



## Investigating Sudanese medical students' needs for English language

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### Abstract

Some Sudanese medical students come to university with very poor English language skills to the point that they cannot cope with their course subjects which are delivered in English, so the present study aims to conduct a needs analysis by examining the English language needs of first-year medical students in the Sudanese universities, to explore the students' English language needs that would help them in their current academic studies and future professional careers, also to investigate whether the existing English language courses meet the students' needs or not. The study used a quantitative and qualitative method, since the data is collected via means of two instruments, a questionnaire for the students, and an interview with the teachers. The sample of the study from which subjects were drawn can be divided into two categories; students from the Faculty of Medicine and other medical specializations (80 students) and teachers who teach at this college (10 teachers). The data obtained was analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The findings showed that most of the medical students and other medical specializations at the University of Kordofan are not satisfied with the current English language course and it does not meet their language needs, the teaching staff were agreed that the current English syllabus does not cope sufficiently with the students' medical English needs and the ESP programme is suitable for them. The study also found out that English language is important for them in their university studies and in their future careers, English language courses at the Faculty of Medicine should be relevant to medicine. The study is concluded with a set of recommendations including: there is a strong need to have a high level of English language proficiency to perform medical job effectively, also. the researcher recommends that further research should be conducted to design an ESP programme based on this needs analysis, Medical students need to be updated to cope with the current changes in the field of medicine, Students should consult references and search their way to be autonomous learners English courses in Faculties of Medicine should focus on the major English language skills and give priority to communication skills.

**Keywords:** development of ESP, features of ESP, ESP approach, role of ESP teacher

### 1. Introduction

English is the only foreign language taught in public schools in Sudan. Students take English language courses for eight years, from fourth grade until they graduate from high school. As a result, students consider it as a course to pass rather than a tool to use in their future careers. Hence, some Sudanese medical students come to university with very poor English language skills to the point that they cannot cope with their course subjects which are delivered in English. The courses taught in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Kordofan are General English, which set according to the available materials, regardless of the students' needs. Thus, a needs analysis is non-existent and the General English component is mixed up with the English for Specific Purposes component. Widdowson (1981)<sup>[23]</sup> describes the general concept of ESP by stating that "If a group of learners' need for a language can be accurately specified, then this specification can be used to determine the content of a language program that will meet these needs". The concept of ESP English for Specific Purposes appeared in 1960s, and since then, it has been a multidisciplinary area of interest. Brunton (2009) states that ESP courses emerged in lieu of GE (General English), because the former could not meet learners' special needs any longer.

In the context of Sudan, most of the courses taught at the faculties of medicine are General English and ESP programs seem to lack attention on the part of course designers and researchers. Furthermore, they do not keep up with modern methods of implementing ESP courses. In order to deal with the lack of the students' English language proficiency, Sudanese Universities should adopt the ESP English for specific purposes approach in their English courses to meet medical students' English language needs. The purpose of these programs is to provide students with English language knowledge in the line their field of specialization and in their future careers. Lack of English language ability prevents many young Sudanese graduates from conducting their future jobs effectively. In this case, the main role of teachers is to match the English language courses that meet the students' needs. Therefore, the ESP approach uses a needs analysis framework as the main tool to define the learners' needs in a specific field, because the awareness is more recognizable in a specific target situation representing a "real-life-situation". Hutchinson & Waters (1992)<sup>[15]</sup>, argue that if learners, sponsors, and teachers know why learners need English, that awareness will have an influence on what will be accepted as reasonable content in the language course.

The major reason for teaching ESP, is to equip the students

with English language skills that enable them to function in the target situation or in the work domain. Although, many of the students in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Kordofan are unable to express themselves or even write a short paragraph in English, the language situation in hospitals reflects a need for medical professionals to have a high level of proficiency in English language. Studies which have addressed widely and specifically the English language needs of medical students all agree that communicating with clients and colleagues in the clinical setting where the major areas of difficulty. Thus, teachers who teach medical students are expected to do more roles than other teachers (i.e. Conducting needs analysis, preparing teaching materials and evaluating their learners).

