

**INVESTIGATING THE NEEDS TO DEVELOP ENGLISH FOR
SPECIFIC PURPOSE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR ALLIED
HEALTH NOVICE**

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Abstract: The present study aimed to investigate the academic and professional English language communicative needs of allied health novice students in Malaysia. Language proficiency is crucial for doctors as they communicate with patients, peers, and other healthcare professionals. Although proficiency in English is a part of the admission requirement, there is a gap in the knowledge of medical students' perception. This study will also focus on the factors enhancing English language skills from the perspective of students to contribute towards the process of English for medical purposes curriculum development, especially in English communication. Data will be collected through focus group interviews with students.

Keywords: English for specific purposes, needs analysis, English for medical purposes

INTRODUCTION

Designing a curriculum which matches learner's needs and helps them meet the goals of a language course can best be achieved by starting with a comprehensive needs analysis. Needs analyses explore what will motivate learners to acquire language in the most efficient way. It also plays a particularly crucial role in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum development.

The study's purpose is to identify the specific academic English language needs of the students at a local university in its medical faculty. To design an appropriate ESL curriculum for these students, it is important to identify their needs by considering the points of view of the administrators, enrolled students, doctors, and content-area instructors. Students' needs that are not being met will be identified by making comparisons among the perceptions of all the parties. The results of this study can be crucial for designing the curriculum and developing materials or training not only for the medical students and instructors at the local university's medical faculty but also for other ESP or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course learners and instructors in ESL medical contexts worldwide.

Observing the plans of the Malaysian government to increase the quality of the national workforce and to encourage citizens to become specialized in health and medicine, it becomes clear that there is a great need for those who intend to work in these fields to be competent in English. Especially because the language is often the language of medical communication in Malaysian health facilities and hospitals. Panikar et al. (2022) note that English is the most frequently used language in Malaysian hospitals and medical centres, from the patients' files to their diagnosis and treatment, as well as at medical conferences.

For example, when a patient is about to have an operation under a multinational surgical team, the members may discuss the details of the operation and its probability of success or failure in English. They may find it easier for this discussion to take place in the language because most of the necessary medical terms are in English and have no exact national language equivalents. Hence, English is used by most if not all physicians and healthcare professionals as a means of communication, despite working in Malaysia. This reflects the need for all healthcare professionals to have a high level of proficiency in English since they deal with a large number of English-speaking employees in their workplaces.

English language courses have formed an obligatory part of the curricula of Malaysian medical and health colleges and institutions since their establishment. Although these ESP courses aim to equip students with the specific language skills needed for their academic studies and target careers, the question arises as to whether they do indeed address and meet these needs. The importance of needs in ESP courses is in no doubt. It could be argued that ESP promotes learners' motivation because it closely addresses their English language needs. Nhu (2019) confirms that identifying the needs of a student is among the first steps in ESP when creating a university course

or designing a workplace training programme. This can help teachers identify the actual skills that their learners will need for the activities they have to carry out in their academic or professional fields (Nicoras, et.al., 2022).

The purpose of this study is to investigate and develop an English Communication Medical Allied Students (ECMAS) module for medical allied novices and to train their communication skills during their studies and after in their career life. The needs analysis involves the process of identification and evaluation of needs. It is the first step that should be taken in order to successfully develop an effective training program (Bleich, 2018). It is a vital process that helps institutions to determine the specific training and training period they need to provide their employees for them to become productive and efficient (Morrison, 2020).

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do medical students in an ESL context perceive their academic English needs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, ESP has emerged as a subdivision of English language teaching to speakers of other languages. ESP is seen as an approach which gives importance to the learners' needs. It is done by attempting to provide them with the language they need for their academic and occupational requirements. Jubhari (2022) points out that ESP courses are triggered by the question 'why do learners need to learn English?' This leads to the findings of 10 learners' specific reasons which direct the decisions to be taken for ESP language teaching. According to Yousafzai et al. (2022), ESP is "English language instruction designed to meet the specific learning needs of a specific learner or group of learners within a specific time frame for which instruction in general English will not suffice" (p. 207).

Wang (2022) acknowledges ESP's tendency to evolve around work-related English needs with their definition of ESP as the teaching of English for "utilitarian purposes," referring to some occupational purposes. By the same token, Negova (2022) states "...an ESP course is purposeful and is aimed at the successful performance of occupational or educational roles. While general English learners study English for language mastery itself, or to pass exams if it is obligatory, ESP learners study English to carry out a particular role. This goal, together with the movement towards communicative teaching in recent decades, means that ESP practitioners try to develop language courses for people who need the communicative ability to use English for specific purposes in particular target situations (Zelter, 2022)

Communication is the act of interaction between two or more people either verbally or non-verbally. It is essential in every sphere of life, and it involves speaking, listening and writing, the tone of voice, facial expression, posture, eye contact, touch and gesture. Matthews et al. (2018) have stated that medical students struggle to communicate effectively in English. Medical students should be exposed to various aspects of communication in order for them to appreciate the need for excellent communication with and outside of patients themselves (e.g. family members and/or other professionals).

