






The challenge of english speaking and writing competencies for english for medical studies: A case study of first year medical students at Sefako Makgatho Health Science University in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to report on the findings of a classroom-based study regarding the English writing and speaking challenges faced by English Medical Studies (EMS) students who were doing first year at Sefako Makgatho Health Science University (SMU) during the time of this research. The methodology for this investigation was quanti-qualitative in nature. Twenty-six research participants participated. Convenient sampling was used. Data was collected through the use of interviews, a self-designed questionnaire and a writing activity with a selected sample of respondents, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. The study adopted Needs Analysis Theory (NA) as the underpinning theoretical framework. The study found that grammatical challenges, particularly word usage, jargon in medical phrases, errors in verb conjugation, tense application, personal pronoun usage, prepositional structure and inadequate English language exposure during secondary education days are the main cause of the problem. The study findings contribute to the literature in that they illuminate hidden or ignored variables that contribute to the researched problem. The findings can also be used as a basis for advising English writing trainers/instructors and curriculum developers. Thus, it is recommended that lecturers should be provided with assistance from appropriate stakeholders to expand their knowledge of second language (L2) teaching, thus ameliorating learners' L2 learning. This will significantly help English for health.

Keywords: English for Medical Studies, English for health, Workplace literacy, English for Specific Purpose, Health Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organisation, Health Literacy (HL) is a multidimensional concept that encompasses an individual's, a family's or a community's knowledge, confidence and comfort (which accumulate through daily activities, social interactions and across generations) to access, understand,

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PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 14th June, 2025 | Accepted: 23rd December, 2025 | Published: 27th March, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Kekana, Tebogo Johannes, Thama Millicent Mamabolo & Malesela Edward Montle. "The Challenge of English Speaking and Writing Competencies for English for Medical Studies: A Case Study of First Year Medical Students at Sefako Makgatho Health Science University in Gauteng Province, South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.2 (2026): 521 - 535. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2026728>

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appraise, remember and use information about health and healthcare.¹ In addition, Dodson and Osborne maintain that HL responsiveness describes the way in which policies, services, environments and providers make health information and healthcare available and accessible to people with different HL strengths, needs and preferences.² Thus, people with inadequate English (both in writing and speaking) will have challenges with accessibility of health information for them to make sound decisions or to transmit knowledge about health matters. This is so because English is used as a vehicle to both record and transmit such information. Mastering English has transformed into an indisputable need for scientific students, as it has evolved into the standard language of science, technology, and research. According to Hutchinson and Waters, with the growing need for English language learning, each English language student demands expertise in his or her profession.³ As a result of this need-based circumstance, English instruction for these students has transitioned from second/foreign language study to English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

This study focused on how English is deployed in real-life communication. The primary features of this approach emphasise the context in which language, whether written or spoken, is used. English used in the medical field, for example, needs specialised terminology and substance. Scholars such as Mohamed in his study titled “The Effectiveness of Internet and Mobile Applications in English Language Learning for Health Sciences’ Students in a University in the United Arab Emirates” also highlighted the importance of ‘English that is meant for health professions’, particularly focusing on context. South Africa is not immune to this issue.⁴ This is because scholars have highlighted the challenge of English writing and speaking competency in African students.⁵

According to Abohadi, when he talks about legalese, he posits that “legal language refers to different language genres which have different communicative functions to achieve.”⁶ Thus, this study argues that the same principle applies to health language. Such types of workplace-oriented language contain a number of unusual features, and these largely relate to terminology, linguistic structure, linguistic conventions, and punctuation. Speaking and writing like a physician (or a health practitioner) is something one can recognize stylistically, and statements contained in health documents have their own different style, driven by the need to be precise and accurate and sometimes for other ulterior motives that are oblivious to the eye of an ordinary person or layperson. It is discipline-specific; as a result, discipline-specific words and phrases that are part of our everyday language take a different meaning in the health context. Such a language can be very inaccessible to many due to its nature. English for health disciplines has not been the subject of many studies (E.g., in the South African context, where English is predominantly spoken as an L2). This is a challenge because those working in professions relating to health are heavily influenced by the laws and other related issues in their interactional practice. According to Batta, the need for English as a professional language in medicine is nowadays beyond doubt.⁷

It is important to note that EMAP (English for Medical Purpose) at SMU is considered extremely important for medical students’ academic and professional life because it is thought to help physicians make more precise diagnoses, establish better physician–patient communication, and reduce

¹ World Health Organization, *Health Literacy Development for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases: Volume 1. Overview* (World Health Organization, 2022).

² Sarity Dodson, Suvajee Good, and Richard H Osborne, “Health Literacy Toolkit for Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Series of Information Sheets to Empower Communities and Strengthen Health Systems,” *New Delhi: World Health Organization, Regional Office for South-East Asia*, 2015.

³ T. Hutchinson and A. Waters, *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centred Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴ Omnia Ibrahim Mohamed, “The Effectiveness of Internet and Mobile Applications in English Language Learning for Health Sciences’ Students in a University in the United Arab Emirates,” *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 12* (2021).

⁵ Liziwe Fesi and Vusumzi Mncube, “Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers’ Perspectives,” *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (August 31, 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1849>; MME ‘Tshidi’ Mohapeloa, “Developing an Entrepreneurial Mindset within the Social Sector: A Review of the South African Context,” in *Science, Technology and Innovation in BRICS Countries* (Routledge, 2020), 142–49, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003008774-12>.

⁶ Kamal Hasan Ali Abohadi, “A Review of the Legal Language Development with the Focus on Its Lexicogrammatical Features,” *International Journal Of All Research Writings* 2, no. 6 (2019): 53.