At present, teachers at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, at the University of Kordofan teach their students General English courses and collect materials relevant to English for Medical Purposes. It is clear that, there is no consistent and thorough needs analysis carried out in order to satisfy the students' needs. That is to say, these courses are more related to GE than English for specific purposes and therefore, far removed from the students' needs. There is thus no ESP courses especially designed for medical students which focus on their English language needs. Barber (1962) explains that "Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English you need". Many teachers teach there think that there is a strong necessity for defining the needs of the students in order to design special English courses for medical purposes, so that their effort would focus on the specific needs of the students. This study tries to assess the students' ESP needs in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Kordofan. Because, the students are not satisfied with the content of their English language courses, as well as the obstacles that instructors are encountered in trying to come up with teaching materials that meet the expectations of ESP students. Learners' roles, however, are rather ignored and teachers are considered the only source of knowledge. Based on the above mentioned, the researcher will attempt to find out whether the English language courses match the students' needs or not.

## 1.2 History and Development of ESP

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) refers to an instinctive but strong movement which has spread over the world and is still continuing with more power and effects. Its history goes back to the 1960s and it has grown since then and become as a single field. However, there were certain factors that contributed to the rise and rapid growth of ESP. (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998 cited in Howett, 1984) state that the arrival of Huguenot and Protestant refugees in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in England started the era of "business English in ELT" from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hutchinson and Waters (1987)<sup>[15]</sup> mentions three main reasons for this rapid growth. They were the "demands of a Brave New World", a "revolution in linguistics" and "focus on the learner". Hymes (1972) identified the rapid expansion in scientific, technical and economic activities in English speaking countries and the linguistic trends as the main contributing factors in this regard. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 19) also reported that:

*"growth of science, technology and business played*

*an important role in the development of ESP and "an enormous number" of students came to the UK, USA and Australia and this factor initiated "a new era of teaching English for different scientific and business disciplines" and English was given the status of the "international language of science, technology and business".*

Hutchinson and Waters (1987)<sup>[15]</sup> specified two important historical factors that were largely instrumental in the rapid expansion of the scope and range of ESP. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 6)<sup>[15]</sup>, the end of the Second World War initiated an age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role fell to English. "The Revolution in Linguistics", (ibid, 1) was another major factor that paved way for the emergence and rapid growth of ESP during the 1960's and early 1970's: the second stage in the growth of ESP. This period (ibid, 2) witnessed a transformation of traditional linguistics of merely describing the features of language into the study of Register Analysis (RA) which focused on the ways language was used in real communication. The difference between written and spoken language as an example of RA. Thus, it is related to a certain grammatical and lexical forms were more frequently used in scientific and technical language as compared to General English (ibid, 3). Widdowson (1979)<sup>[24]</sup> pointed that instead of merely following RA, the emphasis should have been on the learner's communicative competence in various linguistic situations. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) illustrated that, the ESP material produced during that period mainly concentrated on specific grammatical and lexical items instead of real communication. Widdowson, (1979)<sup>[23]</sup> declared that the realization of this deficiency laid the foundation of rectifying efforts that led to Discourse Analysis (DA) and Hutchinson and Waters (1987)<sup>[15]</sup> called it the third stage of ESP growth which was marked by the shift from RA to the study of "discourse and rhetorical analysis". This phase addressed the learners' difficulties that were caused by the unfamiliarity with the use of English. (Mo H, 2005 cited in Allan and Widdowson, 1974:3)<sup>[24]</sup> stated that "consequently, their needs could only be met by a course that developed the knowledge of how sentences were combined in discourse to make meanings". Hutchinson and Waters (1987:20)<sup>[15]</sup> suggested that the main aim of discourse and rhetorical analysis was to identify organizational patterns in texts that formed the basis of ESP syllabus that included "rhetorical functions for communicative purposes". The fourth stage of ESP growth mainly focused on the "target situation". Hutchinson and Waters (1987)<sup>[15]</sup> defined the "target situation" as the one in which the learners would use the specific language they were learning. "Learning-centered". West (1984) also agreed that "learner-centered" and "target situations" were the key terms during this phase of ESP growth and a lot of emphasis was given to NA. The main objective of ESP course contents (ibid) was thus to make the learners achieve linguistic competence by enabling them to acquire the ability to use language accurately and efficiently in different situations. (Mo H, 2005 cited in Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998: 4) stated that:

