

Post Graduate ESP Curriculum: Reading and Writing Needs

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Abstract- Assessing learners' needs is an integral part of any curriculum and course design, namely English for specific purposes (ESP), syllabus design, materials development, teaching methods and testing issues. Critical approach to needs analysis, which is a relatively recent approach, acknowledges the rights of different stakeholders including teachers, students and administrators in the process of needs analysis. However, there has been no formal need analysis for syllabus design at postgraduate level in Medical Universities affiliated to the Ministry of Health in Iran. This study, conducted in 2011, was an attempt to assess the reading and writing needs of postgraduate students in ESP courses on the basis of critical approach to needs analysis. The study population consisted of 67 people: 56 postgraduate students, 5 heads of departments, 5 ESP instructors and 1 executive manager at the Ministry of Health in Iran. Ethical and demographic forms, needs analysis questionnaires, and a form of semi-structured interview were the instruments of the study. According to the findings, there was a discrepancy between students' and instructors' perception of learners' needs and the assumed needs appearing in the syllabi prescribed by the Ministry of Health in Iran. This study showed that a call for critical needs analysis in which the rights of different stakeholders are acknowledged is necessary for meeting the requirements of any ESP classes especially at postgraduate level where the instructors and learners are fully aware of learners' needs.

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Introduction

Meeting the needs of graduate students is a great challenge as academic requirements call for the mastery of certain skills namely critical thinking, argumentation, research conduction, writing and reading skills. However, there are some discrepancies between the skills the students are taught on one hand and their own perceptions of the skills on the other. The situation is further complicated when they fail to match the skills they were taught with the demands of their work settings.

Graduate students, in particular, need reading skills to grasp the ideas conveyed by authors, manage their search strategies, save time, make optimal use of the information extracted from different sources, appraise experts' writings and conduct peer review (1-3). In addition, these students need writing skills to produce knowledge and extend their findings and ideas, obtained locally. Simmons (2002) noted that good writing stems from competency in reading skills leading to a better understanding of written materials while the failure to compose an acceptable piece of writing appear to be due to inadequate practice in reading skills (4). Indeed,

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competency in writing skills to fulfill the requirements of the postgraduate program, for example writing M.A. thesis, PhD dissertation, research proposals, essays and abstracts, is a necessity for graduate students who are primarily trained to meet the needs of academia. Thus, the provision of syllabi in which learning and practicing highly advanced skills of reading and writing are included should be the primary objective of any ESP courses.

Since the 1960s, ESP courses have been based on learners' needs, but the way these needs are measured and analyzed depends on the approach taken by the course developers. The first influential model of needs analysis, proposed by John Munby, was called Communication Needs Processor Model (5). This model provided a list of linguistic features of the target language use situation accompanied by a profile of learners. This model was criticized for being too mechanistic, for paying little attention to the perception and role of learners and for dismissing the obstacles and problems of model implementation (6-9). Criticism on Munby's model led to a change from ends to means and from a purely objective view to gradually more subjective models. Learning-centered approach (7) focused on how to get to the target situation, how language items, skills and strategies are used and what was needed for an effective communication. Similar to Munby's model (5), this approach did not engage the learners in the process of deciding about their own needs. On the ground of the shortcomings of the former approaches to needs analysis, a new approach, the learner-centered, reflecting a more humanistic view and acknowledging the rights of learners, emerged. The proponents of this approach consider students as self-directed and autonomous learners whose needs, wants, expectations and motivations should be considered in the process of decision making (8). Although this approach has a more humanistic view than the former ones, it fails to provide a satisfactory course design which meets the varying demands of stakeholders other than learners.

The main problem with the aforementioned approaches seems to be in their research method which is descriptive in nature and leaves the researcher with a long list of linguistic elements (5), requirements of a learning situation (7), or simply learners' needs (8). Furthermore, these approaches merely focus on one group of stakeholders i.e., either the learners or organizations. However, a more recent approach to research and needs analysis is the critical approach which " is not merely descriptive; rather, it aims also to

be transformative" (10). The advocates of critical approach to needs analysis assume a social/educational hierarchy in which those involved in the process of curriculum design does not have equal power. Being aware of this inequality, they try to empower those at the bottom of the hierarchy and change the existing situation by engaging different stakeholders in the process of decision making about the needs. They include sociopolitical issues in the process of needs analysis. This means encouraging students to examine issues affecting their academic lives and future career. There are several studies (11-15) on needs analysis in which the researchers have tried to tackle the critical approach to needs analysis. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the vocational English needs of hotel maids. There was found to be an unbalanced distribution of power in designing the curriculum of hotel maids; thus, it was concluded that a wider range of voices should be included in the needs analysis (14). In a similar study, a critical approach to needs analysis was applied and it was found that both faculties and students perceived English as being very important in academic and professional work of medical students. As both students and faculties expressed a demand for a basic freshman year English course with listening and more than one year of studying English, the researcher recommended some changes in the syllabus (15). Eslami (2010) explored students' and instructors' perceptions of learners' needs to English in Iran and concluded that lack of a systematic needs analysis was responsible for the discrepancy between their perceptions (11). Flowerdew (2005) employed an eclectic needs analysis and combined critical approach with the traditional approach to needs analysis (13). Although the most comprehensive study was conducted by Benesch who focused on immigrant students in the U.S. colleges, their needs and perceptions might be different from the learners of other countries (16).

