

NEEDS ANALYSIS OF FIRST YEAR MEDICAL BACHELORS' OPINIONS OF ESP COURSE DESIGN

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Abstract: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) dates back to the 1960s, when there appeared a great need of finding a common language worldwide for all manner of communication, business, cultural, scientific, etc in a postwar environment. The need for such a linguistic and pedagogical approach was required in view of the new postwar reality as the US emerged as the new domineering superpower and the disintegration of the British Empire, with the latter spawning in the wake of its collapse many nations using English as a second language. By its nature ESP is an eclectic methodology initially borrowing from other domains of linguistic study theories and practices and combining them to suit its specific needs. Gradually, ESP has carved out its own research space and has become a fully-fledged area of study. A focal point in ESP is the so-called “needs analysis”, i.e. analysis of what the participants in the process of language acquisition demand and desire. Thus, in its practical aspect, ESP always starts with a preliminary research into the purposes, needs and activities for which English is needed. In this train of thought, course design is of paramount importance, as it reflects ESP rationale as well as its methodology. The current paper is also focused on course design and targets a specific research area aiming at discovering students’ preconceptions of what an ESP course should look like. It is in line with similar research in other countries where English is taught both as ESP and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It differs though from all other studies in its area of analysis – medical students, and its methodology employing specific tools such as questionnaires. For that purpose, there were devised two such questionnaires, one at the beginning of the course of study and one at its end. The sample constituted of students from the bachelor degree in their first year at the Medical College at the Medical University of Plovdiv. After a diagnostic test had been carried out, all students were proven to be at B1 or B2 levels. The course consisted of 60 school hours in two semesters and was held in the 2021/2022 school year. The questions from both questionnaires target general appreciation reception and special targeted issues regarding specialized language alike. As a whole, the questionnaires showed that the students in their majority harbor high hopes of learning English for their profession in the course. It can be concluded on the basis of the results that the students express their satisfaction with the overall course design which to a great extent had met their expectations. On the other hand, the students’ reception of the modern means of study, i.e. the interactive methods, together with the new format dealing with assigning more homework and project involvement was positive in broad terms. Another important corollary from the students’ opinions expressed in the surveys, is that they consider the length of the course insufficient. The ESP course design will be changed in accordance with the received results from the survey. It has to be borne in mind though, that any complete makeover or radical change should be performed in the aftermath of more surveys delving into much greater detail.

Keywords: ESP, survey, medical students, needs analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is one of the most established approaches to English language teaching (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998). It originated in the 1960s and is arguably the most influential of all language teaching methods in academic and workplace settings (Belcher, 2004). The need for such an approach has been dictated by the expansion of the English language, which turns out to be the new lingua franca on the international stage (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), be it in commerce, economics, science, medicine, or in academic discourse. This new situation in which English is perhaps the only internationally recognized language of communication requires a different attitude towards it. ESP is an eclectic approach that uses the most valuable, successful and proven ideas from other theories and practices, combining them into a whole. The method includes elements of communicative language learning, problem-based language learning, project-based learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and many other teaching approaches, but also has its own unique characteristics, including a focus on the learner, in close association with specialized subjects and an emphasis on collaboration in both planning and teaching. Defining clear and specific needs is perhaps what distinguishes ESP most clearly from General English teaching (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). This is so because learners of ESP are mostly professionals or students at university whose aims in acquiring the language are connected with communicating a set of professional skills and performing particular profession-related activities. An ESP course is therefore developed based on an assessment of purposes and needs and the activities for which English is needed. ESP is normally goal-directed (Robinson, 1991), so ESP courses develop from a needs analysis, which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that

students have to do through the medium of English (Niemiec, 2017; Nimasari, 2018). ESP courses are generally constrained by a limited time period in which certain objectives have to be achieved, and are taught learners in 'homogeneous classes' in terms of the work or specialist studies that the former are involved in.

