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Integrating Linguistic Frameworks to Bridge the Theory–Practice Gap in Medical English Within Military Education

Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai*
Faculty of Foreign Languages, Vietnam Military Medical University, Hanoi, Vietnam

***Abstract*—This study investigates the integration of three linguistic frameworks, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Sociocultural Theory (SCT), into English for Medical Purposes (EMP) teaching in military medical institutions. It explored how lecturers understand and enact these frameworks and which strategies may bridge the theory–practice gap. Data included a survey of 30 lecturers, semi-structured interviews with 15, and analysis of key EMP resources. Awareness was moderate but uneven (SFL 73%, SLA 67%, SCT 60%), with only 60% reporting integration of all three. Corrective feedback, especially prompts and clarification requests, was common (~80%). Main barriers were rigid curricula (87%), limited contextualised materials (80%), and heavy student workload (~67%). Despite these constraints, lecturers expressed strong support for theory-informed approaches, requesting targeted training and adapted materials. Findings show integration is both necessary and feasible if institutions provide curricular flexibility, professional development, and contextualized resources.**

***Index Terms*—EMP, SFL, SLA, SCT, theory–practice gap**

I. Introduction

In high-stakes professional environments such as military medicine, English functions as a vital operational tool for clinical communication, international collaboration, and peacekeeping. Miscommunication in these settings may jeopardize patient safety and disrupt multinational coordination. Although English for Medical Purposes (EMP) has attracted increasing attention in Vietnam and internationally, most studies continue to focus on civilian contexts (Evans, 2019; Le, 2023). By contrast, the distinctive communicative demands of military medicine, where language must be precise, context-sensitive, and immediately deployable, remain under-researched.

Three complementary frameworks provide valuable insights for enhancing EMP pedagogy. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system and provides the basis for genre-based instruction, which helps learners to produce coherent and context-appropriate texts such as case reports and incident records (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Basturkmen, 2019). Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has long emphasized the importance of input, interaction, and output. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and Swain's (1985) output hypothesis have shaped task-based approaches, while Ellis et al. (2020) later demonstrated that task-based language teaching can promote the authentic use of English, even in regulated learning environments. Sociocultural Theory (SCT), grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) work, foregrounds scaffolding and collaboration within the Zone of Proximal Development. Farrell (2015) further highlights how reflective practice, informed by SCT, can support teacher professional development, an issue particularly relevant in specialized domains such as EMP.

However, each framework presents challenges when applied in military academies. Explicit genre pedagogy, as promoted by SFL, can be time-consuming to deliver within curricula already dominated by medical subjects. SLA-inspired approaches depend on sustained communicative opportunities, which are often restricted in exam-driven and hierarchical settings. SCT encourages learner autonomy and collaborative interaction, but these principles may sit uneasily with the command-oriented ethos of military training. As Basturkmen (2019) and Ellis et al. (2020) both caution, theoretical insights must be adapted to context rather than transplanted wholesale.

In Vietnam, research on EMP remains fragmented and primarily oriented towards civilian applications. Evans (2019) identified gaps in genre awareness among undergraduates, while Le (2023) demonstrated that corrective feedback could enhance accuracy and confidence in speaking. However, neither addressed military-specific challenges. Internationally, recent reviews confirm that EMP continues to rely on general-purpose textbooks and that contextualized resources are in short supply. Li (2025) emphasized the need for tailored materials and training, while Xu et al. (2025) highlighted the limited use of authentic, localized texts. At the same time, teacher development has emerged as a decisive factor in the uptake of theory-informed pedagogy. Cao et al. (2022), for example, found that professional support had a strong influence on EMP teachers' classroom practices. Together, these studies highlight both the promise of theoretical integration and the practical obstacles to realizing it in high-stakes settings.

* Corresponding Author. Email: tuyetmai2611@gmail.com

This situation creates a clear research gap. First, only limited work has attempted to integrate SFL, SLA, and SCT within EMP, and, to our knowledge, no study has systematically examined such integration in military medical education. Second, little is known about how lecturers understand and apply theory under rigid curricula, resource constraints, and heavy student workloads. Third, despite repeated calls for contextualized materials, alignment between widely used textbooks and military-specific communicative tasks has rarely been examined (Cao et al., 2022; Li, 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this study investigates how SFL, SLA, and SCT are understood and enacted by lecturers in Vietnamese military medical institutions. It explores the strategies that may help bridge the gap between theory and practice. Using a mixed design that combines a survey of lecturers, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of EMP resources, the study aims to provide evidence-based guidance for theory-informed pedagogy in EMP. Beyond Vietnam, its findings also have relevance for other high-stakes ESP domains such as emergency care, aviation, and disaster relief, where communicative precision is mission-critical. In doing so, the study addresses two guiding questions: (i) how can SFL, SLA, and SCT be integrated into EMP teaching for military medical learners, and (ii) which pedagogical strategies can help bridge the gap between theory and practice in this specialized, high-stakes context?