In spite of the increasing concern about critical approach to needs analysis and its role in ESP curriculum design, there have been a few research studies in the context of ESP specifically in developing countries like Iran. The present study was the first attempt to conduct a needs analysis for the purpose of syllabus design with a critical approach at the post graduate level in Iran. The study aimed at identifying the needs of graduate students in reading and writing by including both learners' and teachers' viewpoints for proposing a new syllabus for ESP courses at postgraduate levels at the School of Health Management and Information Sciences of Iran University of Medical Sciences (IUMS).

Materials and Methods

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted at postgraduate levels at the School of Health Management and Information Sciences of IUMS between 2009 and 2011. The population of the study consisted of all the students of Medical Records, Librarianship, Health Economics, Biostatistics, Hospital Management and Health Information Management, English instructors, Heads of departments and administrators at the Ministry of Health. Due to small population size, there was no sampling and the whole population of available postgraduate students (N=56), English instructors (N=5), heads of departments (N=5) and 1 available administrator at the Ministry of Health were included in the study. The policy makers in the council of Educational Revolution (the top of hierarchy of policy making) were not available and thus were excluded from the study.

Three questionnaires formed the instruments of the study: ethical considerations (consent form), demographic information and needs analysis. The questionnaire on needs analysis included 12 questions on reading and ten questions on writing skills. There were also seven questions asking participants about the people whom they thought were the best options for determining their academic English needs. A questionnaire based on six point Likert Scale was developed by the researchers on the basis of literature review, and interviews with two faculty members and two graduate students. The development and the revision of the first draft which was piloted with the first semester graduate students took three months. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured by using test-retest (.82). The content and face validity was confirmed by two faculty members of Educational Development Center.

The final form was administered among the graduate students entering the university in the second semester of the academic year of 2011. The questionnaires were distributed by the researchers who also provided necessary information to the participants. The collected data were analyzed by SPSS using descriptive statistics and Spearman's Correlation statistics. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by the researchers and then analyzed for further interpretation.

Results

The results of the study were classified into two main categories of writing and reading skills which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. It should also

be mentioned that the results for discussion included only "high" and "very high" on the response scale.

The overall view of the results showed that majority of the respondents (87.5%) reported an extensive need to reading skills in their study time while 74.6 % of them believed that they would use these skills to a great extent at work time. Table 1 show that about two thirds of the respondents (68.5%) perceived reading technical texts as an important academic need while 70.9 % of them believed that it was a necessity at work time. As for reading English newspapers and non-scientific journals 61.1% of students stated a high and very high need to these skills during their study time, and 49.1% at their work time. 59.3% of the participants perceived translation as an important skill used at study time and 69.1% for work time. A similar percentage of the respondents considered reading technical journals important at study time and 78.2% at work time.

Table 1. The need to reading skills as perceived by the students at study and work settings by percentage

Reading skills	At study time	At work time
Technical texts	68.5%	70.9%
Lecture notes and pamphlets	48.2%	41.9%
Exam materials	46.3%	45.4%
Technical Journals	59.3%	78.2%
English newspapers and non-scientific journals	61.1%	49.1%
Translation	59.3%	69.1%
Using dictionaries	57.4%	54.5%
Reading official letters	48.2%	43.6%
Reading instructions	51.9%	56.4%
Reading tables and charts	57.4%	67.3%

The general analysis of the results indicated that 61.6% of students considered mastery over writing skills important for their academic career while this percentage decreased to 46.2% for their work setting. Electronic letter writing in English was important for 74.5% of the students while it seemed to be important for 82.7% of them at work. More than two thirds of the respondents (72.6%) considered translation skills as an important writing skill at study time and 71.1% at work time. For students who answered the questionnaire, 71.1% viewed report writing in English important for their study and 67.3% for their work. Paper writing showed to be important for 68.7% of the respondents at study time and for 73.6% at work.

