

*An Account of Teaching English to Medical Students
During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Abstract

The first case of COVID-19 in Iran was officially reported by the Iranian Government in February 19, 2020. In order to control and prevent the infection, the Government closed all the universities and requested the people to stay at home. Consequently, Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS), like other universities, cancelled all the face-to-face classes in different Schools, and since the exact date for the resolution of this calamity could not be determined, TUMS decided to proceed the education flow through the available Learning Management System (LMS). As one of the departments of the university, TUMS Department of Foreign Languages devised a plan and prepared itself for the new situation. This paper is a narrative account of the transition. Through reading this narration as a case of educational solution in the preset particular situation, language professors can adopt and implement efficient strategies and approaches in their educational settings.

Keywords: English language teaching, COVID-19 pandemic, virtual learning, learning management system

Introduction (The Exposition): Teaching English at TUMS

Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS) is the oldest medical institute of higher education in Iran and the largest university of medical sciences in the country. Presently about 12,000 students (8 percent international) are studying in different fields of medical sciences at this university. The largest Schools of Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Rehabilitation, Allied Medical Sciences, Public Health, and Nursing and Midwifery in Iran together with about 1800 faculty members in different Schools, 14 teaching hospitals, and 99 research centers, have made Tehran University of Medical Sciences a known medical university in the Middle East [1] which admits around 3,000 students (national and international) every year [2].

All the newly-accepted students in the Bachelor's, M.D., D.D.S., and PharmD programs sit an English language placement examination during the first week of their studies. According to the scores obtained, students are placed in either a) English 101 (Prerequisite English I), b) English 102 (Prerequisite English II), c) general English for medical sciences, or d) specialized English for different majors. Students with a poor English language proficiency are also placed in Prerequisite English I. For these students, the Department informs the professors and instructors of the situation and these students study some extra materials under the supervision and with the help of the professors. Every year, there are students who have taken an internationally recognized test of English language proficiency (e.g. IELTS and TOEFL) and achieved a satisfactory score. After verification of their certificates by TUMS Department of Foreign Languages, they are exempt from the general English course and directly enter the specialized English courses for their majors. In addition to the undergraduate students, specialized English courses are offered to students in more than 10 Master's and Ph.D. programs as part of their curricula.

Case Presentation (The Rising Action): The Outbreak of COVID-19

The Spring semester of the academic year 2019-2020 witnessed an ordinary beginning like the previous semesters. TUMS welcomed students as in the previous semesters, and the cold Winter along with the beauty of the tree-lined streets leading to the University were accompanied by enthusiastic steps of students and professors. But not everything went well. The terrifying news of an outbreak was on the doorstep.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a global pandemic. As of August 7, 2021, a total of 200,840,180 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 4,265,903 deaths have been reported globally [3]. Reportedly

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it originally started in December 2019 in China, yet the first officially documented cases of the disease in Iran were announced on February 19, 2020. In order to control the spread rate of the infection in Iran, the Government decided to close all universities as part of a plan to encourage people to stay at home. As a result, TUMS had to cancel all the face-to-face classes, and as the exact date for the resolution of this calamity could not be determined, education had to continue virtually.

Discussion (The Resolution): When Education Benefits from Technology

In 2017, TUMS had already launched a Learning Management System (LMS), called NAVID, as an essential infrastructure for the establishment and development of e-learning. Now NAVID has different facilities for students and professors. Professors and students can see and monitor their current and previous courses, and as an important feature, it allows professors to receive different kinds of reports including all of their activities, students' collective and individual activities in each course, students' assignments, assessment of and feedback on the assignments, all the exams' reports, and the students' scores and performance in each exam. Professors upload the resources and materials for the students in the 'Resources and Content Section' where different types of resources and the prepared teaching materials can be uploaded in a variety of formats. In the 'Homework Section', professors can give the assignments and set a deadline for the submission of each assignment. Students can upload their assignments in different forms, namely audio, video, photo, or text, depending on the assignment and the instructions given by the professors. Here professors can give feedback to the students both individually and as a group.

NAVID allows the professors to design and take various kinds of tests and examinations. Moreover, the 'Conversation and Messages' Section allows students and professors to raise questions and discuss ideas. The 'Class Section' provides professors and students with the opportunity to arrange for synchronous sessions.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, in the Spring and Summer semesters of the academic year 2019-2020, and the Fall semester of the academic year 2020-2021, about 4,000 students participated in 183 classes which were administered through NAVID. In order to ensure the quality of education, four working groups were formed by the Department, and the part-time lecturers were asked to join the working groups based on the courses they taught. A full-time member of the faculty took on the responsibility of leading a working group. In these groups, part-time lecturers were asked to report in the written form (based on a certain format) at least two times during the semester to the head of each group. The lecturers could use these

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working groups to raise questions, discuss ideas with peers and also the head of the group, receive suggestions, and find solutions for the raised issues. The reports of the working groups were compiled by the head of the group and then submitted to the Chair of the Department of the Foreign Languages.

As teaching has been affected during the pandemic, so has the students' assessment [4]. Since the academic year 2018-2019, the written summative examinations of English language courses offered by TUMS Department of Foreign Languages were held in TUMS Test Center electronically, such that students attended the examination sessions in person and took the test online. In the first and second semesters of the academic year 2019-2020, however, the final examinations were held centrally and electronically, but virtually and remotely.

Together with the changes made in the way the examination was held, it was necessary to change the weights of different components of the student's total score. Accordingly, after considering different options, it was decided that the scoring scheme be revised, and the new scheme was (and still is) as follows: 60% for the student's performance and their assignments throughout the semester (i.e. continuous/formative assessment throughout the semester), 20% for the final written exam, and 20% for individual oral assessments of the student. In effect, the weight of this the summative test was minimized, and it was supplemented by 15-minutes individual oral assessments.

Teaching/Learning Points (The Dénouement): Bringing the Future into the Present

The COVID-19 can be considered as an educational blessing in disguise. At TUMS, for the English language courses, due to the pandemic, formative assessment, through documenting students' works throughout the semester in portfolios and assessing their progress, has assumed an increasing importance and now constitutes a considerable weight of students' total score. Alternative assessment methods based on a constructivist approach can offer several advantages for learning, such as increasing students' responsibility for self-reflection, raising students' motivation, emphasizing evaluation and discussion skills, and receiving constructive feedback from instructors and peers [5,6,7].

These days, a new era is being experienced and our lifestyles are affected by the COVID-19 outbreak [8], and admittedly, virtualization is now an integral part of teaching and learning. Policymakers', professors', students', and even parents' attitudes in dealing with the educational transition can and should change accordingly. Professors are now learning how to use the available technology properly. Students try to get used to the new situation. Parents now understand that their children's smart devices are not only for playing games and hanging out

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on the social media. Through this transition, we all learned that virtual and distance education can be efficient, can save us time and money, can increase cooperation, can amplify creativity and innovation, and can engage students further in their own learning.

This new occasion can be cherished and celebrated, and if properly planned and implemented, is an opportunity for both language professors and students. The education system must always be prepared for the unforeseen situations and conditions. Students and professors should take advantage of this opportunity to acquaint themselves with, and acquire the skills and competencies needed for, the new era. The pandemic seems to have opened new windows for teaching and learning. Bringing the future into the present and changing our views and attitudes towards virtual and distance education and moving in line with the technology-dependent world in the right direction can prove to be a blessing in disguise.

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