Khuram et al. (2023) further observe that there is an urgent need to build a student-friendly atmosphere by removing language communication hurdles. According to Kalola (2022), medical educators and students continue to report communication difficulties between healthcare professionals and language-incompatible patients, as well as difficulties in communication and language teaching and learning. Communication and language hurdles influence student engagement as well as student-patient interactions, hence the demand for efficient communication is growing. Communication among students is required when discussing case reports and scenarios and collecting an effective history from a patient (Khuram et al., 2023). Health professions educators have incorporated elements of universal norms into the medical curriculum to teach communication. However, medical students and physicians continue to struggle to communicate effectively in English.

As observed by Schäfer et al. (2023), misunderstanding due to a linguistic disability increases the risk of life-threatening misdiagnosis and disease management. It is also noted that when healthcare practitioners convey the intricacies of a diagnosis or treatment but fail to adequately articulate the seriousness of the danger, patients may disobey instructions or refuse potentially life-saving treatment. Recognising and prioritising patients' problems, exploring their thoughts, concerns, and expectations, and recognising and responding to emotions are important abilities in patient-centred communication.

Thus, incorporating an ESP programme that focuses on students' communication requirements is highly recommended. Communication has been considered critical in developing socially accountable healthcare experiences (Ismail et al., 2023). As such, it is extremely important in the health sector. Therefore, medical students should be able to communicate effectively, as the diagnosis of diseases and the prescription of drugs to patients depend on the communication capacity of medical students and doctors.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was chosen for this study via the focus group/interview method. In a qualitative study, two main characteristics which include a small sample size provide a detailed description and analysis of a research subject. This in turn has no limitations to the scope of the research and the nature of participants' responses (Collin & Hussey, 2021). This would subsequently create an opponent in participants' feedback and discussion on their participation. Participants were selected from the focus group. Only 4 participants were selected. The participants were from the preclinical phase (years 1-2) and clinical phase (years 3- 5) of a medical program in a public university's medical faculty.

FINDINGS

1. Communication Challenges
2. English Language as Professional Language
3. Learning Environment
4. Lapse of Time
5. Anxiety in Learning

1. Communication Challenges

The study established the finding that medical students experience communication challenges at work (during practicals at hospitals). The participants believed that these communication challenges are caused by various factors, which hinder them from performing well. The participants mentioned that:

“Yes, I face communication challenges at work. I think it is caused by my other tongue and sometimes I end up not correctly pronouncing some words and it makes me ashamed. This sometimes results in opting not to take part in discussions at work” (S-R2, 4/8/23)

“Yes, I do, it is very embarrassing especially when you are talking to senior medical doctors, and you end up stuttering because of the fear of not fully expressing your opinion again” (S-R3, 4/8/23)

Based on the data reported, the English language is perceived to be equally important as a professional language. Medical students communicate internally in English with patients, peers and lecturers and externally through events such as community support, conferences, and extracurricular activities.

2. English Language as Professional Language

The students shared that speaking in English made them appear more professional, particularly when they represented the university in external events.

“It's also something to do with the image because like if we do if we are representing our university and going to a different public university in Malaysia for example. So if we since we are carrying the name of our university, if we converse in English, I would say that it will bring a better image to my university”. hmm *Umm...* [*Laughs*]. I think many people will think like this. (S-R1, 4/8/23)

“Writing a simple e-mail will require us to type in English and like if you are sending it to a lecturer, obviously you want it to be improper like structure, *uh* like grammar and umm everything”. (S-R2, 4/8/23)

It can be concluded that they all agree the English language is mainly status-conscious as they are on a medical campus and with medical students. They do worry about their reputation with their friends, lecturers and peers when it comes to speaking English.

3. Learning Environment

As the students are multilingual with varied cultural backgrounds and nationalities, it is necessary to explore university support in mastering the English language. Students felt that the university learning environment with English as a medium of instruction and extracurricular activities helped in strengthening their command of English. There were obvious improvements in English language proficiency for peers who had initially struggled with the English language after the first semester of the medical programme.

