

An Exploratory Study of Vocational High School Students' Needs in Learning English

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Abstract : The educational objective of vocational high schools (VHSs) is to equip VHS students with practical skills and knowledge that can be applied in the job-related market. However, with the increasing number of technological universities over the past two decades, the majority of VHS students have chosen to receive higher education rather than enter the job market. VHS English education has been confronting a dilemma: Should an English for specific purposes (ESP) approach, which aligns with the educational goal of VHS education, be taken or should an English for general purposes (EGP) approach, which prepares VHS students for advanced studies in universities, be followed? While ESP theorists proposed that that ESP can be taught to secondary learners, little was known about VHS students' perspective on this ESP-versus-EGP dilemma. Scant research has investigated different facets of students' needs (necessities, wants, and lacks) for both ESP and EGP in terms of the four language skills and the factors that contribute to any differences. To address the gap in the literature, 100 VHS students responded to statements related to their necessities, wants, and lacks in learning ESP and EGP on a 6-point Likert scale. Six VHS students were interviewed to tap into the reasons for different facets of the needs for learning EGP and ESP. The statistical analysis indicates that at this stage of learning English, VHS subjects believed that EGP was more necessary than ESP; EGP was more desirable than ESP. However, they reported that they were more lacking in ESP than in EGP learning. Regarding EGP, the results show that the VHS subjects rated speaking as their most necessary skill, speaking as the most desirable skill, and writing as the most lacking skill. A significant difference was found between perceived learning necessities and lacks and between perceived wants and lacks. No statistical difference was found between necessities and wants. In the aspect of ESP, the results indicate that the VHS subjects marked reading as their most necessary skill, speaking as the most desirable skill, and writing as the most lacking skill. A significant difference exists between their perceived necessities and lacks and between their wants and lacks. However, there is no statistically significant difference between their perceived lacks and wants. Despite the lack of a significant difference between learning necessities and wants, the qualitative interview data reveal that the reasons for their perceived necessities and wants were different. The findings of the study confirm previous research that demonstrates that 'needs' is a multiple and conflicting construct. What VHS students felt most lacking was not necessarily what they believed they should learn or would like to learn. Although no statistical difference was found, different reasons were attributed to their perceived necessities and wants. Both theoretical and practical implications have been drawn and discussed for ESP research in general and teaching ESP in VHSs in particular.

Keywords : vocational high schools (VHSs), English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), needs analysis

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