

ENGLISH FOR FUTURE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN SAUDI ARABIA: A NEEDS ANALYSIS PROPOSAL

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Abstract. *Literature suggests that a thorough language needs analysis is very essential for curriculum development the goal of which is to help healthcare learners to be proficient and successful in English in both their academic study and professional workplace. Although English language course designers spend large amount of money in developing their curriculum, they often neglect the process of a needs analysis which is considered to be an important first step when planning any English language course. Unfortunately, English language courses taught at the Health Sciences Colleges in Saudi Arabia, too, have been developed without carrying out a needs analysis. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance and necessity of identifying the academic and professional English language needs of students of Health Sciences Colleges in Saudi Arabia. It also proposes a needs analysis framework for the development of ESP course at these colleges.*

Key words: *English language needs analysis, ESP, EAP, Health Sciences Colleges, Saudi Arabia*

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is often used in both medical studies and workplaces such as hospitals and medical clinics. This implies that the English language plays an important role in both studying medical/health sciences and the level of quality of medical/healthcare services offered to the public. That is, having limited English proficiency might lower the quality of the healthcare and demotivate students to complete their academic studies. Therefore, designing effective English language course should be a priority issue in preparing and training future healthcare professionals in order to ensure proper healthcare.

Recognizing the value and importance of English language in the healthcare field, many countries, among them Saudi Arabia, offer both intensive and extensive English language courses for those who intend to be healthcare workers. Example of these is English language courses offered at the Health Sciences Colleges (HSCs) in Saudi Arabia. These HSCs are fully sponsored and controlled by the Ministry of Health. The total number of HSCs is 30, 15 for males and 15 for females. According to the Ministry of Health (2006, 223), the major objective behind establishing HSCs is to qualify the graduates of the general secondary schools and the secondary health institutes to work in hospitals, local clinics and other medical/health centers as healthcare assistants (nurses, dental assistants, pharmacists, radiology, lab technicians and so on).

Despite the fact that they had spent a good deal of time studying English at intermediate and secondary school and one year at the HSCs, the level of English fluency and accuracy for many HSCs graduates in Saudi had long been unsatisfactory for the

Ministry of Health. That is, most Saudi health workers lack competence in communicating in English at their workplaces (Alhossaynee 2006, 34). Thereafter, the Ministry of Health attempted to develop the English language curriculum at the HSCs in order to train its future employees in work-related language and communication skills. Unfortunately, such curriculum was not developed on the basis of an analysis of the English language and learning needs of HSCs students. The problem of students' underachievement as well as the HSCs graduates' unsatisfactory level of proficiency in English could be ascribed to a possible mismatch between the students' needs, interests and aims and the current English language course. Therefore, the current English language curriculum used at the HSCs needs to be reformed in accordance with the specific language needs in the healthcare field that the students will be involved in.

This paper attempts to present a needs analysis proposal that could be used in order to understand the HSCs students' specific linguistic and learning needs, wants and interests. It starts with a description of the English language course at these HSCs. The importance of both conducting a needs analysis and determining students' learning and target needs is discussed in the section that follows. Then, the needs analysis proposal is presented and explained. Finally, some implications are provided in the conclusion.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP

Wilkins (1976, 55) observes that 'the first step in the construction of any language syllabus or course is to define objective. Wherever possible these will be based on an analysis of the needs of the learners and these needs, in turn, will be expressed in terms of the particular types of communication in which the learner will need to engage'. This suggests that needs analysis is closely linked to curriculum design particularly that of an ESP course. As noted by Brown (1995, 36), needs analysis refers to 'the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation'. According to many ESP scholars, the two main purposes of needs analysis are to describe the real-world settings in which students will be required to use English and to utilize the resulting knowledge as a basis for change in the targeted contexts (Ferris 1998, 290). Therefore, any ESP course that is not based on a careful needs analysis will fail to relate the language taught to the real life language used in students' envisaged academic or occupational setting (Garden 2005, 183). As this implies, needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP courses (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998, 122).

Scholars offer different classifications of needs: *real and ideal* (De Escorcía 1985, 229), *perceived and felt* (Berwick 1989, 55), *objective and subjective* (Brindely 1989, 65; Van Avermaet and Gysen 2006, 20); in addition, *there are target needs (necessities, lacks and wants)* and *learning needs (learning strategies and constraints)* (Hutchinson and Waters 1987, 54). This suggests that *needs* is an umbrella term that covers many different aspects. Most of these aspects are explained in Table 1 below. In the light of these aspects, Needs Analysis in ESP includes identifying:

- A. Professional information about the learners: the tasks and activities learners are/will be using English for- *target situation analysis and objective analysis*;
- B. Personal information about the learners: factors which may affect the way they learn such as previous learning experiences, cultural information, reasons for attending the course and expectations of it, attitudes to English- *wants, means and subjective needs*;
- C. English language learning about the learners: what their current skills and language use are - *present situation analysis* - which allows us to assess (D);
- D. The learners' lacks: the gap between (C) and (A) - *lacks*;
- E. Language learning information: effective ways of learning the skills and language in (D) - *learning needs*;
- F. Professional communication information about (A): knowing how language and skill are used in the target situation - *linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, genre analysis*;
- G. What is wanted from the course;
- H. Information about the environment in which the course will be run - *means analysis*. (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998: 125).