The key stage in ESP is needs analysis. It is the corner stone of this approach and leads to a focused course (Hafner 7 Miller, 2018). According to Robinson (2001) "needs analysis is generally regarded as critical to ESP, although ESP is by no means the only educational enterprise which makes use of it". Strevens (1980) suggests that needs analysis is a necessary first step for specific purposes language teaching; it is more concerned with the nature of scientific discourse. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue, "any language course should be based on needs analysis". In his turn, Hamp-Lyons (2001) opines that needs analysis is fundamental component to an ESP/EAP approach in term of course design. An interesting issue, within the domain of needs analysis and one that merits a more thorough research is finding out the opinions of the learners about the objectives of a course. This recipient-oriented perspective can help course designers glean the expectations of the learners.

Worldwide, there have been studies galore in ESP research over the recent years. Momtazur Rahman (2015) and Delbio and Ilankumaran (2018) delve into the theoretical underpinnings and practical aspects from an abstract standpoint, while a host of scholars have studied various aspects of ESP in different scholarly fields such as Dharmawardene and Wijewardene (2022), who have performed research in an Asian setting; Niemiec (2017), analysing learners' expectations, Nimasari (2018), who researched EAP in the field of information technology, Saykova (2021) who investigated the impact of technology on students' motivation.

Aim of the article: To determine students' aims in learning specialized English in an academic medical setting so that the respective course design is improved.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of the study were involved all students in their first year at the Medical College at the Medical University in Plovdiv at level B1/B2. These were approximately half of all the students enrolled, and were selected after a Diagnostic test. The remaining students were at levels A1/A2 and did not constitute part of the sample. The number of respondents was 59 across all eight specialties at the Medical College out of 124 altogether, which is \approx 48%. – The sample included 12 respondents from the specialty of "Assistant –physiotherapist", 12 from "Dental technician", 6 from "Radiographer", 9 from "Assistant – pharmacist", 4 from "Public Health Inspector", 4 from "Dietary Instructor", 4 from "Cosmetology", 8 from "Medical Laboratory technician". The survey was conducted in the 2021/2022 school year. Two questionnaires of the Likert type (Jamieson, 2004) were conducted – one at base and one at end of course. Due to its limited number of words, this paper does not account for any specific differences according to specialty, gender, or any other detailed information. The questions in the questionnaires are as follows:

Questions at base of course:

1. Do you think you can learn a lot of specialized healthcare English in this course?
2. Do you think you need to improve your grammar to communicate better in a healthcare setting?
3. Do you think you need more specialized vocabulary to communicate better in a healthcare setting?
4. Do you think the use of new interactive methods and the Internet will facilitate the course greater than traditional methods?
5. Do you think more speaking in the classroom will benefit more the skills you can acquire in English?
6. Do you think exercises in grammar and vocabulary should be done more as homework to make room for more discussions in class?
7. Do you think more project work will make the course more effective?

Questions at end of course:

1. Do you think you have learned sufficient amount of specialized English in the course to help you improve your career prospects?
2. Do you think you have mastered grammar enough to feel confident in using English in your professional area?
3. Do you think the interactive methods used in the course have been effective in making learning easier and more pleasant?
4. Do you think you can speak better now than at the beginning of the course?
5. Do you think the project work done on the course helped you acquire more specific knowledge in the desired area?
6. Do you think the course in this format is good enough to learn English for your profession?

7. Do you think you should have more knowledge in healthcare provision to learn specialized English more effectively?
8. If you had the chance, would you sign up for another course in English, as a continuation of this one?

In terms of course design, the course constituted 60 seminar hours over two semesters of equal number of hours. All tests and homework assignments were done at home via Moodle. The students were required to present one project assignment alone or together in small groups of up to three. The mainframe of study was “English for healthcare professionals: A Coursebook for medical bachelors”. All additional materials were provided via Moodle including grammar and lexical exercises. The classroom activities involved the use of an interactive board and multimedia. One- third of all time was occupied by discussions on topics from various sources, including the main textbook. Students were evaluated on the basis of three criteria – 25% weightage – classroom activity, 25% current tests, 50% final test, done during the summer session.

3. RESULTS

Tables 1 and 2 present the results obtained from the survey.

