

FOREIGN LANGUAGES NEEDS AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS OF HANOI MEDICAL UNIVERSITY – A SURVEY REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Methods: In a cross-sectional survey utilizing a self-reported structured questionnaire, a sample of 516 postgraduate students from Hanoi Medical University agreed to be enrolled.

Results: All participants see the necessity of learning foreign languages, especially English, in the medical field. Moreover, 90.7% of students thought that it was of utmost necessity for them to be involved in the revision course before their final foreign language exam. 64.2% of participant saw reading as “very important”, while this percentage seeing listening, speaking and writing important is 41.5%, 37.4% and 25.2%. Regarding to the time duration of the foreign language revision course in their program, half of them considered it to be reasonable. The course was considered to be effective by only 15.3%. The majority of students expect the high frequency of practicing four English sub-skills in classroom. Many students “very often” and “often” have difficulty in practicing the four sub-skills. Two thirds of participants have high frequency of “very often” “often” of practicing listening, speaking and writing. The number of students who “hardly” or “never” meet with trouble in practicing these four sub-skills is very low. In term of the participants’ wants relating to a future foreign language course, 72.9% and 21.7% of students agreed that foreign language should be one compulsory and optional subject, respectively. Besides, 22.9% of students wanted to attend courses organized by the University, 22.9% of students wanted to submit the standardized test results.

Keywords: Learning needs, wants, post graduate medical students, Medical University, Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of needs and types of needs in ESP

Need analysis is the process of examining "what the learners know already and what they need to know" [1]. Another definition proposed by Nunan is that needs analysis was stated to refer to a family of procedures for gathering information about learners and about communication tasks for use in syllabus design [2]. Relatively similar with Nunan's definition, Brown stated that needs analysis (also called needs assessment) is the process of gathering information functioning as the basis for developing curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students [3]. According to Robinson, ESP course is based on a need analysis [4]. In other words, need analysis plays an utmostly important role in the development of the closely relevant ESP course. It helps the curriculum designers take relevant and useful things to learn into consideration whenever developing the curriculum. Like Robinson, needs analysis is also considered as a crucial component of systematic curriculum development. In Brown's systematic curriculum development model, needs analysis is the first phase of an ongoing quality control process, which notices that needs analysis is a crucial starting point for curriculum development. Brown reported that needs can

be stated in terms of goals and objectives which, in turn, can serve as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities and evaluation strategies [3].

In brief, needs analysis is vitally important in designing a course, and therefore, in developing or choosing materials. In this study, learners' needs were sought for in order to shed the light on the extent to which the textbook meets with the learners' needs.

Up to now, there have been a variety of dichotomies on needs introduced by different researchers: situation needs versus language needs; objective needs versus subjective needs [3]; target needs versus learning needs [5]. Among these dichotomies, target needs and learning needs have been widely used in literature; therefore, they were chosen to be in use in this study.

Target needs

Target needs are defined as "what the learner needs to do in the target situation" [5]. In order to have clearer sight into this broad term, it is wise to look into it regarding to necessities, lacks and wants.

Necessities

According to Hutchinson & Waters, necessities are what the learners have to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. For example, medical students might need to find information for their studying of medical subjects at the university, s/he might need to be able to deal with necessary reading skills, medical terms and grammar structures commonly used in these kinds of specialist documents. After graduation, for instance, they might need to communicate effectively with foreign patients. In this situation, s/he might need the ability to speak clearly and listen correctly so that s/he can make the proper communication. Therefore, s/he might need to learn how to deal with communicative situations commonly happen between health care workers and patients in hospitals.

Lacks

Hutchinson & Waters reported that the identification of necessities alone is not enough in ESP. It is wise to know "what the learner knows already, so that you can then decide which of the necessities the learner lacks" [5]. The gap of the matching process between the learner's target proficiency and the existing proficiency can be referred to as the learner's lacks. Medical student, for example, needs to read the medical documents so as to find needed information effectively. S/he is currently well equipped with medical terms and grammar structures commonly used in medical context. However, s/he does not know how to deal with reading sub-skills so as to find the needed information quickly and efficiently. These difficulties in reading skills are student's lacks.