*"linguistic competence included grammatical, cultural, pragmatic, strategic and communicative sub-competencies. This emphasis on linguistic competence broadened the horizon of ELT and various other dynamics of learning situations and learners' situations were considered to make the learners acquire the required linguistic competence. "It involves considering the process of learning and motivation, working out what is needed to enable students to reach the target, and taking into account the fact that students learn in different ways".*

All the above assumptions offered useful insights into the reasons that why the learner and his specific social and psychological situations were also given due importance to achieve the target learning outcomes. Douglas (2000) explains that it was recognized that not only different specializations (medicine, humanities, physics, geology, business etc.), but also different sub-fields of a main specialization needed different communicative functions in terms of syntax, morphology, semantics, phonology, vocabulary and discourse. The linguistic needs of a lab assistant (ibid) in a hospital would be different from the needs of a nurse, a receptionist, a ward boy and an X-ray technician. These precise linguistic needs were the key factors in determining the type of curriculum necessary for ESP courses.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:30) stated that the early stages of ESP were strongly linked with "Register Analysis, Discourse and Rhetorical analysis, Skills-Based Approaches and the Learning-Centered Approach". But after achieving maturity, (ibid, 1) no dominating movement has existed in ESP and many different approaches and a willingness to mix different types of materials and methodologies have been accepted in the realm of this flexible approach, ESP. ESP has been transformed from grammatical, functional and notional syllabuses to a more eclectic and task-based approach (ibid, 2).

Since the 1960s, ESP emerged as the most appropriate discipline to accept the new challenge. Therefore, it becomes a vital and innovative activity within the Teaching of English as a Second Language movement (TEFL/TESL).

### 1.3 Definitions of ESP

Hutchinson and Waters (1987:18) <sup>[15]</sup> define ESP as "it is an approach to language learning and it is based on learners' need". This means that there is no specific kind of language, teaching material or methodology. They suggest that the foundation of ESP involves the learners, the language required and the learning contexts which are based on the primary need in ESP. This help clearly to distinguish between not only what ESP is? but also showing what ESP is not: e.g 1) ESP is not a matter of teaching 'specialized varieties' of English. 2) ESP is not just a matter of science words and grammar for scientists. 3) ESP is not different in kind from any other of language teaching. (ibid).

Strevens' (1988) <sup>[19]</sup> definition makes a distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics:

#### 1. Absolute characteristics

ESP consists of English language teaching which is:

- a. designed to meet specified needs of the learner
- b. related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;

- c. centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;
- d. in contrast with General English.

#### 2. Variable characteristics

ESP may be, but is not necessarily:

- a. restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only);
- b. taught according to any pre-ordained methodology" (Gatehouse, 2001 cited in Strevens, 1988: 1-2) <sup>[20]</sup>.

This definition tries to identify ESP in contrast with General English. Therefore, the emphasis is on "Specific English" that belongs to some particular discipline, occupation or activity. This definition makes it mandatory that ESP courses should concentrate on the language (i.e. syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics etc.), which is appropriate for some particular discipline, occupation or activity. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 4-5) have presented a modified definition of ESP which is also comprised of absolute and variable characteristics of ESP that are as follows:

#### 3. Absolute Characteristics

- a. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;
- b. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- c. ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

#### 1.4 The ESP Approach

Johns and Robinson (1989, 1991) <sup>[18]</sup> and Jacobson (1986) have used needs assessments in order to identify and to understand the complexity of the ways learners acquire and use language for specific tasks. Discourse analysts and researchers have developed different approaches to know how syntax, semantics, lexis, et care introduced and used in scientific subjects (EST), in authentic texts either for academic or occupational purposes. However, Barber has an important contribution concerning these absolute characteristics published for the first time in 1962, as Johns and Dudley-Evans (1993:117) state that Barber's work is based on an analysis of the important features of language met in authentic texts and that he calls "word or item counts". Widdowson (1983) <sup>[23]</sup> and Swales (1990), have also worked with the same view in mind to understand how learners use these features of the English language in various situations.