⁷ Anshita Batta, “Importance of English in Medical Education,” *Journal of Medical Academics* 2, no. 2 (2020): 59.

the number of clinical errors. Thus, given this situation, the researchers strongly believe that the study of this nature will provide opportunities for further research in this area, and this will broaden scholarly understanding of the problem, particularly from a South African point of view, where this problem continues to be a thorn in both workplaces and educational environments.

Furthermore, there are many reasons for wanting to reform discipline-specific languages, like English for health purposes. The most compelling reason is that obscure language can deprive ordinary people of their legal rights. When language is obscure, ordinary people have to consult an expert to learn about their rights. If they are unable to do this, they have no rights. They are at the mercy of whoever claims to know what the language means. The article, therefore, seeks:

- To investigate and identify the English writing and speaking challenges faced by first-year students of English for Medical Studies at SMU in Gauteng province, South Africa.
- To examine whether first-year students at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University encounter difficulties in English writing and speaking proficiency, and if they do, to pinpoint those specific areas of challenge.
- To evaluate if SMU is helping in addressing the English language proficiency of these students.
- To suggest possible intervention strategies that can help these students improve their English writing and speaking competencies.

The study further seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the English writing and speaking challenges that are faced by first-year students of English for Medical Studies at Sefako Makgatho Health Science University in Gauteng province, South Africa?
- Do first-year students at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University encounter difficulties in English writing and speaking proficiency? If so, what are they?
- Is Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University helping first-year medical students in addressing their English writing and speaking challenges?
- What possible intervention strategy or strategies can Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University put in place to help these students improve their English writing and speaking competencies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives on English for Health

Various scholars expressed various perspectives, particularly on the area of ESP, such as English for health. For example, scholars such as Mohamed highlighted the importance of ‘English that is meant for health professions.’⁸ This is so important because it articulates the workplace environment. Furthermore, it is beyond doubt that the English language is vital in every corner of the globe, but it is not without challenges. According to Macedo, “English is used all over the world as a means of interaction among people from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnic groups.”⁹ However, “teachers face several challenges in and out of the classroom since learners find it difficult to practice the language due to various variables.”¹⁰ To add to this challenge mentioned above, Weda and De Villiers argue that the teaching of English in African schools is still a challenge for current and future governments, and this is, to some extent, what this study is trying to address.¹¹

⁸ Ibrahim Mohamed, “The Effectiveness of Internet and Mobile Applications in English Language Learning for Health Sciences’ Students in a University in the United Arab Emirates.”

⁹ Donaldo Macedo, “Rupturing the Yoke of Colonialism in Foreign Language Education: An Introduction,” in *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education* (Routledge, 2019), 1–49.

¹⁰ Fesi Lizwe and Adele Moodly, “Teachers’ Strategies to Promote Reading in English First Additional Language: A Focus on Challenges and Approaches in Language Transitioning in a South African Context,” *The Athens Institute for Education and Research*, 2018, 48.

¹¹ Zenzele Weda and Rian de Villiers, “Migrant Zimbabwean Teachers in South Africa: Challenging and Rewarding Issues,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20, no. 4 (2019): 1013–28.

Language researchers and educators maintain that a lack of identifying students' needs hampers the development and improvement of English language education in ESP.¹² Reynolds et al. investigated the English medical vocabulary strategies, needs, and difficulties of Taiwanese medical school students and found a lack of sufficient contextualized academic English writing practice.¹³ This is a serious gap in the teaching of the ESP module that is meant to enhance the English writing and speaking competency of students in institutions of higher learning. According to Madiseh, over the past decade, students at Iran University of Medical Sciences (IUMS) in Tehran have struggled with English and achieving learning outcomes when it came to preparing for their comprehensive exam and making use of learning content for their future endeavours.¹⁴ In another study conducted on vocabulary acquisition in English for Medicine, Zafirovska and Xhaferi explored students' perspectives regarding learning strategies in Medical English courses in order to give new insight to scholars for curriculum development of English for medicine and found that there are some serious challenges as far as English for health is concerned.¹⁵ In addition, Vahdany and Gerivani found that medical students valued the reading skill higher than other skills, followed by the writing skill at Iran University of Medical Sciences in Guilan province.¹⁶ Thus, this study is very important to investigate whether potential health professionals meet international language competency requirements.

All the above perspectives shine light on the importance of English for health, like all other discipline-specific languages, such as English for law, English for aviation and English for Science. Thus, this study is very important in trying to fill the gap, even in a small way, in this area of ESP.

Challenges posed by English for Health

English for health, like all the other English that are discipline-specific, has its own peculiar challenges. The most challenges relate to the disciplines of health and language. For example, health jargon is unique to the discipline. Sentence construction and word order in the health discipline are very different to general English. Thus, one of the most challenging aspects is developing a curriculum in ESP that will address the students' English language challenges while also enhancing their content knowledge. Institutions face a dilemma because they do not have staff that is well-trained to develop ESP courses or modules that are properly and relevantly tailored for health.

In addition, Scholars such as Martinez et al. highlight how difficult it is for one to penetrate documents that are written in a language that is discipline-specific.¹⁷ The style of writing in health documents can be very challenging even for L1 speakers of English. Thus, it is of paramount importance that when such an English language is taught, it is taught with care. The above assertion captures the core argument in this study. It is further argued that when one reads between the lines, one realises that the problem of comprehension, as far as legal language (i.e, ESP) is concerned, can be mainly a language problem, and in most cases considered as a stylistics one.