In the next step, Spearman non-parametric correlation was used to assess the relationship between students' needs to different reading skills at educational and occupational settings. The findings (Table 3) showed that there was a direct and significant

correlation between students' needs at study time and at work place to these reading skills: reading English texts, technical texts, instructions in the form of pamphlets, English formal letters, English newspapers and journals, letters and electronic messages, translation, mono-lingual English dictionary and reading tables and graphs in English.

Table 2. The need to writing skills as perceived by the students to be high or very high at study and work time by percentage

Writing skills	At study time	At work time
Writing abstracts	60.3%	66.1%
Summary writing	61.1%	60.0%
Outline writing	58.5%	50.0%
Paper writing	68.7%	73.6%
Report writing	71.1%	67.3%
Electronic letter writing in English	74.5%	82.7%
Translation	72.6%	71.1%
Doing their assignment	66.7%	--
Answering exam questions	49.0%	--

Table 3. Correlation between occupational and educational needs of students in relation to reading skill

Elements	Correlation coefficient	P-Value
Texts	r = 0.75	P<0.001
Technical books	r = 0.39	P = 0.004
Lecturer notes	r = 0.44	P = 0.001
Exam materials	r = 0.47	P<0.001
Letters and electronic documents	r = 0.38	P< 0.005
Translation	r = 0.27	P = 0.046
Dictionaries	r = 0.606	P< 0.001
Official letters	r = 0.570	P< 0.001
Reading tables and graphs	r = 0.432	P = 0.001

Spearman non-parametric correlation was applied to assess the relationship between students' needs to different writing skills at educational and occupational settings. The results of the study (Table 4) showed that there was a direct and significant correlation between students' needs at study time and at work place to these writing skills: summarizing, reporting, electronic letter writing, translation, and preparing lectures.

Table 4. Correlation between occupational and educational needs of students in relation to writing skill

Elements	Spearman Correlation Coefficient	P-Value
Summarizing	r = 0.503	P< 0.001
Reporting	r = 0.308	P= 0.030
Electronic letter writing	r = 0.350	P= 0.013
Translation	r = 0.379	P= 0.007
Preparing lectures	r = 0.454	P= 0.001

The results of the interview showed that there was a general agreement between ESP instructors(N:5) in the IUMS Department of Foreign Languages that mastery over writing was the most important need of postgraduate students while reading, speaking and listening skills appeared to come in the next rank. In addition, they believed that for writing a comprehensive syllabus based on the actual needs of the learners, a committee of experts should conduct a study in which learners' perceptions, ideas and expectations as well as instructors' are asked and assessed.

On the other hand, the heads of departments of subject matter disciplines (N:5) believed that English language instructors and post graduate students could not have any roles in needs analysis process. From their point of view, reading skill was the most important skill for postgraduate students, and that it was exclusively the job of heads of departments, they believed, to decide about the learners' educational needs.

Conducting the interview with educational policy makers(N:1) at the Ministry of Health also revealed that they did not have any idea about needs analysis process

and they identified students' needs conventionally by delegating decision makings on students' needs to the heads of departments of subject matter disciplines.

Discussion

The relatively high percentage for the needs to reading technical texts, journals, newspaper, dictionary and graphs and tables suggest that English is a medium of communication for exchanging ideas, understanding others' ideas and performing educational and occupational tasks. This finding also shows the chief role of teaching reading as a basis for improving writing skills as was noted by Simmons (4).

The needs to writing skills as perceived by the students show that because of globalization and extension of high technologies, in particular internet, the students need to improve the skills such as paper writing for conference presentation, report and email writing for international and personal communication more than ever.

According to the findings the de- motivation of the learners and inefficient teaching in ESP classes might

stem from ignoring learners' perceived needs and expectations by authorities and decision makers at postgraduate schools and Ministry of Health and Medical Education. This is in line with the finding of Eslami (11), who found lack of a systematic needs analysis.

The finding that the students were highly interested in taking advantage of studying abroad may be due to students' belief that what they learn in educational settings inside the country is not sufficient and relevant to their expectations; consequently, they need to improve their English language ability outside the country and through sabbatical leave.

The present study also showed that students' had a strong belief in the role of learners and instructors in the process of needs analysis performed for writing curricula in all educational departments. This implies that students are aware that in close connection with their instructors, they could make perfect teams to analyze educational needs.

It is recommended that a team consisting of instructors from educational departments, including English language department and students come to some agreements about educational needs, wants, expectations and desires about ESP curriculum of post graduate students. Considering the increased need to cyber space and broad communication among people through electronic channels, it is recommended that a special attention be given to electronic communication skills. Furthermore, instructors of English language should share and exchange ideas about students' needs with instructors of subject matter disciplines, and other stakeholders to satisfy the educational needs of the students. The findings of this study could be used for the betterment of present syllabi and thereby improvement of materials and test designs on the basis of a systematic needs analysis.

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