

## Academic difficulties for L2 medical students in Hungary

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### Abstract

The study discusses the first results of a survey on the academic competences of L2 medical students (DEOEC, University of Debrecen) from non-Hungarian countries, who pursue their undergraduate medical diploma courses in English. Of the four basic learning skills, the comprehensive study will focus on students' reading, writing and oral skills. Our research results, derived from the Study Skill Checklist (source: Cook Counselling Centre, Virginia Tech Research University) and interviews, tested reading and language skills and revealed that more than 70% of first year medical students have comprehension difficulties. The findings of focus group interviews suggest that the students encounter several difficulties in their interaction with peers and lecturers, have problems in intercultural communication and with cultural shock in a foreign environment. The present study seeks to set up the model of an effective mental-hygienic care system operated by lecturers and peer helpers.

**Keywords:** medical students, reading skills, comprehension, intercultural communication, mental-hygienic care

### Antecedents

The issue of mental hygienic care for foreign students was placed on the agenda of the Mental Hygienic Counselling Board, DEOEC, University of Debrecen in the autumn of 2009. An increasing number of cases suggested that foreign medical students had not only problems with integration into a completely unknown social and academic system, but also with their basic language skills.

### Presuppositions

Mental hygienic care might be essential and the inclusion of foreign students into Hungarian social and academic environment might need active support in the following areas:

1. the required level of *English language skills* (there is a significant gap between the level of students from English speaking and non-English speaking secondary schools)
2. *learning competency* in relation to and independent of academic skills (intellect, ability)
3. *adjustment* to the Code of Studies and Exams at the university (also to improve relationship with the Educational Office and with departments responsible for tutoring specific technical subjects)
4. *coping with stress* in relation to lifestyle and life situations, adjustment difficulties, crises as a result of being overburdened
  - a, coping with adjustment difficulties in the framework of mental hygienic advisory sessions
  - b, providing therapeutic, occasionally psychiatric treatments or interventions.

In the light of the above mentioned, the development of this complex model of care requires a comprehensive and descriptive investigation on foreign students, focusing on three key areas:

- A, individual and group interviews
- B, language tests (focusing on basic skills)
- C, targeted questionnaires and evaluation of their results.

### **Preliminary investigations**

Two preliminary investigations were carried out in the Institute of Behavioural Science, DEOEC Debrecen, one with focus groups and another based on questionnaires. Hungarian students were also asked to fill in various questionnaires to identify and later to adapt those questionnaires for foreign students which might comply with the objectives of our investigation.

Focus group interviews sought to explore the fears and expectations of first year foreign medical students, while the questionnaires the correlations between their language competence levels and learning skills. English language testing was performed by the Department of Technical Language Instruction and Communication Studies, Faculty of Agricultural and Engineering Sciences, University of Debrecen.

The following section of the present study will present the findings of the above preliminary examinations and provide recommendations to map out future investigations in line with key research objectives.

#### *Focus group interviews*

The investigation sought to obtain feedback about the fears and expectations of foreign students in relation to their academic studies and their stay in Hungary. Group interviews were carried out by moderators in several groups. The number of participants was approximately 60.

Students' expectations were divided into the six following categories in relation to:

1. education, learning etc. (e.g. quality education, graduating in 5 years)
2. the structure of education, access to information (e.g. information on the Code of Studies and Exams, the campus, the system of education in English language)
3. social life, free time (e.g. opportunities to meet Hungarian medical students, organization of common programs, leisure time and recreation activities etc.).
4. the municipality (public authorities) of Debrecen (e.g. information notes in streets in English, health care and administration staff should speak English etc.).
5. Hungarian culture, language, inhabitants (opportunities to gain in-depth information on culture, history and people in Hungary, access to Hungarian language courses)
6. students' independent way of life (how to live and cope with everyday problems on their own: cooking, washing, shopping etc.)

Students' fears have been assigned into the following 5 categories:

1. fears about learning (failure at exams, difficulties in understanding lectures and seminars in English etc.).
2. fears about a foreign language and an unknown culture (e.g. language difficulties in both Hungarian and English, (mutual) attitude problems between foreign and Hungarian students, potential exposure to insults etc.)
3. fears about their home countries and families (losing their close ties with family members, friends, their culture or might experience home sickness )
4. fears about their independent lifestyles: coping all alone, illnesses, loneliness, getting lost in the campus or in the town etc.).
5. fears about the years after graduation: how their (foreign) degrees will be judged in their home

countries, how they will find jobs and start careers.