II. Literature Review

A. Linguistic Theories in ESL and ESP Teaching

Linguistic theories provide the foundation for understanding how language functions, how it is acquired, and how it can be taught. In ESL and ESP contexts, they guide lesson design, learner analysis, and pedagogical decisions. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) observe, all methods are grounded in theoretical assumptions about language and learning. However, many teachers perceive such theories as abstract or detached from practice, a tension that is especially visible in high-stakes domains, such as English for Medical Purposes (EMP).

(a). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) views language as a social semiotic realized through ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It underpins genre-based pedagogy, where explicit guidance in text structures enables learners to produce coherent professional documents. Martin and Rose (2008) demonstrated its value in contexts demanding precision and formality, while Rose and Martin (2012) and Humphrey and Macnaught (2015) confirmed its contribution to disciplinary literacy and writing growth.

Despite these strengths, SFL is a resource-intensive approach. Military medical curricula are already dominated by clinical subjects, leaving limited scope for genre-focused writing instruction. Xu et al. (2025) observed that most EMP textbooks rely on general-purpose resources and rarely include specialized genres such as triage notes or field medical reports. This suggests that while SFL offers a robust framework, its practical application in EMP, particularly in military settings, remains limited.

(b). Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories have also shaped ESP and EMP pedagogy. Krashen (1982) emphasized comprehensible input, Long (1996) highlighted interaction as negotiation of meaning, and Swain (1985) argued that output promotes deeper internalization. Building on these perspectives, Ellis (2003) developed Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), advocating the use of authentic, real-world tasks. Empirical research supports its effectiveness in fostering communicative competence (Ellis, 2009). Subsequent studies further underscore its potential, while also highlighting misunderstandings and limitations in its implementation Ellis et al. (2020). More recently, Ha and Murray (2023) found that Vietnamese teachers consider corrective feedback essential to scaffolding, while Ni and Xu (2025) demonstrated that learners' emotional responses to feedback vary with proficiency and motivation.

Nevertheless, SLA-based approaches face challenges. TBLT requires curricular flexibility, smaller class sizes, and well-prepared teachers, conditions not always available in EMP programmes (Cao et al., 2022). In military academies, teaching is often exam-oriented, hierarchical, and time-restricted, limiting opportunities for negotiation and output. As Li (2025) argues, EMP worldwide still leans heavily on form-focused teaching, with limited uptake of task-based principles. This suggests SLA insights must be carefully adapted to military contexts rather than directly transferred.

(c). Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Sociocultural Theory (SCT), based on Vygotsky (1978), frames learning as socially mediated through the use of tools, collaboration, and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. It resonates with professional training, where learners must coordinate decisions under pressure. Applied linguistics research highlights its contribution to collaborative learning and teacher development (Johnson, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Swain et al., 2010). More recently, Cao et al. (2022) showed that EMP teachers' beliefs strongly shape how they enact scaffolding and collaboration in classrooms.

At the same time, SCT's emphasis on peer negotiation can conflict with the command-driven ethos of military education. While teamwork is indispensable in field medicine, opportunities for open negotiation are often constrained

by hierarchy and discipline. This tension raises questions about how SCT can be reinterpreted for settings where authority and collaboration must coexist.

(d). Synthesis and Gap

Together, SFL, SLA, and SCT provide complementary perspectives: SFL accounts for meaning-making in texts, SLA explains processes of acquisition, and SCT highlights socially mediated learning. Their integration has strong potential for EMP, where communication must be precise, context-sensitive, and collaborative. However, as Xu et al. (2025) and Li (2025) point out, EMP pedagogy still relies heavily on general-purpose resources, and research remains fragmented across separate frameworks. Military medical contexts are almost absent from the literature, even though communicative events such as triage briefings, casualty reports, and multinational ward rounds are mission-critical (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations & Department of Field Support, 2017; United Nations, 2023). This underscores a critical gap: the lack of systematic attempts to integrate SFL, SLA, and SCT into military EMP pedagogy. Addressing this gap is the central aim of the present study.

B. Studies on Applying Theory to Practice in English Language Teaching

Internationally, research has long examined how theoretical insights can be applied in pedagogy. Richards and Rodgers (2001) argued that teaching methods inevitably rest on assumptions about language and learning, while Johnson (2006) stressed the value of sociocultural perspectives in shaping teacher education. Studies on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) show that explicit genre pedagogy can strengthen literacy and coherence in writing (Martin & Rose, 2008; Rose & Martin, 2012; Humphrey & Macnaught, 2015). Similarly, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been promoted as a way of operationalizing SLA principles through authentic tasks, with research demonstrating its potential to foster communicative competence (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Long, 1996). However, Ellis et al. (2020) highlighted that misunderstandings and institutional constraints often limit its classroom impact, particularly in exam-driven or hierarchical settings.