Table 1 Classification and Definitions of Needs

Classifications of Needs	Definitions
Real Needs	Those which are realized in most cases towards the end of learners' careers.
Ideal Needs	Those which refer to the ideal situation or state learners are expected or supposed to be in (De Escorcica 1985, 229).
Perceived Needs	Those which are derived from facts and from what can be verified.
Felt Needs	Those which are closely related to the cognitive and effective factors (e.g. personality, confidence, attitudes, learners' wants and expectations) (Berwick 1989, 55).
Objective Needs	Those which are derived by outsiders (not learners) from different kinds of factual information about learners and their experience with using the language.
Subjective Needs	Those which are derived from insiders and related to cognitive and effective factors. They are based on learners' own statements (Van Avermaet and Gysen 2006, 20).
Target Needs	(a) Necessities: the demands of the target situation; (b) Lacks: the gap between the target proficiency and the existing proficiency of learners; (c) Wants: learners' view of what their own needs are.
Learning Needs	(a) Learning Strategies: learners' preferred strategies for progressing from where they are to where they want to go; (b) Constraints: external factors (e.g. staff, time, attitudes, material aids) (Hutchinson and Waters 1987, 54; West 1994, 4).

Comprehensive needs analysis may therefore include target situation analysis, learning situation analysis and present situation analysis. These approaches of needs analysis can complement each other.

A variety of sources and tools can be used in conducting needs analysis. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, 132), Long (2005, 24-40), Richards (2001, 59) and West (1994, 7), the main sources are:

- Learners
- Former students
- People working or studying in the field
- Employers
- ESP teachers
- Documents relevant to the field
- The main data tools for needs analysis are:
 - Questionnaire surveys
 - Interviews
 - Observations
 - Tests
 - Documents analysis
 - Previous research

Long (2005, 28) suggests triangulating both sources and methods (using multiple sources and methods) for identifying learners' needs to help validate the collected data and to increase the credibility of interpreting those data.

4. NEEDS ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of evaluating the current ESP course taught at the HSCs and identifying students' language and learning needs, a needs analysis framework is proposed. This framework consists of five phases.

Phase I is to identify the purpose of the analysis (what information to collect and why), its informants and data collection methods. This phase consists of two steps. The first phase involves identification of those informants and data collection methods in relation to the learning situation needs, whereas the second step concerns those of the target situation needs. There are different multiple informants for each step. Also, different methods for collecting information from those informants can be used (e.g. questionnaires, interviews and document analysis). Triangulation by informants and methods is of paramount importance in needs analysis to have different viewpoints and data on each aspect of the ESP course and the needs.

Phase II, once the purpose, the informants and methods of needs analysis are identified, the next phase is to collect the required data on both the learning and target needs. As Richards (2001, 63) notes, it is important to make sure that only data that will be used is collected.

Phase III, this phase concerns organizing, analyzing and reporting the data collected. A decision has to be made on the statistical techniques that will be used before data collection. Evans and St John (1998, 138) suggest several statistical techniques that can be useful in analyzing the data collected.

Phase IV, after analyzing data, there should be a clear picture of learning and target needs. This phase involves making use of the analyzed data. ‘Needs will have to be prioritized because not all of them may be practical to address in a language program’ and ‘decisions will therefore have to be made concerning which of the needs are critical, which are important, and which are merely desirable’ (Richards 2001, 65-66).

Phase V, in this phase ideas, suggestions and recommendations on how to develop the ESP course will have to be implemented..

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to propose a needs analysis framework for developing the current ESP course offered at the HSCs, Saudi Arabia. An analysis of students’ learning and language needs, interests, abilities and difficulties is necessary in order to know what they like to do with the language, what kind of language they already know, what kind of language they lack and what kind of problems they encounter. Also, an analysis of what and how the language is used in the healthcare field is important. This will, in turn, help ESP course designers identify the kind of language learners will need to learn to be successful in their future professions. The result will be of great value for establishing effective objectives, goals, syllabus and teaching methodologies which can constitute the major part of the ESP curriculum at the HSCs in particular and any other similar ESP curriculum in general.

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