



## RESEARCH PAPER

### English for Nutrition: An ESP-Oriented Need Analysis of Nutrition Students at Pakistani Universities

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## ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the ESP-based needs of nutrition students at Pakistani Universities. Moreover, it examines the challenges that students encounter in using English. English plays a crucial role in the field of nutrition, as it enables access to scientific knowledge and facilitates participation in professional communication. The study is based on Hutchison and Waters' model of need analysis, helping us to analyze the needs and wants of the students. This is qualitative research, in which data is collected through interviews with ten students and five faculty members from the nutrition department at the University of Management and Technology. The findings reveal that students struggle with discipline-related reading, comprehension, research writing, and oral communication due to limited English proficiency. It highlights the need for ESP courses based on their academic and professional requirements. This study contributes to curriculum development for nutrition students by identifying the required language skills and professional communication abilities.

**KEYWORD:** ESP, Need Analysis, Nutrition, Pakistani Universities

## Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a learner-centered approach to language teaching that focuses on the linguistic needs of students in specific academic or professional fields (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP is different from General English. General English focuses on the overall improvement of a student's proficiency in English. However, ESP targets only the specific needs of learners and does not aim to enhance English skills in every context (Yasmin et al. 2016).

In countries like Pakistan, English is used as a medium of higher education (Saleem et al. 2021; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018). In Pakistan, English serves not only as a medium of instruction but also as a site of identity negotiation and representation in professional contexts (Irshad & Yasmin, 2025). Hence, universities must design courses that help students develop English skills relevant to their academic and professional success. Given the importance of English in education, ESP is offered at Pakistani universities because these courses are more targeted towards the needs of specialized fields, enabling students to become proficient in the English required for their discipline.

In recent years, several academic and professional fields have emerged in Pakistan. Among these, the field of nutrition has gained prominence across many universities. Students in nutrition-related programs require strong communication skills to interact with peers, accurately read and interpret research papers, and clearly present their findings. However, current ESP courses in Pakistan are inadequately designed to meet these specific needs, which hinders nutrition students from developing field-relevant linguistic skills.

Nutrition students must also engage in international collaborations and contribute to global health discussions, such as those held by the World Health Organization, especially given the rising global concern about obesity. This highlights the importance of English proficiency to help students succeed in international and professional settings. Effective communication skills will enable them to interact confidently with an international audience (Flowerdew, 2013; WHO, 2021).

There is a need to analyze the ESP-based needs of nutrition students at Pakistani Universities. Thus, Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) model has been used as a theoretical framework in the present study. This model comprises three main features (target needs, learning needs, and present situation analysis). Target needs analysis helps to identify what learners need to do in target situations. Learning needs analysis shows what learners need to do to learn. In the present situation analysis, the student's current level of English is analyzed.

Furthermore, this research serves as a roadmap for policymakers by helping them design educational policies that address the specific linguistic needs of learners at both academic and professional levels.

### **Literature Review**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is defined as "meeting the specific needs of learners" (Ramirez, 2015, p. 2). Similarly, Smoak (2003) describes ESP as "English language instruction based on the real and immediate needs of learners" (p. 27), emphasizing that ESP is task-oriented. One key distinction between ESP and General English (GE) is that GE aims "to develop a general level of proficiency," while ESP is used for "practical purposes" (Mackay & Mountford, 1978). Hutchinson and Waters add that it is "not the presence of a need, but the recognition of a need" that distinguishes ESP from GE, stating that the difference is "nothing in theory, much in practice" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 53).

According to Frinculescu (2009), "English gains the status of lingua franca" due to its widespread use and significance across the globe. Most scientific and medical journals are published in English, and the language has become a vital tool for sharing knowledge in both American and international academic circles. ESP has thus become crucial at both the educational and professional levels.

Medical English, a branch of ESP, is highly contextual and technical. Doctors often use academic and technical language at work, including jargon and informal speech, and typically do not focus on grammatical accuracy. As an advanced form of English, Medical English cannot be taught with the same methods as general English. English for Medical Purposes (EMP) learners are medical professionals or students in health-related departments at colleges and universities. The goal of EMP is to develop communicative competence in social and professional contexts rather than focusing on grammar and structure (Niazi, 2012, p. 51).