Corrective feedback (CF) represents another area where theory and practice intersect. Early work by Lyster and Ranta (1997) suggested that prompts such as clarification requests, elicitation, and metalinguistic feedback led to greater uptake than recasts. Ellis (2009) added that the effectiveness of CF depends on multiple conditions, including error type, task design, learner proficiency, and timing. Later studies (Li, 2010; Lyster et al., 2013) reinforced the role of scaffolding, showing that feedback is more effective when aligned with SCT. More recently, research has shifted to learners' emotions and teacher cognition. Ni and Xu (2025) found that learners' responses to written CF were shaped by proficiency and motivation, while Ha and Murray (2023) reported that Vietnamese teachers regarded CF as a central part of interactional scaffolding. Crucially, Le (2023) confirmed in the Vietnamese context that both teachers and students valued oral CF for improving speaking proficiency and confidence. This finding highlights how SCT principles of mediation and scaffolding can be effectively applied to translate theory into practice.

Vietnamese scholarship also points to the importance of teacher beliefs in shaping practice. Evans (2019) demonstrated that students' academic writing requires explicit genre-based support, underscoring the relevance of SFL. Nguyen (2024) examined TBLT in high school classrooms and found that teachers' beliefs firmly determined their roles during task implementation, affecting task success. This resonates with SCT's view that teacher mediation is central to learning. Beyond Vietnam, studies in China similarly emphasize teacher cognition: Cao et al. (2022) found that EMP teachers' professional beliefs shaped how they enacted scaffolding and collaboration. Xu et al. (2025) reported that EMP textbooks still rely heavily on general-purpose materials, offering little support for specialized communicative tasks. Li (2025) added that EMP worldwide continues to lack tailored resources and systematic training. Collectively, these studies highlight both the promise and the unevenness of connections between theory and practice. However, none address military or medical contexts, where communicative failures can have a direct impact on patient safety and operational coordination.

TABLE 1
SELECTED STUDIES ON THEORY–PRACTICE INTEGRATION

Focus	Key Studies	Findings	Limitations
Teacher education	(Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2006)	Integration of theory, experience, and sociocultural perspectives	Not EMP-specific
Genre pedagogy (SFL)	(Martin & Rose, 2008; Rose & Martin, 2012; Humphrey & Macnaught, 2015; Evans, 2019)	Explicit genre teaching improves coherence	Applied mainly to academic/civilian contexts
TBLT (SLA)	(Ellis 2003, 2009; Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 1996; Nguyen, 2024)	Real-world tasks foster learning; teacher beliefs shape outcomes	Limited uptake in exam-driven/military settings
Corrective feedback	(Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ellis, 2009; Li, 2010; Lyster et al., 2013; Ha & Murray, 2023; Ni & Xu, 2025; Le, 2023)	CF effective when scaffolded; oral CF boosts confidence	Rarely tested in EMP/military
Teacher cognition in EMP	(Cao et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2025; Li, 2025)	Beliefs and resources shape practice	Lack of focus on military medical contexts

C. Research Gaps

Overall, both international and Vietnamese studies affirm the pedagogical value of genre-based pedagogy, TBLT,

corrective feedback, and SCT-informed scaffolding. However, three critical gaps remain.

First, there has been little systematic attempt to integrate SFL, SLA, and SCT simultaneously in EMP, particularly in medical education (Li, 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

Second, empirical evidence on applying these frameworks to specialized communicative tasks, such as patient history-taking, ward rounds, triage briefings, and case reporting, remains scarce (Cao et al., 2022). Although civilian contexts offer valuable insights (Evans, 2019; Le, 2023; Nguyen, 2024), EMP has not been addressed.

Third, while corpus-informed pedagogy has long been suggested as a way of bridging theory and practice in EMP (Hyland et al., 2012), even recent reviews confirm its absence in military settings (Xu et al., 2025). This study, therefore, did not focus on corpus methods but acknowledged their future potential.

Bridging these gaps is essential for advancing EMP in high-stakes environments, where communication must be precise, context-sensitive, and collaborative. In military medicine, where errors can endanger both patients and multinational operations, developing theory-informed pedagogy is not only beneficial but mission-critical (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations & Department of Field Support, 2017; United Nations, 2023).

III. Methodology

A. Research Context and Design

This study was conducted in the faculties of foreign languages at selected military medical universities and colleges. All 30 English lecturers in these institutions participated, representing the full available population at the research sites. Among them, six held doctoral degrees (PhD) and eighteen held master's degrees (MA). Twenty lecturers had more than 15 years of teaching experience, while the remaining ten had less than 15 years. Their responsibilities covered both General English and English for Medical Purposes (EMP). During their postgraduate studies, most had been introduced, at a general theoretical level rather than through detailed practical training, to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Sociocultural Theory (SCT). This background was self-reported in the survey.