The second important approach which is based on "communicative notions" is introduced by Kennedy (1987) to develop discourse analysis. The third approach based on text feature analysis and particularly on the principle of concordance is used by Johns (1991) <sup>[16]</sup> and Strevens (1988) <sup>[21]</sup>. This concept of concordance has been applied in material design in classes of science and technology. Some other approaches have been developed concerning text analysis, but Swale's approach (1990), provides useful information of great insight in an original contribution which he calls "genre-analysis" and which is determining for reading texts in science and technology. The previous approaches deal with written discourse, but a few researchers have thought about investigating both spoken and written discourse in one particular field. For instance,

Dubois (1987, 1988) in biomedicine, Bazerman (1989)<sup>[1]</sup> in physics, and Dudley-Evans (1998) in economics. However, all these types of analysis focus on the learners` needs under the umbrella of ESP that meets these needs.

In language teaching, ESP uses learner-centered approach because the goals and procedures are set according to the learners` needs. Therefore, ESP concentraes on the usage of language in the real-life situation (not on the structures of grammar of language). Also, it facilitates the learners and motivates them, so they can easily use language at work places and use it for communicative purposes. Consequently, the above proposition supports the idea of the study.

**1.5 Characteristics Features of an ESP course**

Setting up an ESP course requires four steps, including needs analysis, syllabus, curriculum design and assessment or evaluation. The most important step in this process, is conducting the needs analysis, which is at the heart of any ESP program. In fact, everything is built around the learner's needs and the material is tailored depending on these needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1992)<sup>[15]</sup> argue that "if learners, sponsors, and teachers know why learners need English, that awareness will have an influence on what will be accepted as reasonable content in the language course and what potential can be exploited". The ESP approach uses the needs analysis framework as the main tool to define the learners' needs in a specific field, because the awareness is more recognizable in a specific target situation

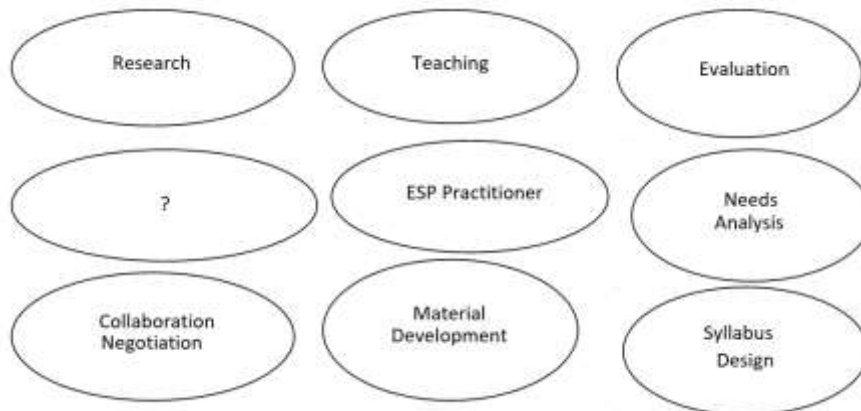
representing a "real-life-situation". According to Carver (1983), there are three features common to the ESP courses:

- a- Authentic materials: The use of authentic learning materials is possible if we accept the claim that ESP courses should be offered at an intermediate or advanced level. The use of such materials, modified by teachers or unmodified, is common in ESP, especially in self-directed studies or research tasks. The students are usually encouraged to conduct a research using a variety of different resources including the internet. Hutchinson and Waters propose some characteristic for providing material as follows:

- a. Use existing materials as a source of your ideas.
- b. It is better to work in a team.
- c. Do not set out to write the perfect materials on the first draft.
- d. Materials can always be improved.

