



# Some suggestions for modelling a contemporary medical English course design based on need analysis<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In English for Specific Purposes course design is based on a thorough need analysis of language learners. This paper focuses on the linguistic needs of medical students and it also identifies the areas perceived as the most problematic and the most important for their future careers. English for Medical Purposes is content- and context-based and an interdisciplinary approach in cooperation with medical teachers may greatly contribute to the students' professional development.

The present study focuses on data obtained from questionnaires and interviews with 62 medical students, 43 medical doctors and 24 teaching assistants. In order to design a relevant course it is necessary not only to analyze the current students learning needs but also to determine what their future needs would be and that was done by including the medical doctors and the teaching staff.

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## 1. Introduction

In our modern world, English has acquired the status of international language and it has become a major channel for global communication. It is the most commonly used language in communication worldwide even among the speakers who usually do not share the same native language. It has been estimated that more than two thirds of the world's professionals and scientists read in English, about 80% of online communication and online information is in English (Molhim, 2011; Crystal, 1995; Popa, 2013). As a consequence, proficiency in English has become imperative in the globalized, interconnected world where employment mobility is one of the defining elements of our contemporary identity (Popa, 2013).

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) language education must be related to professional interests of learners and they should be able to perceive the link between learning a language and their career aspirations and professional lives (Voght and Grosse, 1998). For example, in English for Medical Purposes (EMP), students will need instruction in highly specialized medical terminology, topics and medical discourse, technical language used in professional communication, doctor–patient interactions, features of academic medical context or dealing with medical literature in English. Traditional language classrooms are not appropriate for learners who need to learn a foreign language for

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specific, professional purposes. Language curricula therefore have to adapt to changes and one of the most important tools for determining how the change should be conducted is needs analysis whose role cannot be underestimated (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987a,b; Robinson, 1991; Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2001).

Our present paper deals with EMP course design based on medical students' needs analysis. It is a university course for adult learners, in our case, first and second year medical students at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Nis, Serbia. One of the basic requirements for attending is knowledge of General English on at least pre-intermediate level (i.e. at least B1 level according to the Common European Reference for Language scale). It is context- and content-based and related to the language of medicine and medical practice. Medical students are learning English because they will need to use it in professional and academic careers. The learner is at the centre of the educational process and for each generation of students the course is based on needs analysis in order to specify as precisely as possible what it is that they will be doing with the English language, i.e. their aims and purposes for learning.

After graduation, medical students have several options referring to their professional careers. Namely, some of them will be employed locally as doctors, some will remain at the Faculty as teaching staff. Recently, another option has become increasingly available which refers to the mentioned employment mobility. Thus, a growing number of medical students will seek jobs abroad after graduation and this has put even more emphasis on the need for proficiency in medical English.

The aim of the study was to identify the medical students' perceived needs in terms professional language use, determine the perceived level of linguistic skills and determine deficiencies.

## 2. Methods and materials

The participants involved in the study were second year medical students (62) whose English classes are mandatory, 43 medical doctors who represent the professional level of language use, and 24 postgraduate students who remain at the Faculty of Medicine as teaching assistants and represent the academic level of language use. The total number of participants in the study was 129.

The requirement for participation in this research with respect to students was that they had attended English lessons in the first year. It should be pointed out that English is an optional subject in the first year and mandatory for second year medical students. They come from different high schools (mostly medical and general high schools). Concerning the other two groups, only those who graded their English language knowledge on at least pre-intermediate level (B1) were taken into consideration for this research (according to Common European Reference for Languages scale). Therefore, the level of English language proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced, according to the participants' self-assessment.

The research was conducted in 2014. A blend of qualitative and quantitative approach was used in the research. Methodological triangulation (Long, 2005) of data was adjusted to the research and conducted in order to obtain more reliable information. Data were collected through written questionnaires with closed-ended questions, in oral interviews and through observation. The data obtained through questionnaires were presented in percentages. Information gathered from the interviews and observations was grouped into similar categories with common characteristics or themes.

### 2.1. Research material

*Questionnaire.* The main part of the research was conducted through a written questionnaire which consisted of 5 parts with 11 closed-ended questions. The introductory part dealt with the participants' current level of English, which served as the present situation analysis. The next part about the significance of English during medical studies and/or professional career shed light on the attitude towards learning English and awareness of its importance for professional improvement. The areas where English is most commonly used, the third part in the questionnaire, can be used as an indicator of the possible language needs. It, therefore, enables both present and target situation analysis and can offer a solid ground for course material development and course design.

The next thematic unit of the questionnaire analyzed the weakest and strongest linguistic skills in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening. This is followed by the areas of language that the participants find most problematic and need more practice and instruction. In this section, they could choose among grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and translation. In the final part, the participants were asked to choose only one skill that they believe to be the most important for their medical studies/practice and professional career.

*Interviews.* Considering the limitations of questionnaires, first of all closed-ended questions with set answers which may greatly limit a respondent, it is believed that need analysis should be supplemented by direct communication with the

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