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Comparative needs analysis for designing an ESAP course

Zhenya Marinova Gundasheva^{a*}, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, 6000, Bulgaria

Liubomira Spasova^b, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, 6000, Bulgaria

Olga Dvorska^c, University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy, Kosice, Slovakia

Monika Petrillova^d, University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy, Kosice, Slovakia

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Abstract

The article examines and compares the results of a cross-sectional needs analysis survey for the purposes of designing an innovative ESAP course for students in Veterinary Medicine (VM). Students from two European universities responded to a nominal polytomous survey which probed their range of preferences, expectations and motivation. We analyzed students' selections using criteria such as language level, course content, teaching methods and forms, including the use of internet-based and ICT tools. Depending on their language level, students opted mostly for English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)-specific activities, whereas preferences for general English skills improvement were higher in lower level students. Cultural differences were accounted for and explained to illustrate the traditional practices and the need for introducing more effective methods, including cooperation between the students and faculty of the two universities. We have also proposed directions for designing an innovative ESAP course, which will be implemented next semester at Trakia University.

Keywords: needs analysis; course design; English for Specific Academic Purposes; English for Veterinary Medicine;

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Zhenya Marinova Gundasheva**, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria.
E-Mail Address: jenia.gundasheva@gmail.com / Tel: +352 42 69 92 02

1. Introduction

Needs analysis is a common procedural task undertaken by stakeholders in education, and usually has a simple objective in mind – the design and development of a specialized language course (Basturkmen, 2010). The interesting aspect of this study is that we collaborated on conducting a survey which allows us to compare the needs and preferences of students in Veterinary Medicine (VM) at two universities which share similar cultural and academic environments. The course we are envisioning will prove that faculty (English and core subject) and students can negotiate their preferences and needs, and incorporate their understanding and real-life experience into a project of cooperative nature. The educational challenge, therefore, will be to seek out those specificities which will allow both learners and teachers to participate in the learning process on an equal footage.

2. Background

The University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Kosice, Slovakia offers a 5-year course in Veterinary Medicine and admits both local and international students who attend classes in Slovak and English. Trakia University in Stara Zagora is one of the two Bulgarian schools that offer degrees in VM for Bulgarian and international students. Both universities have been accredited and certified on a European level and their diplomas are legitimate and recognized for practicing VM in Europe.

Both universities offer English language training to first and second year students and have developed in-house teaching materials which prepare students for specific objectives relevant to the academic and professional needs of their degree training. Faculty members are keen to collaborate on common projects and to exchange ideas and materials. The idea for designing a special innovative course in ESAP arose during an Erasmus exchange visit to Kosice this spring. Since plans for writing a new course book for English learners are underway at both universities, we decided to help this process and probe our students' motivation and preferences and base our course and materials on their answers.

3. Methods

The survey comprised of nominal polytomous questionnaire, which listed detailed multiple choices to define students' purposes and motivation, difficulties and lacks in their language skills, the means (use of traditional and innovative methods) and organizational learning forms (McCarter & Jakes, 2013; Hyland, 2006; Paltridge, Brian & Starfield, 2013). The survey was presented as an electronic Google form questionnaire and was anonymously filled in by volunteering students. Students could select multiple answers to the four questions and the results were processed as percentage ratio to the total number of students who took part in the survey. There were 31 Bulgarian students and 117 Slovak students who took part in the survey. These are students at the end of their 2nd semester who will attend two more semesters of English while at university. At Trakia University only those students who considered signing up for an elective English course in their second year took part in the survey. Slovak students are required to follow an English course in their second year and most of them agreed to participate in the study.

When we compiled the survey, we followed an intuitive logic of giving as many specific options as possible, so that students can rely on their maturity to “feel” what could be best for their own education. Furthermore, we asked them to think in terms of specific tasks which illustrated the combination of language and professional skills, course content and methodology. This approach allowed us to immediately detect which activities to include or exclude, and how to proceed with materials development. We clustered the choices based on their content, form and genre relevance. We ended up with comparative table results that gave us visual evidence of students' expectations and interests.