**1.6 The Role of ESP Teachers**

The nature of the teacher's role in ESP varies according to contexts and personalities involved. The teacher in this kind of learning is as a resource that can encourage learners to learn, course designer and material provider, researcher, collaborator, and evaluator. In other words, his role is as a guide and initiator rather than an authority. Camilleri (1999:36) states that, the most important role includes "awareness" of self. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) use the term "practitioner" rather than "teacher" to emphasize that ESP involves much more than teaching. ESP practitioner can have several roles:



**Fig 1:** The Roles of an ESP Teacher

**Bojovic (2006) illustrates**

1)The ESP practitioner as a teacher: "ESP is a practical discipline with the most important objective of helping students to learn. However, the teacher is not the primary knower of the carrier on tent of the material. The students, especially where the course is specifically oriented towards the subject content than the teacher. The teacher has the opportunity to draw on students` knowledge of the content in order to generate communication in the classroom. When the teaching is a specific course on, for example, how to write a business report, it is vital that teacher adopts the position of the consultant who has knowledge of communication practices, but needs to "negotiate" with the students on how best to explore these practices to meet the objective they have. The relationship is much more about the partnership. In some situations, the role of ESP teacher extends to giving one-to-one advice to students (e.g., in non-English speaking countries students will have to publish in

international journals and need advice in both language and discourse issues). The ESP teachers need to have a considerable flexibility, by willing to listen to learners, take an interest in the discipline or professional activities the students are involved in, and to take some risks in their teaching.2) The ESP practitioner as a course designer and material provider: Since it is rarely possible to use a particular textbook without the need for supplementary material, sometimes no really suitable published material exists for identified needs. ESP practitioners often have to provide the material for the course, this involves selection, or writing it. The ESP teachers also need to assess the effectiveness of the teaching material used whether it is published or self-produced. However, since the teachers are encouraged by their employees to write new material, there is a danger of constant re-invention of wheel; advantages of published material are ignored even when they are suitable for a given situation".3)The ESP practitioner as researcher:

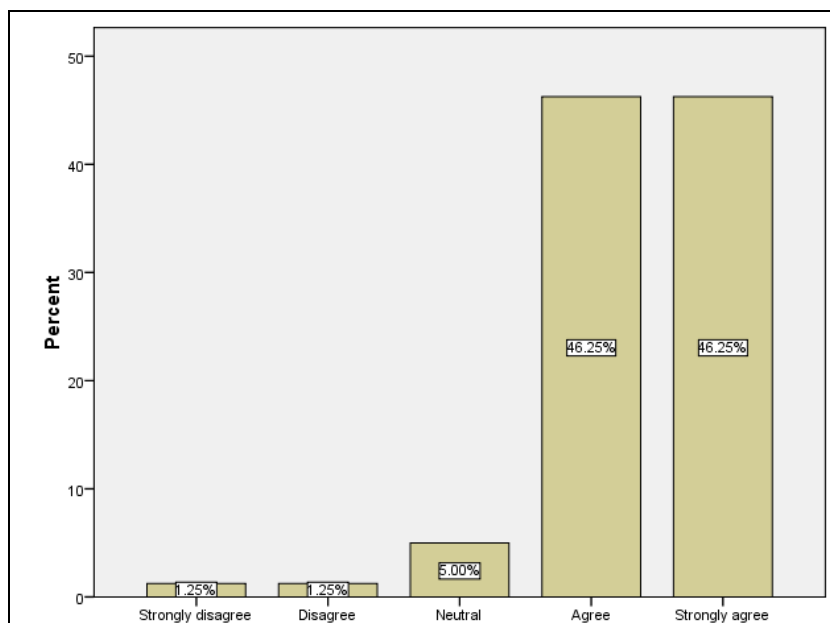
"Research has been particularly strong in the area of EAP (genre analysis). Regarding the research into English for business purposes, there is a growing interest in investigating the genres, the language and the skills involved in business communication. ESP teachers need to be in touch with the research. Teachers carrying out needs analysis, designing a course, or writing materials need to be capable of incorporating the findings of the research, and to be confident that they know what is involved in skills such as written communication.4)The ESP practitioner as collaborator: It is believed that subject-specific work is often best approached through collaboration with subject specialists. This may involve cooperation in which ESP teacher finds out about the subject syllabus in academic context or the tasks that students have to carry out in a work or business situation. Or it may involve the language teacher specially preparing learners for the language of subject lectures or business presentations on the connect of teaching martial that the ESP teacher has prepared. The fullest collaboration is where a subject expert and a language teacher, team-teach classes; in EAP, such lessons might help with the understanding of subject lectures or the writing of examination answers, essay or theses, while in EOP they might involve the language teacher and a business trainer working together to teach both the skills and the language related to business communication.5)The ESP practitioner as evaluator: The ESP practitioner is often involved in various types of evaluation (e.g. testing of students, evaluation of courses and teaching materials). Test is conducted 1) to assess whether students have the necessary language and skills to undertake a particular academic

