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ENGLISH COURSE VERSUS THE ACADEMIC-LINKED  
DEMANDS OF ENGLISH AT THE MEDICAL COLLEGES IN  
ETHIOPIA: AN OVERVIEW

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Today, it is generally acknowledged that English is having a prominent role in the academic scene in Ethiopia. It is regarded as an indispensable skill since it is used mostly for educational purposes in all higher educational institutions. It is important to recognize that the use of English as an academic language does not arise out of any intrinsic merits of English. Rather, its value lies in the enormous reservoir of educational materials, and other academic activities are recorded and administered in it. This phenomenal academic demand has caused English to become the primary means of academic communication at Medical Colleges. Thus, whenever students communicate, they are confronted with academic conventional requirements. This implies that English is not an end in itself, but rather an efficient instrument for greater intellectual demands.

English exists, therefore, as a part of academic work not apart of it because it is fundamental prerequisite for achieving academic goals. It is believed that when communication is effective as an educational tool, the desired behavioral changes as predetermined by educational goals and objectives are observed in terms of knowledge and practice

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(1). Effective communication, therefore, requires successfully employed language skill to achieve the desired goals and objectives. The students are expected to use intelligible English geared to the comprehension level of the listener and reader and follow the spoken language with full understanding.

The students have to acquire the skill to use the skill. English as a service subject provides the learner the know how of language skill to be applied in the academic activities. As a result, Freshman English Course is offered at the Medical Colleges based on the premises that it will help students to develop their potential by fostering a broad range of conceptual and academic abilities. Let us see to what extent the course assists our learners to meet their English needs at the Medical Colleges in attempting to answer the following questions:

1. How adequate is the course content to meet the needs of English at the Medical Colleges?
2. Is the method of teaching effective?

The course is taught as a utility subject for one year. The textbooks, in general, consist of twelve units divided into sections on:

- (1) Reading Comprehension
- (2) Vocabulary
- (3) Structure and Usage
- (4) Composition Writing at a paragraph sentence level.

The units are grouped according to grammatical areas. The technique employed for developing the reading skill is to provide a para story to read, and the testing comprehension and vocabulary are of the popular type-multiple-choice. The method is usually limited to memorization of phrases and patterns. Writing composition are interspersed with grammar lessons throughout and an attempt is made to develop competency under pressure. A few oral exercises from the reading comprehension side are included to the course to provide relief from the steady diet of grammar. Furthermore, the exercises are not really teaching the learners anything, but simply testing what the learners already know. The fact is, despite their differences in scope, the high school English textbooks and Freshman English Course, are similar in their content and methodology. There is horizontal rather than vertical transfer of language knowledge and skill for those who join the Medical Colleges. This is because the learners stay within the same behavioral category in making transfer. In a more concrete way, the gain is the same. Because of the nature of the syllabus, the students are forced to memorize grammatical patterns, and lexical as their principal educational skill to pass the exam. Nothing less, and nothing more.

As mentioned above, the Freshman English Course overemphasises the accumulation of vocabulary and grammatical patterns disregarding communicative activities. Watts (6) observes, as cited by Gay "...to possess a stock of good words and patterns is of little use unless we know how to employ them. Prator (12) remarks:

The purpose of language is communication. Unless it is used for communicating ideas, it is not language learning, but parroting. English never becomes a truly effective means of communication of experience when it is limited only to the grammatical forms.



Of course, we must learn the grammar of any language. In fact, we cannot build a house without foundations. Grammar in itself is not meaningful, but effective communication makes it so. Grammar, therefore, should be taught not as an end for its own sake, but as a means of carrying out communicative intent. From the language teaching and learning point of view, learning language will be incomplete if the contact with it is not meaningful (20). However, opportunities for the learner to use English for communicative purposes are rare in the Freshman English Course. Thus, the Freshman English Course seems to have little to offer a scholarly contribution to the learners in developing their communicative skills to meet the needs of academic studies. I do not mean; however, that the textbooks are worthless. No doubt, they offer something, but they are doing nothing to meet the goals and objectives of English use at the Medical Colleges. I mean that the contents and methods for teaching listening, speaking and writing are not wrong, but inefficient to meet the learners' need. The reading and writing exercises given to students are at a much lower level than what is expected of them in the Medical studies. The textbooks they read, the reports they write, and the oral exams they submit require a much higher level of language skill than what is taught in English 101. No doubt, there is no intellectual congruency because the requirements that the students want to place on English are virtually limited to cope up with the academic demands of the learners' need. In other words, the student is expected to do something that he has never heard or seen before. Thus, the language course for students in professionally oriented colleges seems problem area, where a much hard work is done in isolation at various levels.

