

## Educational Forum

# Is English language as a medium of instruction a hurdle for first year MBBS teaching learning? Perceptions of students and teachers

Madhur M. Gupta<sup>1\*</sup>, Mahesh Deshmukh<sup>2</sup>, Suresh Chari<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biochemistry, NKP Salve Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India

<sup>2</sup>UG Student, NKP Salve Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India

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### \*Correspondence:

Dr. Madhur M. Gupta,

E-mail: [drmadhur20@rediffmail.com](mailto:drmadhur20@rediffmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Presently there is a linguistic dualism i.e. thinking in one language and studying in the other. Proficiency in English is the need of the hour. However, for some an abrupt change in the medium of language along with introduction of terminologies can become a potential barrier to academic success.

**Methods:** A questionnaire based study was carried out in 150 students and 25 teachers of first MBBS.

**Results:** Majority of the students and teachers considered that English as a medium of instruction is not a problem. They also opined that English should be retained as a medium of instruction since it is of global importance; use of regional /national language should be allowed since it will help in dealing with patients and thus better patient care.

**Conclusions:** Since English is the language of global importance, medical teachers should work together to find out a practical approach in addressing some of the problem areas faced by few medical students to help them perform better as an Indian medical graduate.

**Keywords:** English, Medical students, Perception

### INTRODUCTION

English has spread as the teaching language in the south Asian world in many fields of higher education especially in medical education. Countries like France and Arab nations have favoured teaching medicine in students' mother tongue.<sup>1,2</sup> The scenario is different in India. All medical colleges in India teach medicine entirely in English. The rationale for continuing to teach medicine in English focuses on the fact that English has been accepted in twentieth century as international language of science and medicine and much of the scientific, technological and academic information in the world is expressed in English.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, medical students or doctors attending international conferences, courses or clerkships abroad need to be proficient in the English

language. The entire curriculum of medical education in India is in English with many terms in Greek and Latin. This dominance of English has also paved the way for emergence of a new ESP branch (English for specific purposes) as EMP (English for medical purposes).<sup>4</sup>

A large number of students who enter the medical college in India have had their primary higher secondary school education in medium other than English. This sudden change in the language of instruction comes as a shock to many of them and they find it difficult to cope with this transition and grasp the subject of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry with ease as compared to their peer group who has had their school education in English medium.<sup>5</sup> This has prompted debate about advantages and disadvantages of studying in English.

With this in mind a qualitative questionnaire based study was carried out in students and teachers of first MBBS to assess their perception regarding English as a medium of instruction in medical education.

## METHODS

Two revalidated (10 items) 5-point likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) based questionnaire qualitative study was carried out in 150 students and 25 teachers of 1<sup>st</sup> MBBS respectively. After prior permission from IEC, informed consent was taken from the participants. 126 students and 25 teachers responded to the questionnaire. The students' questionnaire was also explained in the national language to help them give the correct picture. The questionnaire explored areas of English as a language: problems if any in understanding and as teaching the subjects, consequences and expectations about retaining the subject as a medium of instruction, utility in future with respect to dealing with patients. Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS software.

Questionnaire for students (strongly agree to strongly disagree):

- It is difficult to capture concepts as all instructions are given in English
- The language of the textbooks easy and understandable
- It difficult in converting thoughts into English language during examination / oral examination
- It is easier to communicate with the teacher in English to solve the difficulties
- The medium of instruction in a medical institute should also be in regional or national language
- Students should be allowed to use regional or national language to describe difficult medical terminologies
- English is an important language since it has global acceptance
- To become a good doctor, knowing regional or local language is more important than knowing English
- Knowing English will only help in learning medical subject but not important in dealing with patient
- English as a medium of instruction should be retained for medical education in all years.

Questionnaire for teachers (strongly agree to strongly disagree):

- It is easier to explain technical concepts in regional / national language
- Question papers must be in regional language along with English language
- Students are less expressive because they hesitate to respond in English
- There is no such problem regarding language of instruction is English in test examination

- To become a good doctor, knowing national language is more important than knowing English
- English will only help in learning medical subjects but not important in dealing with patient
- English as a medium of instruction should be retained for medical education in all years
- English language is important since it has global acceptance
- There must be a separate workshop for students for explanation of difficult terminologies in subject
- There must be a training workshop for teachers to know the process of explanation of concepts in regional/national language.

## RESULTS

As per the data, majority (69.8 %) of the students of I MBBS did not find English as a medium of instruction difficult. 46.8% opined that the language in the textbooks was easy and understandable, 42.37 % considered it easier to communicate with the teachers in English. 89% students also considered that English as a medium of instruction should be retained for medical education in all the years and 97% felt that English is an important language since it has global acceptance. However, 88% students believed knowing regional or local language will be more helpful in future practice.

Majority of the teachers of first MBBS found it easy to communicate and explain technical concepts with the students in regional (76%) and national language (88%). Though English has more global acceptance. 85% of the teachers agreed that students were less expressive in English, however the response of the students to written examination (90%) is not a problem in majority of the cases. 85.71% teachers were of the opinion that there should be a separate lecture for explanation of the difficult terminologies to the students and 68.2 % felt that a teacher training workshop should be conducted to understand the process of explaining difficult terminologies of English in the regional/national language.

## DISCUSSION

One of the prerequisite for professional improvement and progress is a sound knowledge of general and medical English. Quality of medical writing is a very important concern and has been linked with reading comprehension. Difficulty in reading makes the students more dependent on guidebooks. Language problem is said to have long term effects. Mirza et al in their study have demonstrated that it is not easy for the Asian students to convert the communication skills learnt in English into their native language.<sup>6</sup>

In present study, though majority of the students and teachers were comfortable with English as a medium of instruction, thought is to be given to the small percentage of students who find it difficult to understand the

concepts in English. This is because English plays an eminent role in higher education and academic courses all over the world. The seriousness of the issue is that almost all have chosen to come to this profession and are early learners, sincere and hardworking and just due to lack of proficiency of English language they largely remain under-confident in the class room and that leads to low self-image and under performance much below their actual potential.

As for the major language skills, speaking is the most important skill followed by listening, reading and writing respectively. Though knowledge of the national and regional language is important for dealing with patients, inculcating the skill of English as a language will help the students not only to understand the subjects but also help them cope with the future environment.

Current study demonstrates that though the students are studying in English, the minority also face problems in communicating in English or coping with English in other academic fields which is like the study of Eslami ZR.<sup>7</sup> Some of the students understand the urgency to learn English and in the right earnest set the ball rolling by start talking and writing in English. By sheer challenging work they overcome this hurdle sometimes because of correct association with English speaking friends.

Teachers regarded English language as important since is changing and developing and it forms the backbone of medical science. In academic settings, the principle that should be kept in mind is that language should be related to the purpose for which students are expected to use language after their studies.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Present study thus concludes that English as a medium of language is acceptable by the students and teachers. English as a medium of instruction should be retained for medical education. The students and teachers know the importance of this language for the future. However, the little few who find it difficult to understand and comprehend should be encouraged to speak English away from the medical school and should be offered additional inputs in the form of classes so that their skills are not lost and ultimately there is benefit to the health-care system. The teacher must understand the challenges faced

by some students when complex medical concepts are launched in English and alter their T-L methods accordingly. Course planners, English specialists and medical teachers can work together to find out a practical approach in addressing some of the problem areas faced by the medical students with English as medium of instruction.

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