course or career which is important in countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia where large numbers of international students to postgraduate course or research and need internationally required tests e.g. International English Language Test Service (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and 2) to assess the level of their achievement ( i.e. how much learners have gained from the course). Evaluation of course design and teaching materials should be done while the course is being taught, at the end of the course and after the course has finished, in order to assess whether the learners have been able to make use of what they learned and to find out what they were not prepared for. Evaluation through discussion and on-going needs analysis can be used to adapt the syllabus". When a teacher undertakes his required role, he bridges the gap between him and his student which leads to the establishment of an effective environment for learning especially with subject-specific work.

**Statement (1):** The main language of the communication among the doctors and the students is English.

**Table 1:** The main language of the communication

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	1	1.2
Disagree	1	1.2
Neutral	4	5.0
Agree	37	46.2
Strongly agree	37	46.2
Total	80	100.0



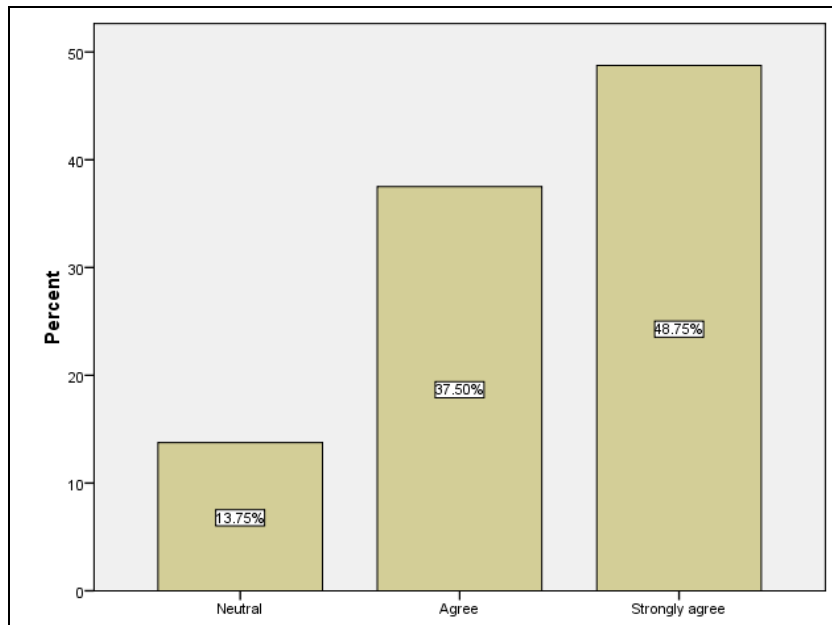
**Fig 2:** The main language of the communication

It is clear from the above table and figure (1.1) that, there were (74) students in the study’s sample with percentage of (92.4%) agree and strongly agree with the statement “The main language of the communication among the doctors and the students is English”. There were (4) students with percentage of (5%) neutral, and only (2) students with percentage of (2.4%) were disagree about that. That means, English is the main language of the communication among the doctors and the students.