Teaching resources combined locally developed EMP materials with internationally published textbooks. These materials targeted the four core skills while embedding them in medical communication topics such as patient–doctor interactions, medical equipment, hospital departments, body systems, and common diseases.

An exploratory mixed-methods design was adopted to connect theoretical perspectives with pedagogical realities. A census survey of all lecturers (n = 30) provided breadth, while in-depth interviews with a maximum-variation subsample (n = 15) offered depth. The survey was adapted from established teacher cognition frameworks (Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2015) and piloted with two non-participating lecturers, leading to minor wording adjustments for clarity. Data saturation, defined as the point at which no new codes or themes emerged, was reached at the thirteenth interview; two further interviews were conducted to confirm redundancy.

This design was considered appropriate for the bounded and high-stakes context of military EMP education, as it allowed both general trends and individual perspectives to be examined. Ethical approval was obtained through institutional review procedures at the participating universities, and all participants provided informed consent.

B. Research Instruments

(a). Survey

A questionnaire was developed based on established teacher cognition frameworks (Borg, 2006; Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Rahimi & Zhang, 2015), with wording adapted to the EMP/military medical context. These frameworks, though not recent, remain foundational and widely cited in applied linguistics, providing conceptual robustness and flexibility that make them particularly suitable for contexts where newer domain-specific tools are unavailable.

The instrument comprised 22 five-point Likert items across four domains: Awareness (Q1–Q5), Practice (Q6–Q11), Barriers (Q12–Q15), and Needs/Attitudes (Q16–Q22). Example items included: *"I am familiar with the three metafunctions of SFL (ideational, interpersonal, textual)" (Awareness); "I have designed or trialled a classroom activity based on SFL, SLA, or SCT"* (Practice); and a reverse-coded statement such as "*Applying SFL, SLA, and SCT makes little difference in EMP teaching in the military context"* (Needs/Attitudes).

Face and content validity were established through review by two EMP/ESP experts. A small pilot study with five lecturers assessed the clarity, timing, and variability of responses, resulting in minor wording adjustments. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with the four subscales yielding coefficients ranging from .71 to .82. Given the small sample size (n = 30), these values should be interpreted as exploratory estimates of reliability rather than definitive psychometric validation (Nunnally, 1978; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

(b). Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 lecturers purposively selected to reflect variation in teaching experience, institutional type (college/university), EMP/ESP involvement, and prior exposure to linguistic theory. This sample size allowed for maximum variation without analytic overload.

The interview protocol consisted of 12 open-ended questions, focusing on three areas: (i) understandings and applications of SFL, SLA, and SCT; (ii) perceived affordances, constraints, and resources; and (iii) expectations for

institutional support and contributions of the study. Example prompts included: "*Can you describe a specific teaching activity you have used that draws on SFL, SLA, or SCT? What was the outcome*?" and "*Do you use materials such as Career Paths: Medical, English in Medicine, or the CanMEDS framework? How do these help or limit theory-informed teaching*?" The protocol was reviewed for clarity by two colleagues but was not piloted separately with participants; this decision was made to minimize respondent burden while ensuring content validity. The design drew on established guidance for qualitative interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Cohen et al., 2018).

(c). Secondary Teaching Materials

To triangulate survey and interview findings, three widely used resources were analyzed: *Career Paths: Medical, English in Medicine* (Evans et al., 2012) and the *CanMEDS* 2015 competency framework (Frank et al., 2015). These were chosen because they represent complementary perspectives and are directly relevant to EMP pedagogy. Career Paths: Medical provides accessible materials frequently used in Vietnam for medical English courses. English in Medicine (Glendinning & Holmström, 2005) is a classic ESP text that emphasizes doctor–patient communication. Additionally, CanMEDS 2015 outlines internationally recognized competencies for health professionals, including communication, collaboration, and professional roles. No official military EMP textbooks were available at the participating institutions; therefore, these three were the most relevant and widely adopted resources. Findings from the material analysis were compared with survey and interview data to identify convergences and divergences in the application of linguistic theory.

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and ethical approval for the use of these instruments was obtained through the review boards of the participating institutions.

C. Procedures and Data Analysis

The study was conducted in three stages: (i) a questionnaire survey with all 30 lecturers to establish baseline quantitative trends; (ii) semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected lecturers to capture in-depth qualitative insights; and (iii) document analysis of EMP textbooks and competency frameworks to examine theory–resource alignment.

Quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistics given the small, bounded population and exploratory aim. Frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency (means and medians) were calculated. Both means and medians were reported for Likert-scale items to acknowledge the ordinal nature of the data. Cross-group comparisons were made descriptively between lecturers with ≥15 years of teaching experience and those with <15 years. No inferential tests were applied, as statistical generalization was neither intended nor feasible.