The Concepts of Health versus Language

ESP teaching and learning, and Genre theory complement each other very well. There exists a nexus between the two. ESP also relates to occupational English. It is undoubtedly true that ESP has expanded interest from descriptive analyses of linguistic features to analyses of genres and their communicative functions. This extension is very crucial to pedagogy, wherein ESP modules such as English for health

¹² Eun Jeong Park, "Affordances and Challenges of Mixed-Methods Needs Analysis for the Development of ESP Courses.," *Language Teaching Research Quarterly* 23 (2021): 12–22.

¹³ Barry Lee Reynolds, Xiaofang Zhang, and Chen Ding, "A Mixed-Methods Study of English Vocabulary for Medical Purposes: Medical Students' Needs, Difficulties, and Strategies," *Applied Linguistics Review* 14, no. 3 (2023): 643–78.

¹⁴ Fatemeh Ranjbaran Madiseh, "Material Development for ESP: A Case of an In-House Course Book for Medical English," *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, 2023, 436.

¹⁵ Adriana Zafirovska and Brikena Xhaferi, "Vocabulary Acquisition in English for Medicine Students' Perspective," *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, 2022, 505–32.

¹⁶ Fereidoon Vahdany and Leila Gerivani, "An Analysis of the English Language Needs of Medical Students and General Practitioners: A Case Study of Guilan University of Medical Sciences," *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 104–10.

¹⁷ Eric Martínez, Frank Mollica, and Edward Gibson, "Even Lawyers Don't Like Legalese," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120 (2023): 23.

are taught. In addition Genre theory is critical in this study because of its focus on situated linguistic behaviour in institutionalised academic or professional settings.¹⁸ According to Bhatia, genre refers to language use in a conventionalised communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution, which give rise to stable structural forms by imposing constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discursive resources.¹⁹ Genre theory also highlights the idea of domain-specificity.²⁰ The researcher contends that in the course of their daily routine, health practitioners produce a range of texts, and these texts are domain-specific. According to Bhatia, such texts display typical patterns found in similarly produced texts by other professionals in the same field.²¹

Development of ESP teaching and learning materials meant for Health

a. Orientation of the study

Medical English, as it is sometimes called, is not the kind of English one learns in high school or secondary school. This type of language has its own language, structure and conventions. It is observed that Medical English is part-technical, part-academic, and part-everyday. It has a wide variety of slang, acronyms, and colloquialisms that those outside the profession find incomprehensible. It exists in highly charged interactions. Most universities that have medical programmes have specific modules meant for students in that programme. For example, at the University of Pretoria, this module is called ‘Academic English for Health Sciences’, at the University of Limpopo, it is called English for Health Sciences (HEHS) and at Sefako Makgatho Health Science University, where this study took place, it is called Health Education and Life Competencies.

Teaching and learning materials for medical English are usually developed by ordinary English lecturers who teach the English language at a university. This puts these lecturers in an invidious position as they are not trained in developing teaching and learning materials in ESP, let alone in ESP for health purposes. English language and health content are at the heart of this development. For this reason, it must not be compromised.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Grant and Osanloo, a theoretical framework is “the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study.”²² This study draws from Needs Analysis (NA) and Genre theories as its lens because language researchers and educators maintain that a lack of identifying students’ needs hampers the development and improvement of English language education in ESP.²³ In addition, ESP has been defined as “an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need,”²⁴ and so needs analysis has commonly played a fundamental role in the development of ESP courses. Genre theory, on the other hand, according to Bhatia, refers to language use in a conventionalised communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution, which give rise to stable structural forms by imposing constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discursive resources.²⁵ These two theories are critical in this study. The theories in this study were selected based on the aims of the research study and its relevance to the study because the idea is to explore and investigate the English writing and speaking challenges faced by these first-year medical students at the selected university. Thus, the researchers draw most of their principles from these two theories to give this study a grounding. Because of the use of this theoretical framework, the issues of reliability and validity were

¹⁸ V.K. Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View* (New York: Continuum, 2004).22.

¹⁹ Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*.23.

²⁰ Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*. 53.

²¹ Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*.

²² Cynthia Grant and Azadeh Osanloo, “Understanding, Selecting, and Integrating a Theoretical Framework in Dissertation Research: Creating the Blueprint for Your ‘House,’” *Administrative Issues Journal Education Practice and Research* 4, no. 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9>.

²³ Park, “Affordances and Challenges of Mixed-Methods Needs Analysis for the Development of ESP Courses.”

²⁴ Hutchinson and Waters, *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centred Approach*.

²⁵ Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*.23.

taken care of in this project. Thus, this framework was relevant and pivotal in providing a solid grounding for this study.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation was quanti-qualitative in nature, where the focus was to determine the views and perceptions of the participants regarding English for Medical Studies. This was done to enable the researchers to investigate English writing and speaking challenges that these first-year medical students at a university in South Africa face when learning in English for Medical Sciences.

Sample and sampling procedure

The investigation reported in this article took place in the 2023 academic year. Furthermore, in this study, the population was the 2023 first-year Medical Science students at a specifically selected institution in South Africa. The research participants all indicated that they are L2. A convenience sampling technique was used to collect data, and this is applicable to the whole sample of this study. According to Etikan, convenience sampling “is a nonprobability sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, availability at a given time, and the willingness to participate, are included for the study.”²⁶ In this study, first-year medicine students who are registered for English are appropriate because they are accessible, closer, and convenient to the researcher since she is a lecturer there at SMU. The rationale for choosing these research participants is that one of the researchers teaches these students, and she has access to them. All the research participants indicated that they spoke English as a second language (L2). The researcher targeted the total sample of 46 participants for this investigation, but unfortunately, only 26 responded positively.

Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the data in this study were of a qualitative and quantitative nature. Thus, the researchers employed three data collection instruments to harvest data in order to answer the research questions that were investigated. Data collection was mainly done through interviews (semi-structured), a questionnaire and a writing exercise. The interviews comprised six (8) questions that were open-ended, and the questionnaire comprised 12 open-ended questions. These three instruments were applied in the study so that the researchers could ensure “the trustworthiness of the findings and to reduce the bias and limitations that may arise from a single method of data collection.”²⁷ The analysis of the data employed thematic content analysis, which assisted in looking for patterns and themes as well as gaps in the data. The researchers mainly collected data from the interviews through an audio digital recorder. The data was then captured and saved in a labelled folder on the researcher’s computer. The recorded data was transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and stored on the researcher’s computer.

Ethical Considerations

The parent consent form was distributed to the parents because not all of them were above 21 years of age. Ethical clearance, which is called TREC, was sought before commencement of the study.

²⁶ Ilker Etikan, “Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling,” *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>.

²⁷ Faith Leah Thobejane, “Challenges Faced by Township Learners in Second Language Acquisition” (University of Pretoria, 2018).52.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Biographical Data

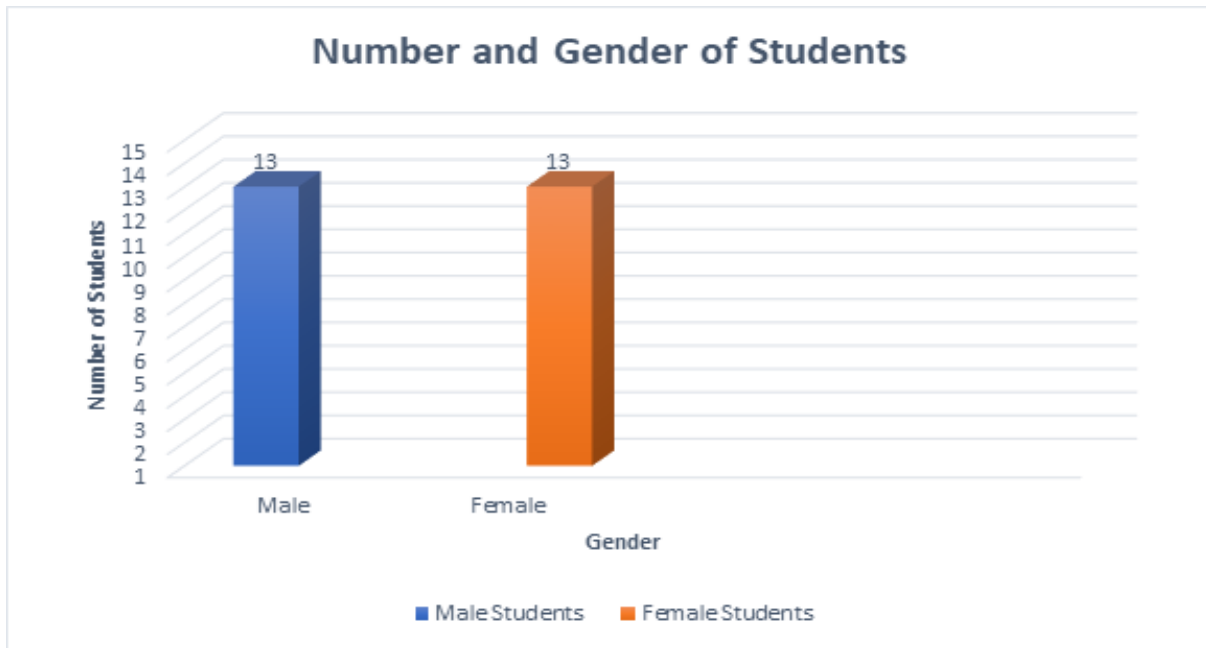


Figure 1: Gender of the Research respondents

Figure 1 above illustrates that out of twenty-six (26), (100%) research subjects, (13) thirteen (50%) were male, and (13) thirteen (50%) were female. It should be noted that it was not the creation of the researchers that the research subjects are so evenly distributed. It was just a coincidence.

Students' Age Range

To understand the participants well, the researcher asked the participants to provide their age range.