“We no speaking English at house”... [Laughs] “(S-R3, 4/8/23)

“At first I was quite struggling to adapt with English speaking environment. I don’t speak English at home” (S-R4, 4/8/23)

“I tried to improve myself with a lot of things like, I watch English movies, I listened to English songs, learn from peer, friend, YouTube. And of course, I tried to gain the courage to speak in English with my friends...but sometime I think is my place...no..no..no.. environment” (S-R1, 4/8/23)

In a nutshell, it is noted that the students watch and listen to English movies, read entertainment materials, use online learning tools and register for English classes outside the university. However, they also found that environments also play into factors and are equally vital to them.

4. Lapse of Time

Furthermore, the students felt that limitations in English language impacted their learning as they needed more time and effort to comprehend the resources.

“They might actually be speed lagging behind learning like learning the syllabus, I mean, they have to be or they have to put like extra effort to learn the same thing that we learned or we have to learn because maybe it’s not in the language that they are comfortable in...” (S-R2,4/8/23)

“For medical student should have batter English course, that can help in our profession. I mean special English course for medic...hmmm...umm...batter.” (S- R3,4/8/23)

In conclusion, it was discovered that assessments such as assignments, presentations, reports and the Objective Structured Clinical Examinations were carried out in English. Hence, having a poor command of English had an impact on their assessments in situations where examiners were not clear about what was presented.

5. Anxiety in Learning

Lack of English proficiency impeded students’ day to day learning. Some students were afraid to ask their lecturers when they are unsure of the content taught or participated less in problem-based learning discussions.

“...eventually when you go out into the working world, when you do literature reviews, when you review other people’s research, when you do your own research, eventually you’re going to have to reach that level of like academic, that sort of academic standard that is required of the community when they do research projects, and you do literature reviews.” “For me usage of English might not be very important in a community level, but for professional level like from colleagues to colleagues, we still need to use English or professionalism and to discuss anything about medical, I think it’s very important to speak in English” (S-R1, 4/8/23)

Assumed from the students’ information obtained from the interview, it is possible to conclude that they were concerned about the process of acquiring communication in English skills for a variety of reasons. One such concern includes their level of confidence which caused them to be reluctant to speak in front of colleagues, peers or lecturers. One of the issues that the students expressed concern about was the status-conscious factor as they are in a professional setting. This student also further mentioned time lapse. That is, giving them more time and a better design in English as a second language courses will lead them with a fantastic chance to learn something completely better.

DISCUSSION

From the findings, medical students in a multilingual setting have acknowledged the importance of English language in the medical program, with the themes of Communication Challenges, English Language as a

Professional Language, Learning Environment, Lapse of Time and Anxiety in Learning. The medical students identified that they learn the English language through social media, peers and friends. Vygotsky puts forward the concept of Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) in which learners' level of potential development is determined through adults' guidance or collaborative work with more capable peers (Pathan et al., 2018). Through guided participation, learning and development take place in social contacts between learners and teachers (Allman, 2020). As in the context of this study, medical students learn English language skills through social media peers in guided activity. Evidence also shows that natura emphasizes the importance and accuracy of students' communication skills and vocabulary in the English language.

Moreover, students who perceived English language skills to be important acknowledge that they learnt the skill through peers during participation in other activities in social medical contexts. In the sociocultural theory, Vygotsky emphasized the commanding role of social experience on human development. It is also understood that the framework of thought is developed through social interaction which is internalized through the cultural practice in which the learner is placed (Dang & Cross, 2023). Learners develop thought and knowledge within the same community practice as learning in a second language contacts it's a collaborative achievement (Alharbi, 2023).

To this effect, evidence shows that multilingual students who acquire English language skills experience the assimilation process through peer learning. This correlates with a study conducted among university students from a multilingual background in other countries on the perceived impact of extracurricular activities on foreign language environments. The study discovered that the English language is used in a professional setting among other healthcare professionals and for patient care. Vygotsky proposed that mediation (a form of tool) is often used by learners to resolve a problem or achieve a target. Hence, language is considered a significant tool for learners to develop the knowledge that they require. In this context, medical students indicate the impact of English language proficiency in the medical profession (Pathan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, medical students indicate the impact of English language proficiency in the medical profession as a tool. As a tool, it is not only used for communication in patient care, peers, or other health professionals but helps them develop personally and professionally as well. This opens the opportunity to further their medical education abroad and participation in medical research. However, even though students recognized the importance of the English language in this aspect, they also identified the challenges faced in acquiring the language skill required and the subsequent impact that may occur from the lack of English proficiency. Therefore, students have employed various strategies such as getting peer assistance or enrolling in external language courses as there was no ESP in the university.

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