Qualitative analysis employed an inductive–deductive thematic approach, grounded in the research questions. Deductive codes were initially derived from the four domains of the survey (awareness, practice, barriers, needs/attitudes). Inductive codes were then generated from close reading of transcripts, allowing new themes to emerge beyond the initial framework. Coding proceeded iteratively, with analytic memos used to refine categories and ensure coherence. NVivo software (2020) supported systematic storage, transparency, and traceability of coding decisions. The approach was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) framework for thematic analysis.

To strengthen trustworthiness, several strategies were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague experienced in ESP research, who reviewed coding samples and thematic maps to challenge the researcher's assumptions. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Member checking was conducted with three interviewees, who reviewed thematic summaries and confirmed or clarified the interpretations. An audit trail was maintained, including dated coding memos, successive versions of the codebook, and decision logs, which were retained for internal review and could be made available for external audit if requested.

The sample represented the full population of lecturers in the participating institutions. Findings are therefore suitable for analytic generalization, that is, linking results to theoretical constructs, within similar Vietnamese military medical contexts. Statistical generalization to wider populations was neither intended nor claimed.

D. Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

All participants were fully informed about the aims, scope, and procedures of the study and provided written consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, with the right to decline or withdraw at any point without penalty, and no incentives were offered.

To preserve anonymity, survey and interview responses were coded (e.g., LQ01–LQ30 for lecturers in the questionnaire; LI01–LI15 for lecturers in the interviews), and no personal identifiers were collected. Data files were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the research team, an audit log documented file access for accountability. In accordance with institutional policy and the APA Ethics Code (2017), all data will be securely retained for five years following publication and then permanently deleted.

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committees of the participating military medical universities. The study complied with internationally recognized standards of research integrity and confidentiality in applied linguistics and education.

IV. Results

The study explored lecturers' awareness, practices, barriers, and needs regarding the integration of SFL, SLA, and SCT into EMP teaching. Table 2 presents the full distribution of responses across the 22 survey items, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Table 2
Distribution of Lecturers' Responses Across 22 Items (N = 30)

No.	Item (summary)	1	2	3	4	5
1	Understanding SFL principles	1	1	6	11	11
2	Grasping SLA concepts	1	1	8	10	10
3	Understanding ZPD in SCT	2	2	8	9	9
4	Distinguishing SFL–SLA–SCT in lesson design	2	2	10	8	8
5	Recognizing their own limited knowledge (reverse)	1	1	8	10	10
6	Applying SFL in teaching writing, analyzing medical texts	2	2	8	9	9
7	Applying SLA (doctor–patient dialogues, role-plays, case presentations)	1	1	6	11	11
8	Applying SCT (group discussions, role assignments, scaffolding)	1	1	8	10	10
9	Integrating all three frameworks in teaching speaking/writing	2	2	8	9	9
10	Using corrective feedback (prompts, clarification requests)	1	1	4	12	12
11	Designing/trialing activity based on SFL, SLA, SCT	3	4	9	8	6
12	Difficulty translating theory into classroom practice	1	1	6	11	11
13	Lack of teaching materials/examples in medical contexts	1	1	4	12	12
14	Rigid military curriculum and time constraints	1	1	2	13	13
15	Students' lack of familiarity/interest in theory-based activities	1	1	8	10	10
16	Difficulty designing assessments based on frameworks	2	2	8	9	9
17	Belief that theory integration enhances EMP quality	1	1	2	13	13
18	Willingness to experiment if given resources/guidance	1	1	2	13	13
19	Desire to attend workshops/training	0	1	1	14	14
20	Belief that adaptation to the military context is essential	1	1	4	12	12
21	Belief that theory integration makes little difference (reverse)	14	8	6	2	0
22	Willingness to share results with colleagues	1	1	6	11	11

To complement the detailed distribution, Figure 1 summarizes domain-level results in two ways: (a) mean scores (1–5 Likert scale) and (b) percentage of lecturers selecting "agree" or "strongly agree" (4–5).