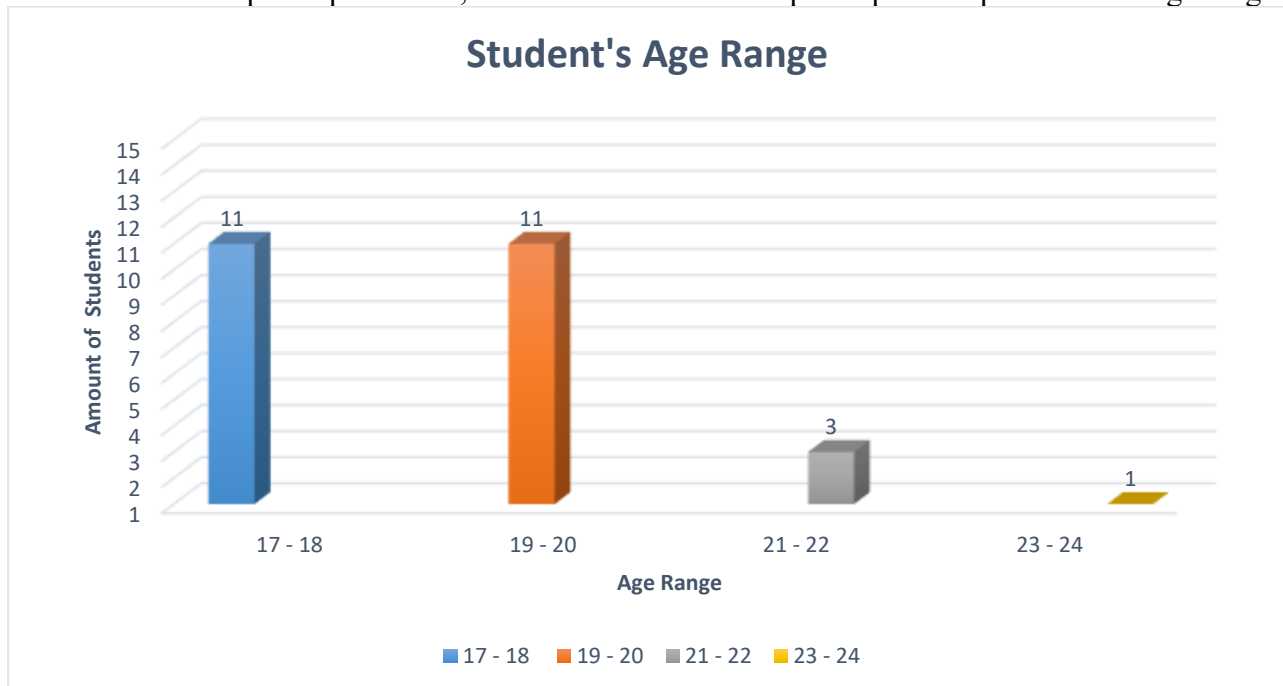


Figure 2: Students' Age Range

Home languages of the students

The home language of the students was one of the aspects used to describe the participants. Figure 3.2.3 below indicates the home language of the students.

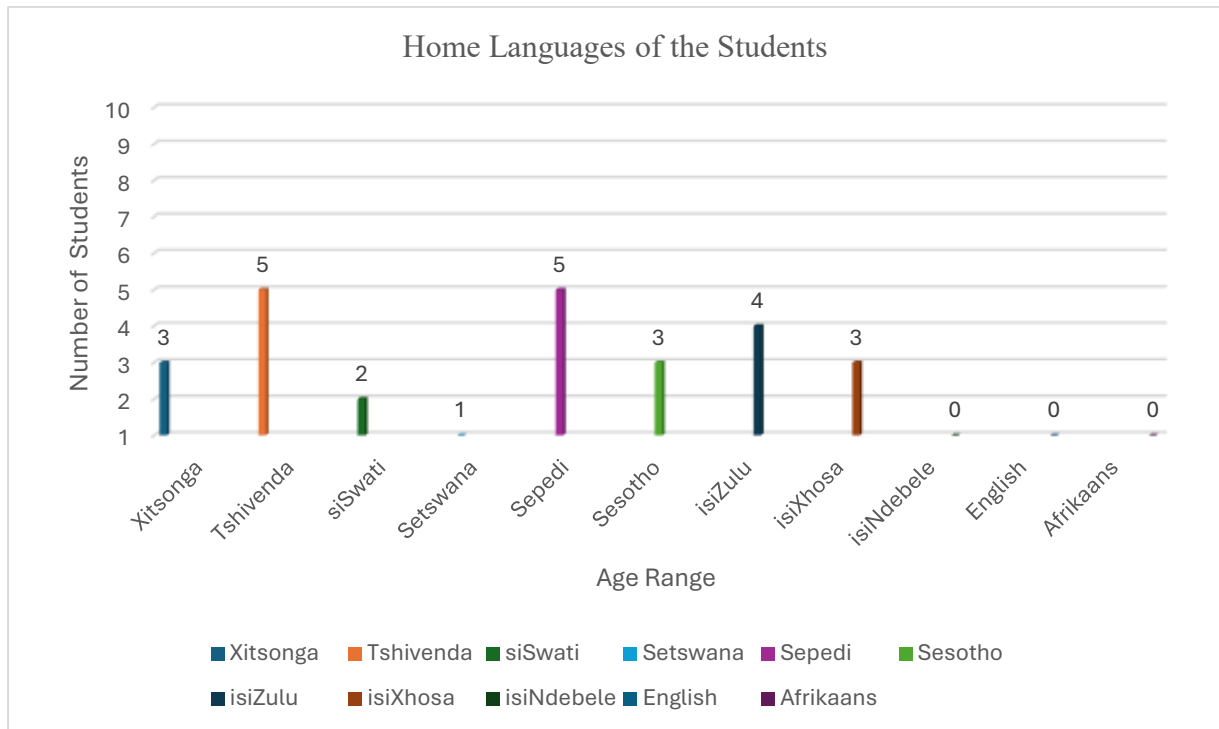


Figure 3: Home Languages of the Students

Figure 3 above illustrates the home languages of the participants. The graph indicates that three (3) students speak Xitsonga, five (5) speak Tshivenda, two (2) speak siSwati, one speaks Setswana, five (5) speak Sepedi, three (3) speak Sesotho, four (4) speak isiZulu, and three (3) speak isiXhosa as their home language. It is important to note that no one indicated that English is his or her mother tongue. This will be very important when the results of this study are discussed.