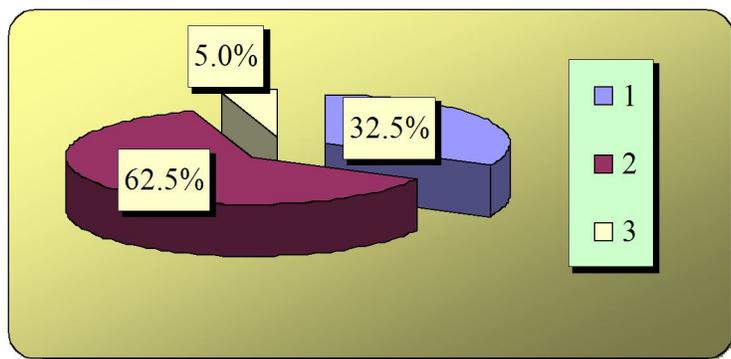
### *Investigation on the correlation of language level and learning skills*

The investigation included 120 people; 70% of them speak English as their second language. Out of the four key language skills, the initial part of our investigation studied students' academic reading skills by the *IELTS* (International English Language Testing System: *Academic Reading, Zoo conservation programs*, Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS 1. pp 24-27.) Cambridge University Press 2003).

Maximum score: 13 points, evaluation:

0-4 points	not acceptable (indicated with blue in the pie chart)
5-9 points	acceptable (indicated with purple in the pie chart)
10-13 points	compliant (indicated with white in the pie chart)

Distribution in terms of language skill level in the sample (N=120)



### Survey on the level of learning skills

Students' level of learning skills was assessed with the Study Skill Checklist (source: Cook Counselling Centre, Virginia Tech Research University). The questionnaire seeks to explore the following areas of student attitudes and habits:

- timetable
- concentration
- note making
- reading
- taking exams
- writing skills.

The questionnaire provides statements relating to the inadequate development level of a specific skill. Students were asked to evaluate these statements if those are true of them or not.

The percentage of students' answers is presented in the following table (N=120):

<i>Question Title</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
q1 I spend too much time studying for what I am learning.	38.33	61.67
q2 I usually spend hours cramming the night before an exam.	<b>50.83</b>	49.17
q3 If I spend as much time on my social activities as I want to, I don't have enough time left to study, or when I study enough, I don't have time for a social life.	<b>50.00</b>	50.00
q4 I usually try to study with the radio and TV turned on.	<b>30.83</b>	69.17
q5 I can't sit and study for long periods of time without becoming tired or distracted.	<b>51.67</b>	48.33
q6 I go to class, but I usually doodle, daydream, or fall asleep.	<b>30.83</b>	69.17
q7 My class notes are sometimes difficult to understand later.	35.83	64.17
q8 I usually seem to get the wrong material into my class notes.	<b>15.83</b>	84.17
q9 I don't review my class notes periodically throughout the semester in preparation for tests.	36.67	63.33
q10 When I get to the end of a chapter, I can't remember what I've just read.	<b>25.00</b>	75.00
q11 I don't know how to pick out what is important in the text.	<b>33.33</b>	66.67
q12 I can't keep up with my reading assignments, and then I have to cram the night before a test.	37.50	62.50
q13 I lose a lot of points on essay tests even	<b>51.67</b>	48.33

	when I know the material well.		
q14	I study enough for my test, but when I get there my mind goes blank.	27.50	72.50
q15	I often study in a haphazard, disorganized way under the threat of the next test.	35.83	64.17
q16	I often find myself getting lost in the details of reading and have trouble identifying the main ideas.	40.00	60.00
q17	I rarely change my reading speed in response to the difficulty level of the selection, or my familiarity with the content.	44.17	55.83
q18	I often wish that I could read faster.	62.50	37.50
q19	When my teachers assign papers I feel so overwhelmed that I can't get started.	31.67	68.33
q20	I usually write my papers the night before they are due.	37.50	62.50
q21	I can't seem to organize my thoughts into a paper that makes sense.	26.67	73.33

As the above table shows, most problems emerged in relation to fast reading (scanning), with making notes and with remembering reading materials.

**The percentage of students** who need help in relation to certain learning skills:

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Need help</i>	
	Yes	No
Timetable	45.83	54.17
Concentration	34.17	65.83
Active listening	25.00	75.00
Reading	70.00	30.00
Taking exams	33.33	66.67
Writing	29.17	70.83

N=120

70 % of the studied students need help with their reading skills, and the least problematic area is note-making (perhaps because students fail to make notes in classes!).

### Correlations of language and learning skills

The study of the correlation of students' learning techniques, level of English and the role of their "learning language" leads to conclude the following:

Students in the *weakest language level category* show relevant gender differences in *reading skills*: the percentage of girls who admit their difficulties is much higher than that of boys.

The *medium language category* also reveals considerable differences in relation to reading: four times more boys account of reading difficulties than girls.

The *weakest language level category* also presents gender differences in note-making skills: much higher percentage of boys report on difficulties and admit they need support than girls.

### Outlook

The Institute of Behavioural Sciences DEOEC , The Department of Technical Language Instruction and Communication Studies, Faculty of Agricultural and Engineering Sciences, and Department of Psychiatry DEOEC (University of Debrecen) will perform the investigation in cooperation. The findings will serve as a sound basis for setting up a system of mental hygienic care in our university, with respect to our students' special needs and local potentials.