Table 1. Response results from the questions at base:

Question	Fully agree %	Partly agree %	Neither agree or disagree %	Partly disagree %	Completely disagree %
Q1	56	15	8	14	7
Q2	87	4	-	3	6
Q3	91	5	-	-	3
Q4	34	23	25	15	3
Q5	87	3	5	8	2
Q6	23	24	5	22	26
Q7	15	12	20	25	28

As can be clearly observed from Table 1, the students in their majority harbor high hopes of learning English for their profession in the course. Only a few students (four in particular) strongly disfavor the idea that the course could be beneficial to their knowledge of specialized English. A substantial number of respondents consider the improvement of their grammar as a key prerequisite to improving their level of the language, while in the students’ understanding speaking is an essential skill that has to be honed in the classroom. With regard to the methods of learning, including in that matter homework assignments (Q4, Q6, Q7), the students are obviously unconvinced as far as their expediency is concerned. Of particular note is the percentage related to learning grammar and vocabulary as homework assignment with more students strongly disagreeing than those approving the approach.

Table 2. Response results from the questions at end of course:

Question	Fully agree %	Partly agree %	Neither agree or disagree %	Partly disagree %	Completely disagree %
Q1	56	15	8	14	7
Q2	87	4	-	3	6
Q3	91	5	-	-	3
Q4	34	23	25	15	3
Q5	87	3	5	8	2
Q6	23	24	5	22	26
Q7	15	12	20	25	28

The questionnaire done at end of course could be divided into three areas. The first one deals with the students’ attitudes to the success of acquiring the foreign language during the course (Q2, Q4) and a possible follow-up (Q8). The response to these questions is not uniform; while the students admit a significant improvement in their overall knowledge of the language and especially in straightening out their grammar, they still consider speaking to be their ‘Achilles heel’. The second area targets the respondents’ opinions of the chosen methods of teaching involved (Q3, Q5). As a whole, their attitude to the employed teaching approaches is positive, as is shown in the numbers from Table 1. Points of debate could be triggered concerning Q5 and project work as a whole. The third area covered by the questionnaire attends to the general issue of the course rationale (Q1, Q6, Q7). Obviously the students strongly approve of the suitability of the course, being in the opinion at the same time that a better result would have been achieved should the course had happened at a later stage of their studies at the Medical College.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Although probably too general in scope, the survey raises a number of issues regarding the students' needs in view of ESP. First, it can be concluded on the basis of the results that the students express their satisfaction with the overall course design which to a great extent had met their expectations. A more detailed analysis would show that despite a lower percentage on grammar improvement with respect to the students' expectations, the latter do not consider that a handicap in their progress in learning the language. On the other hand, the students' reception of the modern means of study, ie. the interactive methods, together with the new format dealing with assigning more homework and project involvement was positive in broad terms. That is especially encouraging regarding their attitudes to project work, which seems to be effective in boosting their motivation for studying. Speaking remains a key weakness of the course' design and implementation, as the results from the survey suggest that the students were still unsure of their progress in that skill. An important point to be accounted for is the students' understanding that ESP should be taught at a later stage, in acknowledgement of the fact that probably medical knowledge present in the course syllabus but not taught in their specialized subjects in Bulgarian, posed a challenge for them. Another important corollary from the students' opinions expressed in the surveys, is that they consider the length of the course insufficient. That comes to show among other things that the students seriously consider mastering their command of English as a key priority to further their career prospects.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The conducted survey elaborated in the paper did achieve its pre-set aim. The ESP course design will be changed in accordance with the discussion points illuminated above. It has to be borne in mind though, that any complete makeover or radical change should be performed in the aftermath of more surveys delving into much greater detail. What is in need are analyses of level of exam success, gender, years of graduation – whether the enrolled students come fresh from secondary school or have some work experience, etc. Also, the scope and length of research sampling can be extended, including second and third year students' satisfaction of the elective courses in ESP and EAP. Nevertheless, the mere fact that such analyses, as the presented one in this paper, are a positive fact that ensures future enhancements in ESP approaches.

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