The sector of the high school the students attended

To understand the participants even better, the researcher asked the students to disclose the type of high school they attended:

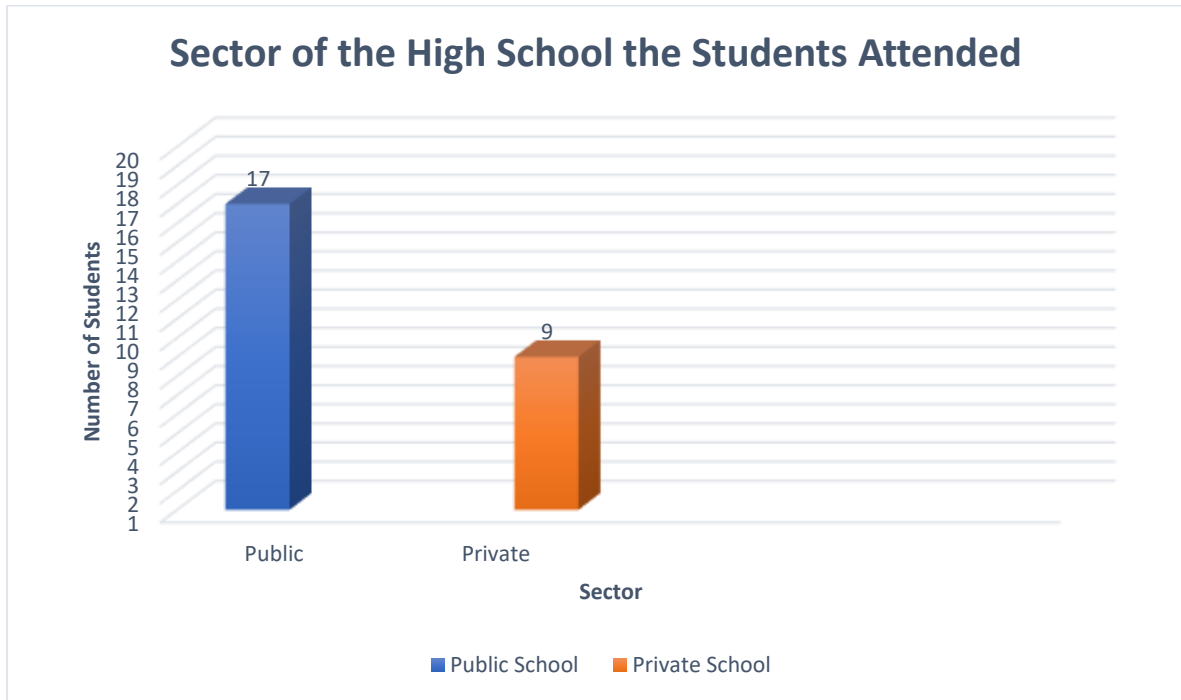


Figure 4: Sector of the High School the Students Attended

Figure 4 above illustrates which sector the students’ high schools were in. Seventeen (65.38%) went to public high schools, and nine (34.62 %) went to private schools. This indicates that a majority of the research respondents in this investigation got their basic education through public, or what is commonly known as government schools. Only nine research respondents went to private schools, and this could be attributed to the high cost of private education in South Africa, and also perhaps to the stringent acceptance measures.

In addition to the biographical information above, research subjects were also questioned on their challenges regarding English linguistic knowledge, particularly when it comes to English grammar (that is, both in the spoken and written modes). Their perspectives are indicated in detail below in the Table.1.1

The following verbatim responses below are samples of the responses provided:

Table 1.1: Research participants’ verbatim answers and Themes for Analysis

Theme	Codes	Some Quotes
Grammar	Misuse of verbs and tenses	Research respondent 8: “I did live in a village next to a mountain.” Research respondent 17: “My mother did not went to school so she is not working.”
	Misuse of personal pronouns (he/she)	Research respondent 9: “My mother, he is a very strong woman.” Research respondent 23: “ My father gives me this chain because she was working at a shop for jewellery.”
	Misuse of prepositions	Research respondent 1: “I came to SMU for Medicine.” Research respondent 15: “My friend’s family is different than mine.”
	Incorrect word usage	Research respondent 5: “Studying every day is exhausting sometimes after class I just lay down and switch off my phone.”

		Research respondent 9: “Me I don’t like being with friends.”
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It is observed from the table above that misuse of verbs and tenses is one of the challenges indicated by the research subjects. The examples in Table 1.1 give a clear indication that there are students who are not competent as far as those areas of English grammar are concerned. Out of 26 (100%) research respondents, 34.62% (i.e. is 9 of the research respondents) did very well in their grammar and all of them attended private school prior to coming to SMU, the other 65.38% (i.e. Seventeen) did very bad when it comes to English grammar and this could be attributed to the fact that they went to public or government schools. As Table 1.1 illustrates, some research respondents were struggling with their English vocabulary. Out of twenty-six, 19 (73.077%) had challenges with English vocabulary (i.e. both at word usage and also spelling words). Some research respondents told the researchers that in their public schools, where they attended their Grade 12, they were taught in their respective home languages most of the time; therefore, that is why their English vocabulary is poor. This could be attributed to the fact that the very same teachers also suffer from inadequate English proficiency. Among the 26 respondents, 18 (69.231%) of them indicated that the English language is a bit difficult for them, and to make matters worse, English that is tailor-made for medicine is even harder.

In addition, 18 (69.231%) of the research respondents indicated that the type of English module (i.e the one meant for Health at the university) was different from the type of English subject they learned at a high school level, and this makes it very difficult for them to understand it. Twelve (46.154%) of the research respondents indicated that they are still struggling to learn language aspects like paragraph and essay construction and referencing. The other student indicated that the module (i.e. the one at the university) is a waste of time because they are not going to write or use essays in their careers. To complement the above-mentioned data and also to get evidence from another intervening variable on the matter investigated, the research participants were asked the following question in their interviews:

Question 1: Is the university helping in improving your medical English competence?

