

# ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: IMPLICATIONS IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

Sajida Zaki

English language has come a long way from being the native language establishing identity of a nation, to its status raised to that of lingua franca for many countries to maintain social and economic links.<sup>1</sup> With globalization and technological revolutions its status is further elevated to be the international means of communication for the residents of this global village.

The change in the purpose for language learning and use with the changing needs of the learners created a shift in English language learning contexts too. Earlier, it was assumed that people wanted to learn English because they were interested in the culture of the native speakers of English or they wanted to study the literature produced in this language. A closer look at the linguistic needs of the learner and the status of English language has exploded this myth. Today, learners are learning English as they require, using it as a tool for education, work and life.<sup>2</sup> The scope of English language teaching-learning has enlarged immensely with an increasing focus on learning the genre of English language and in the way that will enable learners to draw benefits in their academic, professional and personal domains of functioning.

A number of internal and external developments and pressures are posing challenges to professional institutions and academia of higher learning to reconsider the place of English in their educational decision-making. Central questions regarding the students' language needs and skills are being revisited. The recent psychographic and demographic changes of the language learners have ushered in a wave for the need to develop English language skills to medical personnel to communicate effectively with their contemporaries across the globe and also with their patients.<sup>4</sup> This generic English for Specific Purposes (ESP), teaching-learning has become an essential component of curriculum at medical colleges and universities world over; and discussions and investigations about the need for formal English language teaching and its modalities are ensued in our local context too.

The 'Language Needs Analysis' approach needs to be pursued in order to identify closely the language needs of the learners at various turning points during their professional training and later in their careers. The needs assessment, then, be carefully worked upon by the language experts and curriculum developers to make the language courses and programmes meaningful.

Language learning is not to be quantified in terms of number of years one has studied a language, or the courses one has completed, or the tests and exams one has cleared; but it is

estimated in terms of an individual's (professional's) mastery of communicative competence which is to be exhibited in all aspects of life where English is the medium or tool for communication. English language learners need to reflect language competence in effectively communicating in all formal and informal contexts for all academic, personal, social or professional purposes. Evaluating language learners on this criterion "communicative competence" leaves much to be desired and done; and this gap is filled up by offering ESP courses at professional and higher educational institutes and, sometimes, even by the organizations employing these professionals.

Lacking communicative competence affects, on the one hand, creative and critical thinking, problem-solving and interpersonal skills; and on the other, leaves individuals with inaccurate and invalid perceptions, values and arguments. Considering the limitations imposed on the members of any profession and also the benefits they can draw, English language learning is increasingly becoming a priority issue for educational policymakers and administrators. However, some obstacles are making it difficult to achieve this desired language competence and these are to be overcome since these can be the possible barrier hindering one's language proficiency. Among these, the most common, crucial and conclusive barriers are: the attitude of the learners, absence of a suitable curriculum and methodology, the general environment and lack of language experts. Nevertheless, premier Pakistani institutes in the field of business administration, health and engineering sciences have taken initiatives to incorporate English language courses suitable to their fields.

Medical doctors and researchers need to learn English not only because it is the medium of teaching and learning but because it is the medium of publishing their research work. Scientific communications are required to be crisp and to-the-point without redundancy that becomes an eloquent prose, yet, grammatical accuracy and phraseology still forms an important component of archival evaluations of a research communication at all levels - be it a research paper, a dissertation or a thesis. The international and national rating criteria of the scholarly status of a prestigious biomedical journal also include an attention to the linguistic aspects of the published articles.

Medical graduates are traditionally taught to write case histories during all levels of training - undergraduate, internship and postgraduate residency. This supposedly forms the basis of coherent communication in the context of medical needs for management, evaluation, follow-up and often reporting purpose. Some fields such as radiology and pathology require explicit descriptive reporting. Yet, owing to

---

**Correspondence:** Dr. Sajida Zaki, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Management, NED University of Engg. and Technology, Karachi. E-mail: drzaki@neduet.edu.pk

Received: October 10, 2006; accepted December 07, 2006.

the lack of non-uniform media of education, prior to entry to the Medical College or University, particularly with regard to linguistic aspect, writing coherent English to effectively report a unique case or research information remains a predicament for many, even for those with postgraduate qualifications, obtained from native English-speaking countries.

It is apt for educators to examine and adjust teaching programmes and pedagogical materials in order to effectively meet the changing realities that occur within societies in personal or professional spheres of it's people.

Medical curriculum designers should also take an initiative to overcome this barrier and introduce ESP courses, tailored to the needs of medical graduates, teachers and researchers.

## REFERENCES

1. Seidlhofer B. Closing a conceptual gap: the case for a description of English as a lingua franca. *Int J Applied Linguistics* 2001; **11**: 133-58.
2. Hull G, (edi). *Changing work changing workers: critical perspectives on language, literacy and skills*. Albany, NY: State Uni New York Press, 1997.
3. Byrnes H. Perspectives. *Modern Language J* 2006; **90**: 244-66.
4. Lepetit D, Cichocki W. Teaching language to future health professionals: a needs assessment study. *Modern Language J* 2002; **86**: 384-96.

