

## 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 health care 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 to the process of English for medical purpose 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 will match learners' needs and help 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 most efficiently. Needs analyses are crucial in English for Specific Purposes curriculum development. The study identifies students' specific academic English language needs at a local university's medical faculty in Malaysia. It is important to identify their needs by considering the points of view of the administrators, enrolled students, doctors, and content-area instructors to design an appropriate ESL curriculum for these students. The students' unachieved needs will be identified by comparing 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 medical students and instructors at a local university's medical faculty in Malaysia but also for other ESP or EAP course learners and instructors in ESL medical contexts worldwide.

Observing the plans of the Malaysia 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, especially in terms of English, which is often the language of medical communication in Malaysia 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 patient's file to his/her 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 whose members are discussing the details of the operation and its probability of success or failure, they find it easier for this discussion to take place in English 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, although they live and work in Malaysia. This reflects the need for all healthcare professionals to have high proficiency in English since they deal with numerous English-speaking employees in their workplaces.

English language courses have formed an obligatory part of Malaysian medical and health colleges and institutions' curricula 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 address and meet these needs. There is no doubt about the importance of needs in ESP courses. It could be argued that ESP promotes learners' motivation because it closely addresses their English language needs. NHU (2019) confirms that 'the first step in ESP is to identify learner's specific needs when creating a university course or designing a workplace training programme. This can help teachers identify the skills their learners will need for the activities they have to carry out in their academic or professional fields (Nicas et al., 2022).

The study's purpose is to investigate and develop an English Communication Medical Allied Students (ECMAS) module for medical allied novice 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

taken to successfully develop an effective training program (Bleich, 2018). It is a vital process that helps institutions determine the specific training and training period they need to provide their employees to become productive and efficient (Morrison, 2020).

This research aims to answer the following question:

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

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a subdivision of English language teaching to speakers of other languages. ESP is an approach which gives importance to the learners' needs, 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?', leading to the answer that 10 learners' specific reasons for learning are what 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 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, verbally or non-verbally. Communication is essential in every sphere of life, and it involves speaking, listening, writing, voice tone, 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 to appreciate the need for excellent communication with and outside of the patient (for example, family members and other professionals) in healthcare. Khuram et al. (2023) further observe 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 and difficulties in communication and language teaching and learning. Communication and language hurdles influence student engagement and 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 still struggle to communicate effectively in English.

Thus, incorporating an English for Specific Purpose programme that focuses on students' communication requirements is highly recommended. Communication has been considered critical in developing socially accountable healthcare Ismaiel et al. (2023). Communication 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.

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 notes 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.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was chosen for this study via the focus group/interview method. A qualitative study, two main characteristics include a small sample size, provides a detailed description and analysis of a research subject with no limitations to the scope of the research and the nature of participants' responses (Collin & Hussey, 2021) and creates 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 (Medical Faculty).

## FINDINGS

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

### *Communication Challenges*

The study also established how medical students experience communication challenges at work (during practicals at hospitals). The participants believed that these communication challenges are caused by various factors, and they 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)

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

### *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 on English language are mainly status conscious as they are in medical campus and medical students. They do worry about their repo with their friends, lecturers and peer when come to speaking English.

### *Learning Environment*

As students were multilingual with varied cultural backgrounds and nationalities, it was 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 was obvious improvement in English language proficiency for peers who had initially struggled with English language after the first semester of the medical programme.

*"We no speaking English at house" ...laugh* "(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, the students watched and listened to English movies and read entertainment materials, and online learning tools and registered for English classes outside the university. They found environments also play an equally vital to them.

### ***Lapse of Time***

Furthermore, 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 better English course, that can help in our profession. I mean special English course for medic...hmmm...umm...batter.” (S- R3,4/8/23)*

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

### ***Anxiety in Learning***

Lack of English proficiency impeded students’ day-to-day learning. Some students were afraid to ask their lecturers when 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)*

From the interview, it is possible to conclude that the medical students were concerned about acquiring communication in English skills for various reasons, including their confidence, as they're reluctant to speak in front of colleagues, peers, or lecturers. One of the issues that the students expressed concern about was status-consciousness as they are in the professional sector. This student also mentioned time-lapse by giving them more time and a better design of English as a Second Language courses. It will give them a fantastic chance to learn something completely better.

## **DISCUSSION**

From the findings, medical students in a multilingual setting have acknowledged the importance of the English language in the medical program, with the themes namely Communication Challenges, English Language as a Professional Language, Learning Environment, Lapse of Time and Anxiety. The medical students identified that they learn the English language scale 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 contact 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 social medicine activities. In the sociocultural theory, Vygotsky emphasized the commanding role of social experience on human development and 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 a second language is a collaborative achievement (Allharbi, 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. English is used in a professional setting among other healthcare professionals and for patient care. Vygotsky proposes 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 within 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. English, as a tool, is not only used for communication during patient care, peers, and other health professionals but also helps them in personal and professional development. This development opens opportunities to further their medical education abroad and participate in medical research. However, even though the students recognize the importance of the English language in this aspect, they identify the challenges faced in acquiring the language skill required and the subsequent impact that may occur from the lack of English proficiency. Therefore, the students have employed various strategies, namely getting peer assistance or enrolling in external language courses to cope with challenges as there was no English for specific purposes in the university.

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