A more serious matter is that the textbook is out-of-date since it follows the mid-fifties manipulative methods. A substantial body of research has indicated that such a program does little to increase fluency and precision in written composition (11,14,16) or to improve skill in reading comprehension (2,4). Twaddel (17) rejects word-list memorization as a futile approach to vocabulary acquisition. Some foreign language educators (15,8,3,7, 19,10,5) suggest that manipulative methods as used by the Freshman English Course used have limited value for tertiary level students. This implies that Freshman English Course has limited use as a tool for academic purposes.

This is a brief picture of the English teaching and learning situation at the Medical Colleges. The question is: How do we expect the Freshman English Course within the limits of the old-fashioned framework and superficial content to assist students to be intellectually competent and linguistically fluent?

The preponderance of evidence suggests that the Freshman English Course fails in several ways to come up with the standard requirements that the students want to place on English for academic demands. A skill should be learned (13). Moreover, it should be taught in conformity to the needs of the users (18). It is, of course, important to know that it is the Spoken and Written skills competency, and the ability to understand and the skill to dig out the deep implied, and inferential meanings of a printed material that they badly need. And these skills are essential ingredients for academic success, in general, and are equally applicable to teaching and learning activities.



Based on the objective evidence mentioned above, English ought to receive greater attention than it is getting at present, for the fact that it is not taught for the purpose it serves. As Morris and Fitz\_Gibbon (9) suggest, "Objective should reflect the level of the skill attainment which the program hopes to produce." Thus, English syllabus should be more intelligently tailored to cope up with the language demands of the course so that the objectives and requirements of the colleges will be met. The remarks are:

1. Today, language educators agree that the objective of learning and teaching language should be for communicative competency (the individual's total capacity to language). For Freshman students as advanced learners, and since they have learned grammar for more than eight years at high schools, the language emphasis should be on functional skills of English, that is, practicing communication techniques, developing effective writings skills, and acquiring reading fluency with comprehension. Communicative Syllabus, which focuses on the appropriate use of language, setting seems feasible for Freshman students. This Syllabus meets a number of students objectives:

- (a) provides practices of the basic structures
- (b) helps to gain functional command of English
- (c) prepares linguistically for successful academic experience in an institution of higher learning.

2. The major aim of Medical Colleges is to produce trained professionals with high academic standards, and capabilities of undertaking research. Unfortunately, the high school graduates join the Medical Colleges totally unequipped for any college work because the high school

English books are grossly inefficient to enable students to deal with academic work beyond twelfth grade. Furthermore, the fact that the students are able to express themselves after having been registered for Freshman Preliminary English Course does not necessarily imply that students are able to write academic and research papers on their own. Therefore, Freshman English and Sophomore English Courses should not be viewed as alternative ways of dealing with a subject, but as different courses with different objectives. The former sets its goals on grammar and vocabulary, and the latter patterns its objectives on the know-how of academic conventional regularities. Each course represents a separate branch of language skill which by definition has its own distinctive principles and procedures for developing language skill through its own logic.

For reasons that are not clear, Medical Students are not supplied with every necessary academic linked requisites of English required for the performance of academic writing skills. However, this paper maintains that the technical and scientific writing course, which enables students to learn how to write effectively, merits and deserves a place in the curriculum at the Medical Colleges. The introduction of Sophomore English, therefore, seems to be more feasible at Medical Colleges in Ethiopia. Sophomore English Course has the following pedagogical merits:

- (a) provides the core functions such as summarizing, analyzing, note taking etc., pertaining to academic course work.
- (b) develops communication know-how which can be applied in the academic method of scholarly writing.



If the goal of English classroom is to attain a level of acceptable competencies in spoken and written aspects of the language which foster the academic success of the learner, the Communicative Syllabus, and the Sophomore English Course should be harmonized to cross fertilize each other to achieve that goal.

Otherwise, if the objectives and aspiration of the colleges, and the purpose of English is not met, it will be like expecting a soldier to win a battle having a gun without the bullet.

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