Out of 26 (100%) research respondents, 14 (53.846%) of them indicated that they felt that the university is helping those who do not know English enough, although they are also of the opinion that this aiding measure is not enough. Furthermore, 5 (19.231%) research respondents indicated that their English/Academic literacy module did not provide them with the intervention they would have liked. It is only 1 (3.846%) respondent who responded by saying she is not sure whether the intervention provided by the university is enough or not. Out of the 14 (53.846%), two (14.286%) research respondents indicated that they feel that the university is trying its best to help. Nine (9) of them explained further that some of the academic literacy lecturers take time after classes to assist students with basic English skills such as grammar and vocabulary. Two other research respondents indicated that sometimes in class, some lecturers take 10 minutes to recap on basic English skills, which they feel is not necessary. One research respondent indicated that the lecturers sometimes suggest websites and books that will help improve their English skills. On the same matter, 5 (19.231%) research respondents indicated that the university does not provide any help when it comes to improving their English proficiency. Out of the 5 (19.231%) respondents, 3 (60%) of them indicated that some lecturers are only concerned with getting through the syllabus. In addition to the questionnaire and interview data, the researchers also subjected the research participants to a writing exercise with the intention of getting more data on the English writing challenges that might be affecting the research participants. The analysis and findings of this activity are discussed in detail below:

Analysis and interpretation based on the Written Essay by the Research respondents

Research participants were also requested to write an essay on a given topic. This was to allow the researchers to gather more raw, in-depth and concrete data regarding the research participants’ English writing deficiencies. Principles from Textual Analysis (TA) were employed in this study as a lens through which to scrutinize the students' writing. This was seen as a way to strengthen the investigation.

The researcher gave 26 students an academic essay assessment on a specific topic. The essay question was “*Why is it important that South Africa produce more medical graduates?*” The essays were marked based on the *content, organisation, language and style*. Regarding content, the researchers were, among other things, mainly looking for things such as a statement of the main idea, an explanation and examples supporting the ideas expressed. Regarding language usage and style, the researcher was looking for challenges relating to grammar. The essays were marked out of 20. 10 marks for content, 6 marks for technical aspects and 4 marks for style.

The following emerged: Out of 26 (100%) research respondents, 25 (96.254%) got above 60 % in the overall essay, and only one (3.846%) got 50%. As can be seen, a staggering majority of the research respondents passed the essay writing exercise. This was quite a surprising result. The research respondents were able to conduct research and put their information in a logical manner. This might be due to the fact that this research is being conducted towards the end of the year, whereby they were already taught how to write a well-researched essay in Academic Literacy, which seems to indicate that the module meant for English for Health seems to be effective. Although these students were impressive in their essay content, the aspect that prevented them from obtaining full marks was the language and style. Clarity and precision are paramount, with attention paid to sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary choice. In this category, the students struggled. It was clear from their answers that their grammar was severely lacking. 80% of the students got less than 40% on the technical aspect.

DISCUSSION

This research study investigated the English writing and speaking challenges faced by first-year students of English for Medical Studies at SMU in Gauteng province, South Africa. The study reported that first-year students of English for Medical Studies at SMU indicated a high perception that they indeed have a serious challenge when it comes to English workplace literacy that is focused on health professions or environments. This finding is consistent with the findings of various scholars.²⁸ The other finding is that majority of the research subjects attended public schools in South Africa. This finding aligns with the factual view that South Africa's basic education is struggling to impart adequate English literacy to students whose L1 is not English. If health students have adequate workplace English, it helps them to become independent and engages them in the learning process.

Similarly, various researchers such as Makhubele et al. found that adequate workplace English helps significantly in boosting students' autonomy as far as learning is concerned.²⁹ This finding is also confirmed by Rumsey et al. and Williams et al., who found that English that is tailor-made to the discipline has a positive impact on improving the speaking and writing of students.³⁰ This result demonstrates the importance of using a properly developed ESP that is meant for health professions. Overall, a relevantly developed ESP is an entertaining and engaging resource for language learning. It also provides students with chances to get acquainted with the work-tailored skills that are going to be useful in the world of work. Such a view is affirmed by Bhatia, who emphasises Genre or discipline-specific language. This is also highlighted in literature on CLT (Communicative Language Teaching).³¹

The study found that a significant number of research subjects indicated a challenge with grammar (both at the speaking and writing levels). This finding is confirmed by some previous studies, which found a substantial correlation between the English L2 speaking and writing prowess and the type of school they have attended, where the challenge seems to be English grammar.³² The present study

²⁸ Martínez, Mollica, and Gibson, “Even Lawyers Don’t Like Legalese”; Zafirovska and Xhaferi, “Vocabulary Acquisition in English for Medicine Students’ Perspective”; Madiseh, “Material Development for ESP: A Case of an In-House Course Book for Medical English.”

²⁹ Themba Makhubele, Tebogo Kekana, and Mphoto Mogoboya, “Evaluation of English for Specific Purposes Textbooks by Medical Sciences Students at the University of Limpopo: A Needs Analysis Approach,” *Int. J. Spec. Educ* 37, no. 3 (2022): 14150–62.

³⁰ Michele Rumsey et al., “The Consequences of English Language Testing for International Health Professionals and Students: An Australian Case Study,” *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 54 (2016): 95–103; Anna Williams et al., “Healthcare Professional and Interpreter Perspectives on Working with and Caring for Non-English Speaking Families in a Tertiary Paediatric Healthcare Setting,” *Ethnicity & Health* 23, no. 7 (2018): 767–80.

