEP Office Hours. The majority of these individual sessions are to revise manuscripts for submission to international medical journals, power point presentations for international conferences and/or to practice and revise papers for presentation at international conferences.

Recently a few have come to practice role plays for the extremely demanding USMLE Step 2 CS test. Step 1 is the reading comprehension diagnostic skills written test, which is given in Tokyo. Step 2 is given at several testing centers in the USA and, due to the rigid nature of evaluation of communicative skills as well as cross-cultural sensitivity, etc., often must be retaken. Passing both steps enables young doctors to apply to do research or residency at a hospital in the USA for a year or two.

Additionally, a few doctors, who may not feel entirely comfortable in a classroom setting, come in to the MEEP office on an individual basis to work on improving their oral communication skills in a relaxed, non-threatening venue, thus increasing their confidence. Others come in during Office Hours, which are also listed on the MEEP schedule as “English Café”, in order to simply practice and maintain their oral communication skills while enjoying “a nice cuppa”. The MEEP door is always open and new visitors are always welcome.

B. Nurses, nurses' aides

A small number of nurses and nurses' aides drop in often, usually on an individual basis, to talk for an hour or so to practice oral communication skills and sometimes discuss how to field questions from foreign patients. This often leads to work on the differences and great variety in lay terminology (including English dialect differences) equivalents for medical terminology.

C. Office staff

Those individuals in the hospital offices who may have to deal directly with patients from overseas are beginning to drop in to the MEEP office to practice a little English. These staff members may deal with registering patients for admission to the hospital or the A&E/E.R. unit or with billing or insurance issues. Thus far there has been no move to create an actual class but interest seems to be building.

IV. Results and indications

Due to the Okinawa Prefecture government push to develop the prefecture as a viable site for medical tourism, personnel from many other hospitals in the northern and central areas of Okinawa have become actively aware of what is taking place at Hokubu Hospital, which is serving as the current center for this vanguard program implementing EMP. An increasing number of doctors and nurses at area hospitals are watching what is happening at Hokubu Hospital and some have asked about the possibility of beginning some classes at their hospitals or for their staff, but held at Hokubu Hospital. The details are still being discussed. In conjunction, the author of this manuscript is beginning to survey language educators with an interest in, and some knowledge of, medicine in anticipation of programs being established at more hospitals in Okinawa.

Thus, although still in the early stages, the growing interest in, and apparent success of, the MEEP at Hokubu Hospital bodes well for the plans of the prefecture to develop Okinawa as a medical tourism site. MEEP is being recognized more widely all the time as the necessary replacement for the current, highly impractical, practice of many hospitals hiring interpreters on a temporary basis. All too often the interpreters lack sufficient medical knowledge to adequately deal with doctor-patient interactions. If medical tourism becomes a reality in Okinawa, the use of these temporary interpreters will become not only impractical but virtually impossible due to the large number of foreign patients anticipated. To reiterate the title, "Lost in translation? Found in ESP!"...perhaps that should be EMP. Indeed, medical English is making strides in Okinawa.

Acknowledgements

The author of this manuscript would like to extend grateful thanks to Dr. Tetsuo Uehara, Director of Okinawa Prefecture Hokubu Hospital and Mr. Hideaki Nagano, Chief of Okinawa Prefecture Hokubu Hospital Administration for their support of this program. Additionally, sincere thanks are given to Dr. Takuhiro Moromizato, Dr. Tomoyo Hiratsuji, Dr. Naomi Sasaki and Ms. Kazumi Maeda, RN, all at Hokubu Hospital, for their ongoing support and advice in developing this program. Endless thanks are also given to Mr. Tahiro Uechi, Hokubu Hospital I.T. expert, for his invaluable assistance resolving PC/computer issues. Finally, although publishers' representatives and textbook distributors rarely are acknowledged, this author would like to thank the following individuals for their useful advice and text recommendations: Rika Kojima (Cengage Learning K.K.), Yoshiko Hashimoto (Oxford University Press), David Moser (Cambridge University Press) and Alastair Lamond (englishbooksjapan).

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**Proceedings of the 2nd International Symposium on
Innovative Teaching and Research in ESP, IGTEE UEC Tokyo 2015**

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