**Statement (2):** Most of the written materials related to students` job(s) are in English.

**Table 2:** The written materials related to students` job(s)

Options	Frequency	Percent
Neutral	11	13.8
Agree	30	37.5
Strongly agree	39	48.8
Total	80	100.0



**Fig 3:** The written materials related to students` job(s)

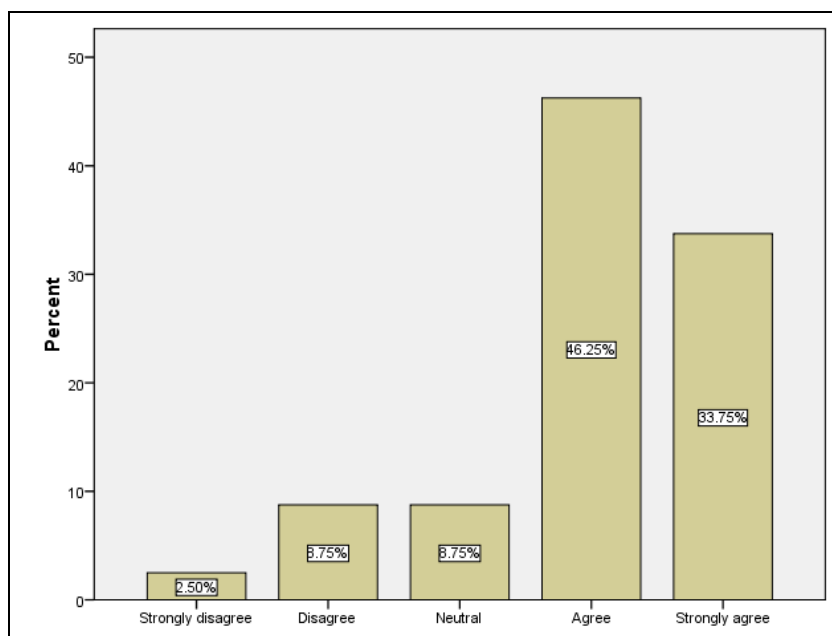
According to statistical results, the above table and figure (1.2) show that, there were (69) students in the study`s sample with percentage of (86.3%) agree and strongly agree with the statement “Most of the written materials related to students` job(s) are in English”. There were (11) students with percentage of (13.8%) neutral with the statement, which means English is the most of the written materials related to students` job(s).

English.

**Table 3:** Written medical reports

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	2	2.5
Disagree	7	8.8
Neutral	7	8.8
Agree	37	46.2
Strongly agree	27	33.8
Total	80	100.0

**Statement (3):** All medical reports have to be written in



**Fig 4:** Written medical reports

Table and figure (1.3) it is found that, there were (64) students in the study`s sample with percentage of (86.3%) agree and strongly agree with the statement “all medical reports have to be written in English”. Whereas (9) of them with percentage of (11.3%) disagree and strongly disagree, and (7) of the respondents neutral with the statement with

percentage of (8.8%). This result has been proved that all medical reports are written in English language.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study showed that most of the students want to learn English to communicate with native speakers

and other people. Therefore, they think that most of written medical materials, reports, training courses and getting information from medical resources are in English language. Moreover, it appears that English is very important for the students' studies, because it assists them in achieving good scores in exams. Also, it is important for discussing topics, reading text books, and understanding instructions related to medicine.

Another point is that English language helps medical students a lot in their future job to deal with drugs, writing prescriptions and know about the diseases.

The study suggests that English language courses at the Faculty of Medicine should be relevant to students' English language needs and there is strong need to have a high level of English proficiency to perform medical job effectively.

. Medical students need to be updated to cope with the current changes in the field of medicine and Students should consult references and search their way to be autonomous learners (i.e. they should be more interactive to know about the medical terminologies which are very often written in English and some of them even don't have clear equivalents in Arabic or other languages).

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