4. Results

Students were asked to assign themselves to a language level such as A2-B1, B1-B2 and B2-C1. Slovak students were predominantly in B1-B2 (75%), with 9% lower and 15% higher level. Bulgarian students similarly selected B1-B2 (42%), but with higher percentages in lower and advanced level of English (29% each). These differences in concentration of Intermediate level students are due to the different high school backgrounds of students in Kosice and Stara Zagora. They are also due to the fact that Bulgarian students who are willing to attend the second-year course already have a higher level of English upon entering university, because they have graduated schools with intensive language study. Slovak students are very mobile – they travel and study foreign languages and are exposed to more than one foreign language at a very early age – either Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, German, or English, which is usually studied as first foreign language at school. This means that almost 30% of interviewed students in Bulgaria are still lacking confidence in their language skills and will benefit from a short-term revision of introductory English. The higher percentage of Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate students will be likely to step up in their preparation and acquire more advanced English skills. Slovak students will probably form a more homogenous group of learners that can enter a higher-intermediate specialized English course.

Apart from self-evaluation, we decided to measure the purpose and motivation choice and divided the items into objective needs related to exams and career advancement, general English needs, English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Professional Purposes. As seen in Table 1., Bulgarian students are considerably more interested (23% to 6% for Slovak students) in using their language skills to prepare for a licensing exam in a foreign country, possibly the UK or North America. On the other hand, Slovak students are planning to use English when they participate in an Erasmus exchange (32%) or as trainees (25%) in another European country. Both students are almost level (16% and 11%) when they refer to testing their language proficiency with an internationally recognized exam, which will improve their chances for employment and/or further university studies.

Table 1. Objective Needs Related to Exams, Career Prospects and Professional Development

Objective needs related to exams, career advancement and professional development	BG sts choices	BG sts %	SK sts choices	SK sts %
I am following a required foreign language course as part of my degree training	6	19%	34	29%
I need to sit for an exam in English	0	0%	16	14%
I will be attending a student exchange program (Erasmus, etc.)	4	13%	37	32%
I will be doing a traineeship in a foreign country	6	19%	29	25%
I need a certificate for English language aptitude to apply to educational or professional organizations	5	16%	13	11%
To prepare for a professional licensing exam in Veterinary Medicine in the UK and/or North America after I finish my studies	7	23%	7	6%

What is predictable for these groups of students is their motivation to learn for general reasons (see Table 2.) – to improve their present skills (almost 50% in both groups), for travel and general communication (BG 29% and SK 38%), as a meta language for second and third foreign language learning (BG 10% and SK 17%), while some (BG 29%, SK 21%) feel pleasure in learning the language. The reason why General English is so popular is because of the availability and direct contact with global culture, translated into English. Foreign media, entertainment, frequent contacts with other cultures, generational specifics and the natural enjoyment of learning are the most common reasons for this preference.

Table 2. General English Acquisition Needs

General English acquisition needs	BG sts choices	BG sts %	SK sts choices	SK sts %
I need to improve my current level of English	14	45%	59	50%
For travel and general communication purposes	9	29%	44	38%
To use English as a meta language for learning another foreign language	3	10%	20	17%
For the pleasure of learning a foreign language	9	29%	24	21%

English for Academic Purposes appears to be in demand amongst both groups. Given the fact that Slovak students are more interested in studying abroad, while Bulgarian students are willing to work abroad after graduating Trakia University, it is clear that academic skills are needed by both groups. Every year I receive feedback from Bulgarian students who tell me that they were able to understand complex concepts in their core subjects thanks to the textbooks used in the English course, and a recommended reading list which includes e-books and websites with pertinent information for native students of VM. Judging from the above, students enter their second year with more experience in their fundamental disciplines and are more likely to benefit from the academic aspects of the course. Normally, students in both countries are required to attend lectures and seminars in English and are given opportunities to extend their knowledge by writing short communications or reports. However, more can be desired in terms of productive skills and the results from the survey are clear. More than half of the students expect and want to attend seminars and lectures where they can be instructed in English (BG 52%, SK 56%). The same is true for reading scientific journals and periodicals (BG 52%, SK 46%). More Slovak students, however, will read their subject textbooks in English (SK 43%, BG 29%), because of the better library resources at Kosice, and the long tradition of teaching VM in English. Trakia University launched its first year VM course in English in 2015 and the University relies mainly on e-books and lectures delivered by local and visiting faculty members. Therefore, students can use and are willing to use English language resources if given the chance. What is impressive is the ambition of students at both universities to write scientific reports and articles and to publish their research or present it at conferences. Between 11% and 23% of students in both schools are apparently considering an academic career, or at least wish to improve their academic performance. Probably universities could provide an online course in academic writing to support their students' growth and academic development. The English language course we are envisioning is a step in this direction.