Like other ESP courses, EMP should be developed with the learners' specific goals and contexts in mind. This involves first identifying who the medical learners are and what their objectives are. Instruction in EMP aims to enhance learners' communication effectiveness through teaching methods like problem-based learning and content-based instruction. Technology also plays a key role in enabling real-life communication in the classroom. EMP courses include instruction in medical terminology and sometimes rely on traditional methods such as vocabulary teaching and grammar translation (Maher, 1986).

Various evaluation techniques are used to identify both learning and target needs (Brown, 1995). These assessments help tailor or revise ESP courses to address learners' real-world requirements. According to Niazi (2012), the teaching of medical English now includes more contemporary needs and approaches. Medical students, having already acquired considerable field knowledge, should focus on using English in their academic and professional contexts rather than learning basic grammar. Because they often learn medical English from non-native speakers, ESP instructors must understand the relevant discourse and register as well as possess pedagogical expertise.

Medical English courses should be structured with discipline-specific goals in mind. DuGas, Esson, and Ronaldson (1999) proposed a two-part lesson format: Lesson "A" focuses on introducing vocabulary, while Lesson "B" contextualizes learning through authentic materials such as hospital forms, medical equipment, and role-play activities. These activities encourage student interaction and simulate real medical settings, helping to improve communication in professional environments.

Therefore, ESP plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between General English and the specialized English required in various fields. However, challenges remain in effectively implementing ESP courses, particularly in Pakistan. These challenges can be mitigated by applying a robust needs analysis model, especially for students in nutrition programs at Pakistani universities.

## **Material and Methods**

This is qualitative research that examines the English language needs of nutrition students at Pakistani universities. Data was collected through interviews from two groups of participants: ten students enrolled in the nutrition department and five faculty members from the same department. The faculty members were selected for their expertise in the field. They provided information regarding the language skills required for students' success in academic and professional settings. Moreover, they highlighted the challenges faced by students. Each interview lasted for 30–45 minutes and was conducted in English. However, participants were given the option to switch to Urdu when necessary to express complex ideas more clearly. The research team obtained informed consent from all participants, audio-recorded the interviews, and created detailed transcripts for analysis. Any Urdu portions were carefully translated into English to preserve both the meaning and context.

A thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The analysis was based on Hutchinson and Waters' needs analysis framework, focusing on three major categories: 1) Target needs: The language proficiency required for professional and academic success; 2) Learning needs: The way students learn these skills most effectively; 3) Present situation analysis: The current proficiency levels of students.

To enhance research validity, several validation strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by sharing initial findings with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Triangulation was achieved through cross-comparison of data between faculty and student groups, and through the inclusion of institutional documents (e.g., syllabi, assessment rubrics) where available.

The study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines throughout. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and measures to ensure confidentiality. Anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to all participants. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and made accessible

only to the research team. In accordance with standard research ethics protocols, all data will be destroyed after five years to ensure participant privacy.

## **Results and Discussion**

The study is crucial as it provides an understanding of ESP-based needs of nutrition students at Pakistani universities. The interviews conducted helped the researcher to explore three main areas. These include English communication skills required at academic and professional levels, language challenges faced by students, and effective learning approaches highlighted by instructors.

The data revealed that both groups of participants highlighted the importance of English proficiency in the academic environment of the nutrition field. According to faculty members, students had difficulty understanding texts from research articles and international journals. One faculty member said, "Many students encounter difficulties comprehending complex arguments in research articles due to challenges in understanding specialized terminology". This aligns with Flowerdew and Peacock (2001), who reported that non-native speakers faced challenges in interpreting academic texts. Similar challenges in negotiating meaning across cultural and disciplinary boundaries have been noted in translation and identity-related studies (Irshad & Yasmin, 2022; 2023).

Students restated these concerns, emphasizing the importance of English proficiency for academic achievement. They highlighted a significant disparity between their existing and required language skills, which constitutes a substantial obstacle to academic development. This challenge is especially pronounced in the field of nutrition, which is expanding rapidly and depends extensively on international research literature. The lack of proficiency in writing skills also emerged as a major concern. Nutrition researchers are expected to write findings in English, and according to faculty feedback, many students face challenges in writing literature reviews, academic papers, and research reports.