Wants

Target needs are considered not only in terms of necessities and lacks but also in terms of wants. Wants are what the learners feel they need. It is discussed that "a need does not exist independent of a person. It is the people who build their images of their needs on the basis of data relating to themselves and their environment" [5]. Wants perceived by learners may conflict with necessities perceived by sponsors or teachers.

Learning needs

Learning needs are linked with the "route" to the destination set by target situation. It is naive to base the course design and the whole ESP program merely on target needs [5]. Learning needs aim at the personal concerns of the learners including methodological, administrative and psychological needs. Like target needs, they influence and affect the overall ESP

program ranging from syllabus designing to testing and evaluation. ESP learning is not a mechanical project to be imposed mechanically on the learners. The whole ESP program is an enjoyable, pleasing, manageable, generative, creative and productive activity. If needs analysis is the major distinction of ESP program, the learning needs then have the pivotal role to play in needs analysis. Any need analysis without involving learning needs may be a weak model, excluding the major psychological, sociological and methodological concerns of the ESP learners.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Setting

This study conducted a cross-sectional survey using a self-administered structured questionnaire to assess postgraduate medical students' needs for foreign languages training. The survey was conducted in May, 2017 at Hanoi Medical University (HMU).

The university is located in Northern Vietnam, one of the leading universities in the country, and a leading medical education institution among eight medical universities in Vietnam. HMU, which is an important source of high-quality health workers for the whole country, trains general practitioner and specialist doctors, traditional Vietnamese medicine doctors, nurses, medical technicians and public health workers at both the undergraduate and graduate level. For many years, HMU has been a focal point for creating and disseminating innovations in medical education and medical research.

Participants and Sampling

Subjects surveyed were postgraduate students including 255 students of the medical master training program and 261 students of the medical residency training program in Hanoi Medical University. The sampling frame for students was derived from a list of all postgraduate students attending the 2016-2017 academic year, all of whom were invited to spend twenty minutes answering the questionnaire after being enrolled in a final term exam of foreign languages. In total, thanks to the support of Postgraduate Department, 100 percent of students agreed to participate.

Measurements

The participants' general information, the necessity of foreign languages in medical field and of foreign language courses, the participants' opinion relating to the current foreign language courses at Hanoi Medical University, and participants' wants regarding to a future foreign language course was measured by close-ended questions with different response choices.

The importance of language skills in students' daily tasks at work was measured on a 5-point semantic scale (from *very important* to *very unimportant*).

The frequency students expect to practice each language sub-skill in classroom and the frequency students have difficulty in practicing each sub-skill was measured by a 5-point semantic scale (from *very often* to *never*)

Research Ethics and Data Collection

The survey was approved by the HMU management board, Postgraduate Department and Department of Foreign Languages; then all postgraduate students were informed of the survey objectives and invited to participate in this survey voluntarily. Both male and female medical students were anonymously surveyed, filling out the survey on their own. Due to the uncontroversial nature of this study, there was no requirement for a formal approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of HMU. 516 questionnaires were distributed to students and 516 were completed, giving a 100% response rate.

Statistical Analysis

Data was entered using EXCEL, and then transferred into STATA 10.0 for analysis. After cleaning the data, descriptive statistics were calculated for analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the general information relating to the surveyed participants. The number of students in the master program and the residency program is relatively equal, making up 49.4% for the former and 50.6% for the latter. 93.4% of participants were attending an English course, including both inside and outside the university curriculum courses, whereas the number of students at a French, Chinese, Germany, Russia and Japanese course is 14.5%, 1.7%, 0.2%, 0.2% and 0.8%, respectively. The number of students taking English as a compulsory subject in their studying program is ten times as big as the one attending French course, 90.9% compared to 9.1%. Very little students are studying Chinese, Germany, Russian and Japanese.