³¹ Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*.

³² Tebogo Johannes Kekana, *Workplace English Writing Needs: A Case Study of Perceptions and Experiences of Police Constables at Selected Police Clusters in the Gauteng Province, South Africa* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2015); Makhubele,

found that students suffer significantly when it comes to vocabulary, the use of prepositions, tense and verbs. This result aligns with previous studies in ESP. In the same vein, the study found that generally the university tries to help students who are struggling with speaking and writing in English, though some research subjects felt the university is not doing enough to help them in that regard. This finding can be interpreted as meaning that even though the university is trying hard to help, there is room for improvement. These findings are also crucial when one wants to develop an effective and relevant ESP for health.

The discussion above shines a spotlight on ESP matters in health programmes. The findings show that language on its own plays a pre-eminent role in health processes or practices; it is indeed something of a paradox that problems of definition, interpretations and specificity are constantly referred to by various language theories. Plain English will constitute a good example and proof of the changes in a good direction that are happening in areas such as legal English and health English. However, it was observed that many discipline English speakers or professionals, to a greater or lesser extent, oppose the plain English movement and would prefer to adhere to the well-known forms, mostly due to the fact that this seems more practical from their point of view.

The other very crucial finding discussed in the results of this study is that lecturers who teach EMAP are not necessarily ESP specialists but rather just ordinary lecturers of general English. This is a serious problem facing not only Sefako Makgatho Health Science University but most institutions of higher learning in South Africa. To complicate the matter further is that one of the main obstacles for developing a relevant and efficient English for health course is finding the appropriate reading material to meet the students' level of proficiency, and this is because these students come to the university with differing English language proficiency. ESP course developers will struggle to accommodate all the differing English proficiency levels of students. There is no perfect course book because each course book is used in different situations by different students who have various objectives, needs, wants, proficiency levels, and cultural backgrounds. It is maintained that Health professionals must understand and address their own health literacy strengths, needs and preferences.³³ According to Dodson et al. health literacy responsiveness describes the way in which policies, services, environments and providers make health information and healthcare available and accessible to people with different health literacy strengths, needs and preferences.³⁴ It is further observed that recently, research has expanded to include the measurement of the health literacy of healthcare professionals and of students of the healthcare professions in efforts to increase their awareness and knowledge of health literacy.³⁵ According to Budhathoki et al, if healthcare professionals themselves have health literacy needs, then this can hinder their abilities to support their patients.³⁶ This is one of the main findings in this study that a significant number of first-year medical students suffer from health literacy (i.e. as far as English writing and speaking competency is concerned).

Furthermore, although the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test is an assessment of a learner's English to establish whether they can cope with the rigours of entry into Higher Education, it has been used for other purposes for which it is not intended. One such example is its use in assessing a doctor's English as a step towards registering with the General Medical Council (GMC). This makes the findings in this study even more important because health practitioners in other countries are required by law to prove their English linguistic competency before they can register with the health council. Most research respondents in this study indicated that they have challenges with English writing and speaking.

Kekana, and Mogoboya, "Evaluation of English for Specific Purposes Textbooks by Medical Sciences Students at the University of Limpopo: A Needs Analysis Approach."

³³ Shyam Sundar Budhathoki et al., "Use of the English Health Literacy Questionnaire (HLQ) with Health Science University Students in Nepal: A Validity Testing Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 6 (2022): 3241.

³⁴ Dodson, Good, and Osborne, "Health Literacy Toolkit for Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Series of Information Sheets to Empower Communities and Strengthen Health Systems."

³⁵ Shyam Sundar Budhathoki et al., "Health Literacy of Future Healthcare Professionals: A Cross-Sectional Study among Health Sciences Students in Nepal," *International Health* 11, no. 1 (2019): 15–23.

³⁶ Budhathoki et al., "Use of the English Health Literacy Questionnaire (HLQ) with Health Science University Students in Nepal: A Validity Testing Study."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

- ESP modules meant to improve the English language in health programmes should not be for only one year or one semester, but at least a minimum of two years.
- Institutions such as SMU should involve linguists, particularly for ESP when ESP modules are developed, because by their nature, they are not language-based institutions.
- Language across the curriculum should also be considered as far as content modules (i.e., Health modules) are concerned.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to find out the English-speaking and writing challenges faced by first-year university students pursuing health qualifications. It further examined the interface of these factors. This study was founded based on the plethora of literature, which has shown that these students find it difficult to fathom their English course, which is discipline-specific and meant to prepare them for the world of work. This study found that there is an array of intertwined and interrelated factors that combine to hamper the English-speaking and writing ability of the investigated first-year students at SMU. These factors are located in three areas, namely: institutional-based and context-based. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions that develop these ESP utilise professionals who are specialists in ESP meant for health qualifications in combination with content lecturers. Institutions of higher learning that train these ESP developers and other relevant stakeholders provide the necessary intervention to help minimize the perpetuation of the problem investigated. Linguists who are trained in both ESP and General English should also be roped in when curricula of this nature are developed. This study could be used as a basis for further inquiries regarding factors that stifle the acquisition of adequate and relevant English language for health. In addition, the researchers in this study tried their best to discuss the distinctive areas in English language writing as indicated by the written essays of the research subjects. Textual or document analysis shows that health literacy or language is a distinct and peculiar variation of language which should be given serious care. It has its specific graph, logical, lexical, syntactical and phonological features. Such analysis helps the ESP practitioners to select specific and relevant content for courses related to language that is meant for health.

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