



Rhetorical structure and linguistic features of case presentations in case reports in Taiwanese and international medical journals

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A B S T R A C T

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The case presentation is the core section of a medical case report. Issues in the teaching of case report writing have recently been the subject of great interest in medical education, especially in the era of globalization. Given that Taiwanese medical students, residents and junior physicians are requested to write case reports in English and they may experience difficulty in language use, there is a need to investigate models. The purpose of this study is to identify the rhetorical structure of case presentations and to find the differences in the linguistic features of case presentations between international and Taiwanese medical journals. We conducted a hand-tagged move analysis of a corpus of 40 case presentations. The findings revealed that the rhetorical structure of case presentations is similar. However, differences emerged in the analysis of the linguistic features showing chronological order and the record of admission and these were perceived as the two major drawbacks in Taiwanese presentations. For medical and English teachers, these findings can be easily transformed into teaching materials. This study contributes to a model of interdisciplinary collaboration among professionals in English for Medical Purposes (EMP) and Medicine on college teaching and training of medical English writing.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Case report and case presentation

A case report in a medical journal functions as professional communication for clinical and academic purposes. The format of a case report usually encompasses five sections: (1) abstract, (2) introduction with a literature review and objectives, (3) description of the case, (4) discussion and conclusions, and (5) references (Cohen, 2006; DeBakey & DeBakey, 1983; McCarthy & Reilly, 2000; Taylor, 2005). The description of the case is usually called a case presentation or case history, and it is an integral and central section of a case report (Cohen, 2006; McCarthy & Reilly, 2000).

A case presentation can be more specifically defined as a “systematic documentation of a well-defined unit: usually the description of an episode of care for an individual...” (Domholdt, 2005, p. 148), and it comprises a “reflective, insightful and detailed description of clinical practice” (Rivett, Jones, & Higgs, 2008, p. 478). The case presentation in a case report is usually based on the detailed history in the medical record and summarizes pertinent positive or negative observations in a narrative

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form (DeBakey & DeBakey, 1983). The order of narration in a case presentation is similar to the framework of the case history in the medical record (Bickley & Szilagyi, 2009; McCarthy & Reilly, 2000; Orient, 2005; Willms & Lewis, 1991). It usually begins with an essential identification of the patient and then gives details about the history of the current situation. A summary of the physical exams and any test results that provide insight into the case are also included. Finally, the initial diagnosis and differential diagnosis, clinical course, management and follow-up are added.

In Taiwan, a non-English-speaking country, medical students are requested to write medical records in English, and junior physicians are also encouraged to submit case reports in English to local or international journals for different purposes including promotion. In the era of globalization, competency in writing medical records and case reports in English is playing an increasingly important role; hence, there is a great need to investigate models.

1.2. Teaching of case presentation in Taiwan

Before exploring how our medical students are taught to write case presentations in English, a brief introduction to the teaching of medical record writing in the course of clinical diagnosis may be helpful for readers unfamiliar with Taiwanese medical education. Traditionally, in the fourth year of a seven-year medical school program, there has been only a brief introduction to the general principles of medical record writing, usually lasting one–two hours. The formal instruction includes the framework and content of a medical record with recommended textbooks for references (Bickley & Szilagyi, 2009; Karytman, 1991; Orient, 2005; Willms & Lewis, 1991).

The process by which medical students and residents learn to write a case presentation is shown in Table 1. Firstly, medical students and residents have to interview patients to collect their clinical history, and our patients' first language is usually Mandarin Chinese or Taiwanese. To communicate well with them, students and residents always use everyday language to conduct clinical interviews. They usually follow the sequential steps of history-taking or outlines of history-taking, as well as physical examinations, which are ubiquitous in medical education (Bickley & Szilagyi, 2009; Karytman, 1991; Orient, 2005; Willms & Lewis, 1991;). Students and residents often take notes to help them compose a case history in the medical record thereafter (Bickley & Szilagyi, 2009). When they write medical records, they use general English to compose narratives. When students need to conduct oral case presentations, or when residents and junior physicians prepare a case report for publication, the original medical records are used as source material to write case presentations, in which medical terms may be adopted. The written case presentation should be a complete, accurate, precise and concise text. However, learning the skills of writing a case history completely and succinctly is difficult for many medical students, residents and even for junior physicians. Furthermore, the transformation from interview to medical record and case presentation is a highly complex process involving interactions between medical knowledge, cognitive management, and linguistic expression (Shi, Corcos, & Storey, 2001).

Since teaching and training of medical record writing during clerkship and residency are often inadequate, medical students lack sufficient opportunities to gain insight into the connection between obtained clinical information and the writing of medical records and case presentations. Unsurprisingly, writing the case presentation of a case report for publication becomes a painful challenge for residents and junior physicians. To fill the gap, Prosser, Burke, and Hobson (1997) suggested that medical curricula should include an organized, uniform and efficient method of teaching professional writing, and teaching case report writing has recently become a growing topic of interest in undergraduate medical education (Anwar, Kabir, Botchu, Khan, & Gogi, 2003). However, one of our challenges is that medical students and residents in Taiwan often have difficulty in using the appropriate English language in academic writing. Admittedly, they are required to achieve the high-intermediate level of the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) developed by The Language Training & Testing Center (LTTC)¹ before they graduate. According to the LTTC official website, an examinee who passes the high-intermediate test is one who “has a generally effective command of English; he/she is able to handle a broader range of topics, and although he/she makes mistakes, these do not significantly hinder his/her ability to communicate....” (2011). However, test-takers still may not be able to fully understand language that is syntactically complex, and they may not be able to apply their language ability to academic discussions or publications that require an advanced level of GEPT. In other words, while our medical students may be equipped with fluent and accurate language proficiency in everyday communication, there remains a gap between their everyday English and professional English.

Table 1

Process of conducting a written case presentation.

Process	Language	Form	Performer
Conducting interviews with patients	L1 (everyday language)	Interview in sequential steps	Students, residents
Writing medical records	L2 (general English)	Itemized form	Students, residents
Writing case presentations	L2 (academic English)	Summarized narrations	Students, residents, junior physicians

¹ LTTC involves scholars and TESOL experts in Taiwan forming a Testing Research Committee and a Testing Advisory Committee that is supported by Ministry of Education. GEPT is the English proficiency test, which contains four language skills modules with the goal of improving the general English proficiency level of Taiwanese learners.

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