Table 1: Participants' general information

Variables (n=516)	n (%)
Type of students	
Master program students	255 (49.4)
Residency program students	261 (50.6)
Foreign language courses in which students are attending (both inside and outside the university curriculum)	
English	482 (93.4)
French	75 (14.5)
Chinese	9 (1.7)
Germany	1 (0.2)
Russian	1 (0.2)
Japanese	4 (0.8)
Foreign languages students take as a compulsory subject in their studying program	
English	469 (90.9)
French	47 (9.1)

All participants see the necessity of learning foreign languages in the medical field. In particular, 96.3% of them reported English as one important foreign language, 16.7% of them chose French and only 1% saw the significance of studying Japanese. Moreover, 90.7% of students thought that it was of utmost necessity for them to be involved in the revision course before their final term foreign language exam.

Table 2: Necessity of foreign languages and foreign language courses

Variables (n=516)	n (%)
The necessity of learning foreign languages in the medical field	
Necessary	516 (100)
Unnecessary	0 (0)
Foreign languages medical students should learn	
English	497 (96.3)
French	86 (16.7)
Chinese	2 (0.4)
Germany	1 (0.2)
Russian	2 (0.4)
Japanese	5 (1)
The necessity of the revision course before the final program exam of foreign languages	
Very necessary	172 (33.3)
Necessary	296 (57.4)
Unnecessary	48 (9.3)

The figure 1 reveals the importance of language sub-skills in students' daily tasks at work. All these sub-skills are considered to be "very important" and "important" at work by participants. 64.2% of participant saw reading as "very important", while this number for listening, speaking and writing is 41.5%, 37.4% and 25.2%. There was only roughly 2% of participants proposed these four sub-skills having no role in their tasks at work.