Table 3. English for Academic Purposes Needs

EAP needs	BG sts choices	BG sts %	SK sts choices	SK sts %
To attend seminars and lectures in English	16	52%	66	56%
To read journals and scientific research in English	16	52%	54	46%
To read textbooks and manuals published in English	9	29%	50	43%
To acquire advanced skills for academic writing (e.g. reports, articles, case studies and projects)	5	16%	13	11%
To publish my own research in English	7	23%	20	17%
To be able to present original work at conferences and symposia	6	19%	22	19%

Probably the majority of students responded very favorably to the idea of teaching English for Specific Professional Purposes, i.e. for communication with foreign clients and colleagues (BG 52%, SK 60%), and

the acquisition of specialized language skills (BG 58%, SK50% for medical and BG29%, SK14% for scientific and technical). Almost an equal percentage of students in both groups opted to practice their translation/interpreting skills in VM English. The role of traditional language education which takes in consideration vocabulary and translation skills is evident, and there's nothing bad about it. First of all, it gives knowledge, follows a routine and allows students to work on their fluency in English, while students are becoming more knowledgeable in their core subjects. We also asked our students if they will be interested in 'real life' communication – contacting foreign or native speakers of English for interviews or further collaboration. The results were promising (BG 23%, SK 10%), and we are hoping to introduce this idea next semester. The suggestion we can make is that students can acquire English language skills not only passively, but also by participating actively and as equal partners in their own formation.

Table 4. English for Specific Professional Purposes

English for Specific Professional Purposes	BG sts choices	BG sts %	SK sts choices	SK sts %
To translate/ interpret from/into specialized English	10	32%	34	29%
To communicate with foreign clients and colleagues	16	52%	70	60%
To acquire essential medical vocabulary	18	58%	59	50%
To acquire essential technical and scientific language skills	9	29%	16	14%
Real-world' communication - contacting native speakers for project work	7	23%	12	10%

5. Discussion

The possibility of assigning quantitative data to the selection of methods and means for designing this course deserves further exploration. If the comparative data shows similar trends for academic needs, then this may be due to either seeking change in career development, transferring educational habits from other subjects to English classes, or expecting to apply new skills in students' future professional practice. The first option takes in consideration the possibility of career advancement and therefore English is only a medium for this purpose. The second one sees English only as a subject which may or may not resemble the other core subjects offered at university, and which can be taught most often for general purposes. The third option is to see an ESAP course as an opportunity to train students to express themselves, discuss and write argumentatively in English, which will allow them to build skills that they will use elsewhere (McCarter & Jakes, 2013; Paltridge, Brian & Starfield, 2013). Therefore, applying analytical and critical thinking to the English class can actually have further reverberations on their overall educational experience. Because of the similar traditional cultural environments in both universities, which still demand memorization and the retention of large amounts of information, students can use communicative classes in English to dare speak up and see themselves in a role quite different from their usual passive-receptive state.

That is why we have decided to prepare a more dynamic, modern and individually structured course in VM English. The target groups will function as experimental groups in both Slovakia and Bulgaria and they will consist of up to 12 volunteering students each at B1-B2 (or above) level of English. The students will be taught for 2 hours, 15 weeks per semester, plus additional tutorial sessions or individual conferences. The genres and forms will include both academic, and professional texts, audio and video recordings, podcasts and webinars. The students will work in groups in class and on shared projects with their Bulgarian, resp. Slovak colleagues. If possible we can use the technology of interactive boards to connect our classrooms over the internet at arranged times. Faculty and students will discuss and negotiate the

topics and language skills, which need extra practice and will receive guidance and advice for individual practice. The course will focus on both receptive and productive skills and students can work in groups with limited teacher intervention. Teachers will be facilitators, assistants and motivated colleagues to students who are on the way of building themselves as independent and connected professionals on a global scale.

6. Conclusion

The comparative needs analysis survey presented here includes more questions which regard specific language skills which can be translated as difficulties for both student groups. We have, however, limited ourselves to sharing the most immediate impression which such a survey can give – namely, that we are teaching our students to think in connection, not in isolation to their colleagues, their teachers and themselves.

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