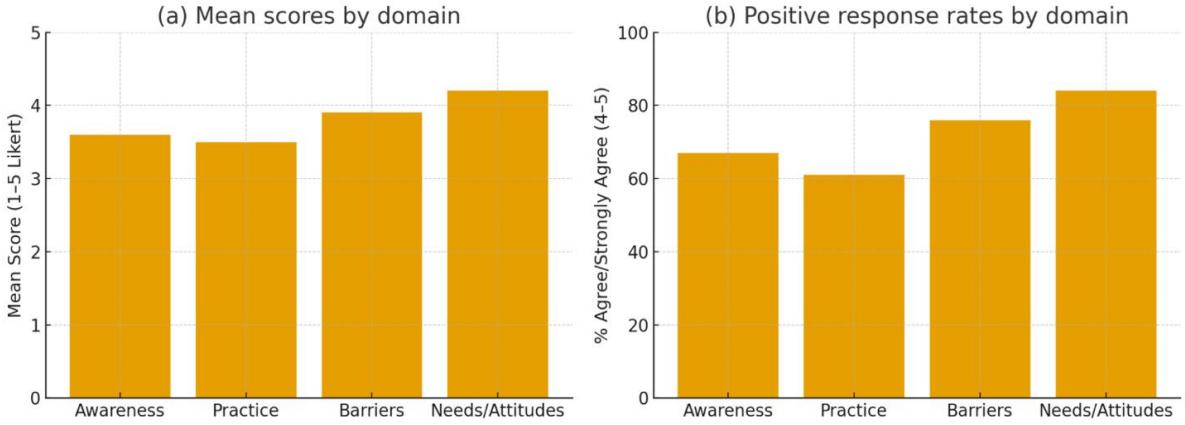

Figure 1. Domain-Level Summary of Lecturer Responses (n = 30): (a) Mean Scores on a 1–5 Likert Scale, and (b) Percentage of Lecturers Selecting "*Agree*" or "*Strongly Agree*" (4–5).

A. Awareness

Survey data indicated moderate to high awareness of the three theoretical frameworks. Twenty-two lecturers (73%) reported understanding SFL principles (Item 1), while 20 (67%) indicated familiarity with SLA concepts (Item 2). Awareness of SCT, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development, was somewhat lower at 18 (60%, Item 3). More than half (16, 53%) admitted difficulty distinguishing the frameworks when designing lessons (Item 4).

As summarized in Figure 1a, the mean score for awareness was 3.6, and Figure 1b shows that 67% of lecturers gave positive responses. Interview accounts reflected this unevenness: "*I know about SFL, but only in theory, not in practice"* (LI03); "*Sometimes I mix SLA and SCT because both talk about interaction*" (LI07); and "*When planning lessons, I sometimes cannot tell whether I am using SLA or SCT principles, it feels blurred"* (LI11).

B. Practice

Between 18 and 22 lecturers (60–73%, Items 6–9) reported applying aspects of SFL, SLA, or SCT. However, only 18

(60%) integrated all three simultaneously (Item 9). Corrective feedback was a strong practice area, with 24 (80%) using prompts or clarification requests (Item 10).

Notably, only 14 lecturers (47%, Item 11) reported designing or trialing a specific classroom activity explicitly based on SFL, SLA, or SCT, underscoring the gap between theoretical awareness and systematic application. Figure 1a shows that the mean score for practice was the lowest among the four domains (3.5), with only 61% reporting positive responses (Figure 1b).

Interview data confirmed this partial use. One lecturer explained: "*I used role-plays for doctor–patient dialogues, but time pressure means I cannot do it every week*" (LI05). Another observed: "*Group discussions work well with our students; they learn from each other, which I see as SCT in action*" (LI09). Several admitted: "I sometimes design writing tasks, but I do not connect them explicitly to SFL structures" (LI14).

C. Barriers

Barriers were strongly emphasized. Twenty-six lecturers (87%, Item 14) reported rigid curricula and time constraints, while 24 (80%, Item 13) cited a lack of contextualized EMP materials. Translating abstract theory into practice was a challenge for 22 students (73%, Item 12), and 20 students (67%) highlighted their low engagement with theory-based tasks (Item 15).

Figure 1a shows a mean of 3.9 for barriers, with 76% of responses indicating a positive outcome (Figure 1b). Interviews provided vivid detail: "*Our students are disciplined, but overloaded with medical study, they have little energy for extra interactive tasks*" (LI07). "*The curriculum is fixed; I cannot easily insert new activities"* (LI02). Another added: "*Designing tests based on theory is very challenging, I usually fall back on multiple choice*" (LI13). A further concern involved institutional culture: "*Even if I want to innovate, approval processes are strict, and everything must follow regulations*" (LI04).

D. Needs and Attitudes

Despite constraints, lecturers displayed highly positive attitudes. Twenty-six to twenty-eight (87–93%, Items 17–18) agreed that theory integration improves EMP quality and expressed willingness to experiment if supported. Demand for workshops was nearly unanimous, with 28 (93%) respondents selecting *'agree'* or *'strongly agree'* (Item 19). Similarly, 24 (80%, Item 20) stressed the need to adapt pedagogy to the military context, while 22 (73%) were ready to share results with colleagues (Item 22).

The reverse-coded item confirmed this optimism: 22 lecturers (73%) strongly disagreed and 8 (27%) disagreed that "*applying SFL, SLA, and SCT makes little difference in EMP teaching*" (Item 21). No one agreed. As Figure 1a shows, Needs/Attitudes achieved the highest mean score (4.2), and Figure 1b highlights the highest positive response rate (84%).

Interviewees echoed these views: "*If we had model lesson plans, I would definitely try them*" (LI10). "*Workshops are necessary, we need to see how theory can be used in our own classes*" (LI12). Another added: "*I would be confident if I had ready-made EMP scenarios, otherwise I hesitate to try*" (LI15).