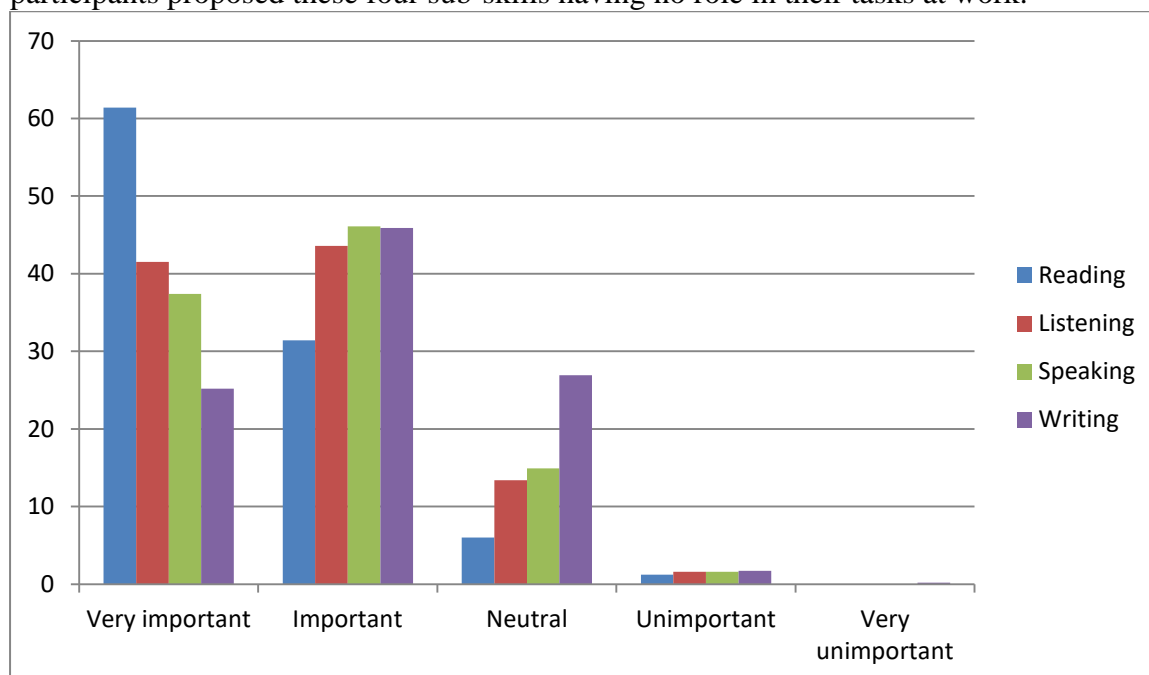
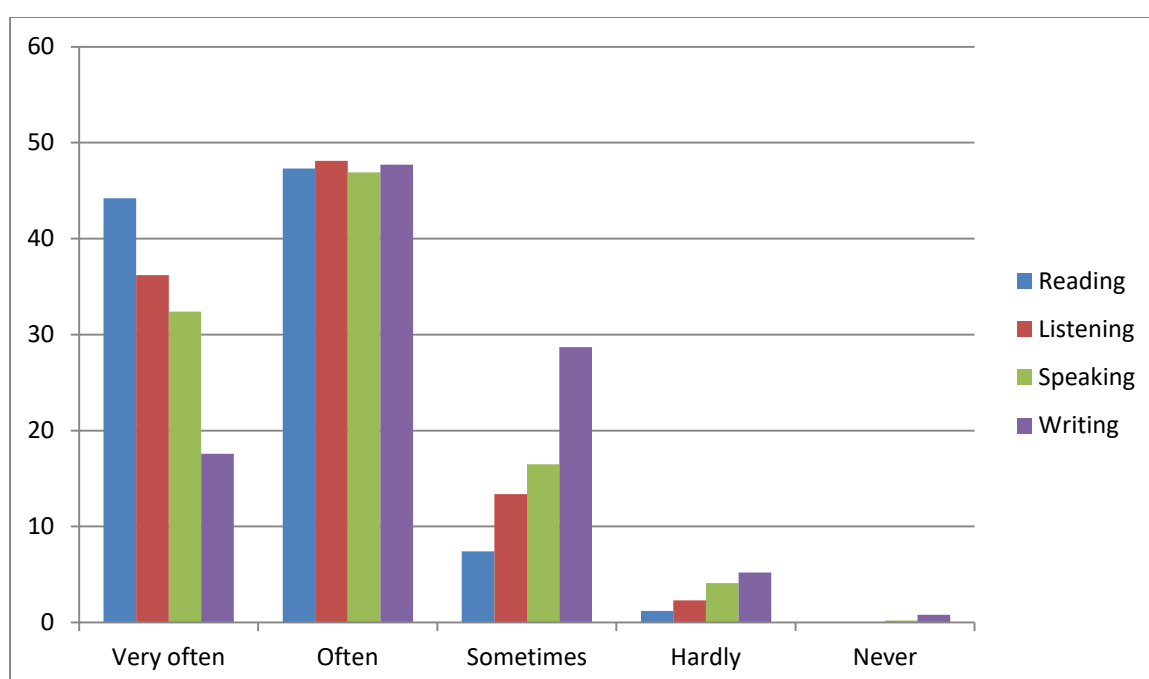
**Figure 1: Importance of language sub-skills in participants' daily tasks at work**

Table 3 reveals the participants' opinion relating to the current foreign language revision courses at Hanoi Medical University. Regarding to the time duration of the foreign language course in their program, half of them considered it to be reasonable. In addition, there was still 26.6% of participants finding the current foreign revision course ineffective. The course was considered to be effective by only 15.3%.

Table 3: Participants' opinion regarding to the current foreign language courses

Variables (n=516)	n (%)
Time duration of the foreign language course	
Too long	10 (1.9)
Too short	245 (47.5)
Reasonable	261 (50.6)
How effective the foreign language course is	
Effective	79 (15.3)
Ineffective	137 (26.6)
Neutral	300 (58.1)

The figure 2 shows the findings to the question: “How often do you expect to practice the language sub-skills in classroom?” Overall, the majority of students expect the high frequency of practicing these four skills in classroom. Writing is expected with lowest frequency among the four skills.

**Figure 2: Frequency students expect to using language sub-skills in classroom**

The figure 3 reveals the frequency students having difficulty in practicing each sub-skill. Overall, the majority of students “very often” and “often” have difficulty in practicing the four sub-skills. Two thirds of participants have high frequency of “very often” “often” of practicing listening, speaking and writing. The number of students who “hardly” or “never” meet with trouble in practicing these four sub-skills is very low, constituting only 3.3%, 3.5% and 3.3% for listening, speaking and writing, respectively.