One faculty member observed, "Even bright students who understand the concepts often cannot express them effectively in proper academic English." These difficulties often stem from a lack of coherence and organization in students' writing. This aligns with Hyland (2016), who argued that writing in a specific academic discipline differs greatly from general English writing, both in purpose and structure.

Additionally, oral communication skills were identified as a critical component for success in the field of nutrition. University-level instruction encourages students to improve their speaking skills through regular presentations in English. One PhD student shared, "When I first presented at a national conference, I realized how unprepared I was to explain my research clearly in English." This emphasizes the role of scaffolding, where teachers support learners in gradually developing their spoken communication skills. These findings are supported by Douglas (2000), who asserts that ESP must address both academic and professional communication demands.

The data also emphasized the importance of considering Pakistan's sociolinguistic context when designing ESP courses. While English is the medium of instruction in many universities, most students are more fluent in regional languages, which hampers their ability to speak or write fluently in English. Participants in the study described how the difference between their mother tongue and the target language affects their language proficiency. This aligns with Belcher's (2006) concept of "bridging pedagogies," which promotes addressing both linguistic and conceptual gaps within an academic context.

A difference was found between faculty members' expectations and learners' perceived needs. Faculty members emphasized the importance of critical thinking and deeper academic engagement with global research. On the other hand, learners focused on the immediate goals, including effective communication and understanding of field-related literature. This highlights the need for developing a balanced ESP syllabus that starts with basic communication skills and progresses to more advanced competencies.

The above discussion indicates that the English language needs of nutrition students are shaped by both universal expectations of scientific communication and the local educational realities of Pakistani universities. While the study focuses on nutrition students, its methodological framework and findings may be valuable for the development of ESP courses across other specialized disciplines in similar educational contexts.

## **Conclusion**

The main focus of this research is to identify the English linguistic needs of nutrition students at Pakistani universities. The study employed the Hutchinson model of need analysis to have an in-depth analysis of learner needs, learning needs, and the target needs of the learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The findings reveal that students face multiple challenges in the process of dealing with discipline-related reading, comprehension, and oral communication, highlighting the need for ESP courses that would enable students to address the problems. The findings not only assist in the development of ESP courses for university-level students but also facilitate the creation of culturally and contextually relevant courses (Basturkmen, 2010; Belcher, 2006).

According to the research, students encounter multiple challenges when they conduct research. One of the most important problems is that they have to write articles, read journals, and prove their stance at the international conferences in English, but their mother tongue is Urdu; therefore, they face difficulty in the process of transition of language from Urdu to English, according to the demand of the context. The study highlighted the ways through which students can effectively meet the linguistic needs of the learners (Hyland, 2006).

The research also provides various kinds of valuable recommendations for enhancing the overall effectiveness of courses related to ESP. One of the most important recommendations is that ESP courses should not be taught in isolation but should be integrated with the other courses relevant to the nutrition department. In addition to this, the instructions that are provided to them should be authentic and reality-based, and the vocabulary should be a transition from the simple to the complex one and should be discipline-oriented (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Moreover, the oral skills of students should be given a top priority because students are required to perform their tasks and deal with people in real life through oral communication. Therefore, students must be effective and proficient learners/speakers of language (Gatehouse, 2001).

The study also provides suitable directions for future research. There should be longitudinal research that entirely focuses on suitable pedagogical practices, which play a crucial role in providing rich data for changing the effectiveness of ESP courses and making them more competent for nutrition learners. Moreover, there is a need to analyze workplace language to understand learners' practical needs, which can inform the design of a course that effectively addresses them (Flowerdew, 2013).

Thus, this research provides a roadmap that not only develops an ESP program but also plays a crucial role in meeting this challenge, ultimately contributing to improved nutrition practice and better health outcomes in Pakistan.

### **Recommendations**

The study highlights the need for ESP courses based on the academic and professional requirements of nutrition students. These courses must incorporate the modules on comprehension, oral communication skills and research writing.

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