E. Teaching Materials Analysis

To triangulate findings, three secondary sources were analyzed: Career Paths: Medical, English in Medicine, and the CanMEDS 2015 competency framework. A rubric was applied across three dimensions: (i) SLA (input, interaction, output), (ii) SFL (textual/genre structures), and (iii) SCT (collaboration, scaffolding, role-based learning).

Results showed that Career Paths: Medical contained eight role-play tasks across 30 units (27%), offering rich SLA-style practice but little support for genre-based writing. English in Medicine presented five extended doctor–patient cases out of 12 chapters (42%), again privileging SLA over SFL. The CanMEDS 2015 framework highlighted teamwork and professional roles consistent with SCT, but remained a macro-level reference without lesson-level tasks. Interview data confirmed these gaps: "*We need resources with concrete military medical scenarios, like field hospital cases or peacekeeping missions*" (LI12).

Overall, lecturers demonstrated awareness of SFL, SLA, and SCT and a strong willingness to integrate theory into EMP teaching. However, systematic practice remained limited, with only 14 lecturers (47%) designing explicit theory-based activities. Barriers such as rigid curricula, time constraints, lack of contextualized resources, and student overload emerged as persistent challenges.

As reflected in Figure 1, the contrast between high needs and attitudes (mean 4.2, 84% positive) and low practice (mean 3.5, 61% positive) underscores a critical tension. The lack of military-specific materials further reinforced this gap, limiting lecturers' ability to translate theoretical awareness into systematic classroom practice. This readiness–constraint divide defines the central challenge for bridging the theory–practice gap in EMP within the military.

V. Discussion

This study examined how three major linguistic frameworks, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Sociocultural Theory (SCT), can inform English for Medical Purposes (EMP) pedagogy in Vietnamese military medical institutions, and which strategies may help bridge the persistent gap between

theory and practice. The findings both affirm earlier work in applied linguistics and extend it to a distinctive, high-stakes context where communication has direct operational consequences.

A. Integrating SFL, SLA, and SCT Into EMP Teaching

The evidence revealed uneven awareness among lecturers: they were more comfortable drawing on SLA and SCT practices, such as role-plays, group discussions, scaffolding and corrective feedback, than on SFL. This imbalance reflects broader trends in ESP and ELT, where communicative approaches grounded in SLA have long predominated (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985; Long, 1996; Ellis, 2003, 2009). The lecturers' use of interactional activities echoes Ellis's (2009) argument that tasks encourage meaningful input–interaction–output cycles, while their emphasis on peer learning and role assignment resonates with SCT's view of learning as socially mediated through scaffolding and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). By contrast, the relative neglect of SFL confirms Evans's (2019) finding that Vietnamese learners often lack explicit genre knowledge, and Xu et al.'s (2025) observation that EMP textbooks rarely incorporate specialized genres. This pattern suggests that while SLA and SCT perspectives are already partly embedded in practice, SFL remains underutilized despite its clear potential to support disciplinary literacy.

Nevertheless, the strong positive attitudes reported in this study indicate that integration is achievable if appropriate support is provided. SFL offers the tools to make visible the structure and function of genres central to military medicine, such as triage notes, incident reports and clinical handovers (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2008). SLA provides mechanisms for transitioning from noticing to use, especially under time pressure, while SCT emphasizes the value of role-based collaboration that mirrors real-world field conditions. When sequenced together, these frameworks can form a coherent pedagogical cycle: SFL-led modelling to deconstruct relevant texts, SLA-oriented tasks to rehearse them under authentic conditions, and SCT-based debriefs to consolidate performance and redistribute expertise. This integration would also align with international competency frameworks, notably the CanMEDS framework (Frank & Sherbino, 2015), and with operational training requirements outlined in United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations & Department of Field Support (2017) and United Nations (2023) guidance. In this way, theory-informed pedagogy is not only academically desirable but operationally necessary.

B. Pedagogical Strategies for Bridging the Theory–Practice Gap

Despite the lecturers' readiness, over 90 per cent expressed willingness to experiment with new approaches, less than half reported designing explicit activities based on the three frameworks. This readiness–constraint gap parallels findings in other EMP contexts: Cao et al. (2022) showed that Chinese EMP teachers often recognize the relevance of linguistic theory but struggle to implement it, while Li (2025) argued that EMP globally still leans heavily on general-purpose, form-focused instruction. The present study adds a military dimension, showing how rigid curricula, hierarchical approval systems and the intense workload of medical students exacerbate the difficulty of turning awareness into systematic practice.