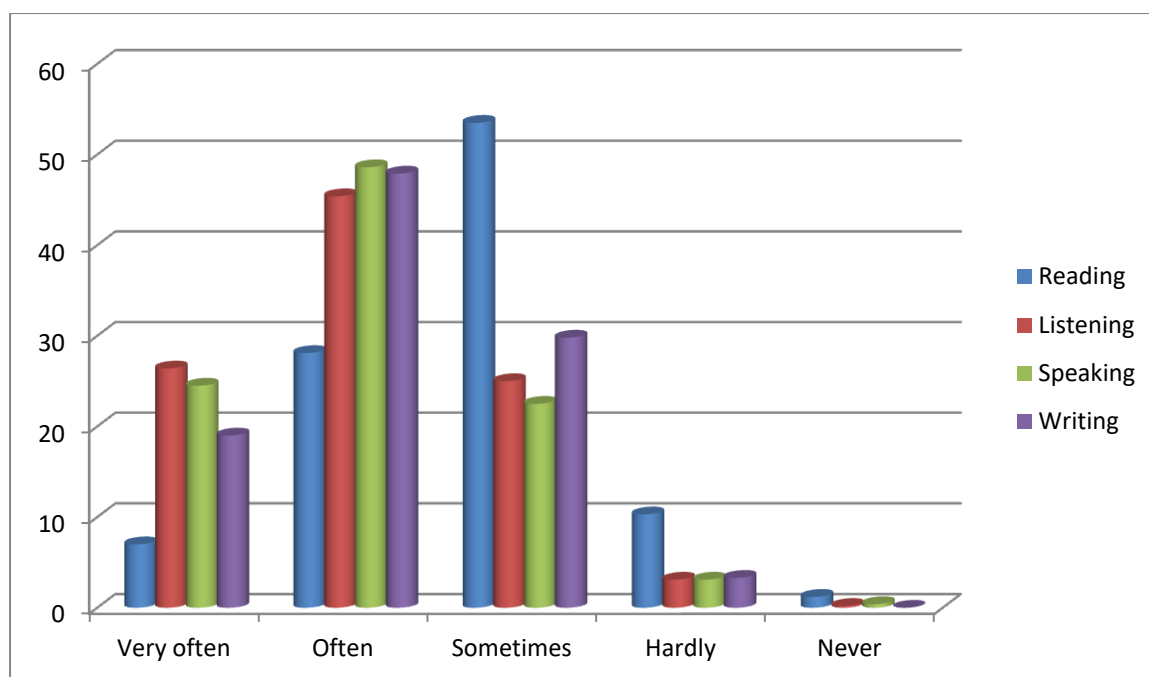


Figure 3: Frequency students having difficulty in practicing each sub-skill

Table 4 indicates the participants' wants relating to a future foreign language course. Regarding to the type of the course, 72.9% and 21.7% of students agreed that foreign language should be one compulsory and optional subject, respectively. Besides, 22.9% of students wanted to attend courses organized by the University, 22.9% of students wanted to submit the standardized test results so that they did not have to attend the compulsory course.

Table 4: Participants' wants regarding to a future foreign language course

Variables (n=516)	n (%)
Types of the foreign language course	
Compulsory	376 (72.9)
Optional	140 (27.1)
How to meet the requirement of foreign languages	
Attending the course organized by the university and taking a seat at the final course exam	118 (22.9)
Submitting the standardized test results (IELTS, TOEFL, CEFR...)	118 (22.9)
Both the above-mentioned options	280 (54.3)

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, our study identified that foreign languages, particularly English played an important role in participants' studying and working. The majority of students considered the revision foreign language courses to be necessary before their final exam on foreign languages despite the small number of participants considering it ineffective. In addition, the time length of the revision course for postgraduate students was reasonable. Besides, the majority of students expected the high frequency of practicing the four sub-skills in classroom because most of them "very often" and "often" had difficulty in practicing these four sub-skills. Finally, students wanted either to attend compulsory courses organized by the University or to submit the standardized test results. As Hanoi Medical University resembles most other universities in Vietnam, the results of this survey could be applied to other universities in Vietnam or in other developing countries which resemble Vietnamese context.

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