Several strategies emerged as viable means of bridging this divide. One is the adaptation of task-based language teaching to mission-critical scenarios. SLA research has consistently shown that authentic tasks foster engagement and communicative competence (Ellis, 2003, 2009). The lecturers in this study confirmed that role-plays and case presentations were among their most effective practices. However, as Nguyen (2024) reminds us, teacher beliefs are crucial in determining whether TBLT is successfully enacted. Professional development, therefore, needs to help lecturers design tasks that replicate situations such as casualty triage, evacuation briefings or multinational ward rounds, ensuring both SLA alignment and operational relevance. A second strategy concerns corrective feedback, which was widely used and valued by the participants. Their experiences align with Ha and Murray's (2023) and Le's (2023) evidence that flexible feedback practices enhance both accuracy and confidence, and are consistent with Ni and Xu's (2025) finding that learners' emotions towards feedback vary with proficiency and motivation. In military contexts, where learners face fatigue and cognitive overload, feedback must be delivered adaptively and with sensitivity to learner state if it is to be effective.

A third strategy lies in creating structures for reflective and collaborative professional learning. While not consistently explicitly recognized as a framework, teacher cognition research has long stressed the importance of reflection in shaping practice (Borg, 2006), and our findings show that most lecturers were willing to share results and attend workshops. Establishing professional learning communities would enable lecturers to co-design, trial, and refine theory-informed EMP tasks and materials, thereby overcoming the isolation often reported in hierarchical institutions. Finally, the analysis of secondary materials underscores the importance of contextualized resources as a strategy in their own right. Both *Career Paths: Medical and English in Medicine* were rich in SLA-style dialogues and role-plays but weak in SFL-based writing support. At the same time, CanMEDS 2015 offered SCT-consistent competencies without classroom-ready tasks. This evidences the need to develop tailored military EMP modules that integrate SFL genres, SLA tasks and SCT collaboration, thus enabling lecturers to put theory into practice systematically and sustainably.

C. Contribution and Novelty

By triangulating quantitative, qualitative, and documentary data, this study makes three contributions. First, it is among the first to document the attempt to apply SFL, SLA and SCT simultaneously in EMP, extending earlier work in

Vietnam (Evans, 2019; Nguyen, 2024; Le, 2023) and recent analyses in China (Cao et al., 2022) to a specialized military context. Second, it identifies a paradox of readiness without practice, sharpening Li's (2025) observation of inertia in EMP by showing how military structures further widen the gap between awareness and enactment. Third, it specifies a set of pedagogical levers, task-based scenario design, adaptive feedback, reflective collaboration and contextualized materials development, that can realistically convert lecturer readiness into sustainable practice if institutional support is forthcoming.

In short, integrating linguistic theory into military EMP is both feasible and urgent. The challenge lies less in persuading lecturers of its value than in providing the time, training and resources required to enact it in the precise moments that matter for operational effectiveness.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined how Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Sociocultural Theory (SCT) can inform English for Medical Purposes (EMP) pedagogy in Vietnamese military medical institutions. The findings showed that lecturers possessed uneven but emerging awareness, drew more readily on SLA- and SCT-related practices than on SFL, and expressed strong willingness to innovate despite structural and resource constraints. This pattern illustrates both the promise and the difficulty of embedding linguistic theory in specialized, high-stakes educational settings.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates that SFL, SLA, and SCT are not competing paradigms but complementary perspectives that can be integrated into a coherent pedagogical cycle. SFL provides the tools for modelling genres crucial to military medical communication, SLA explains how tasks and interaction facilitate acquisition, and SCT highlights the collaborative scaffolding that reflects the realities of field medicine. By sequencing these perspectives, the study advances current ESP research, extending previous work in Vietnam (Evans, 2019; Le, 2023; Nguyen, 2024) and Asia more broadly (Cao et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2025; Li, 2025) into the neglected military domain.

Practically, the study identifies a set of strategies that can help bridge the readiness–constraint gap: designing task-based scenarios around mission-critical events, embedding short genre cycles for operational texts, providing adaptive feedback sensitive to learner state, and developing contextualized military EMP materials. For institutions, the implication is clear: sustained investment is needed in professional development, timetable flexibility, and the design of collaborative materials. Without such support, individual lecturers cannot systematically apply the theories they value.

The study, however, has limitations. It relied on the lecturers' self-report, as gathered through surveys and interviews, rather than direct observation of classroom practices. The focus on a single national military system may also limit generalizability, while the cross-sectional design does not capture how practices evolve. Future research should therefore incorporate longitudinal classroom data, include learner perspectives, and compare military EMP pedagogy across countries.

Overall, the study shows that bridging the theory–practice gap in military EMP is both feasible and urgent. Success depends not only on lecturers' readiness but also on the institutional commitment to embedding linguistic theory into authentic training scenarios. In military medicine, where miscommunication can compromise patient safety and operational coordination, making theory visible in practice is not optional but imperative.

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Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai (*First author*) is currently a Dean of Faculty of Foreign Languages, Vietnam Military Medical University (VMMU), Hanoi, Vietnam with over 25 years of teaching and researching in the field of teaching English for speakers of other languages and English linguistics. She received M.A's degree in Applied Linguistics at La Trobe University, Australia in 2008 and earned Ph.D's degree in English Linguistics at University of Languages and International Studie (ULIS), Vietnam National University in 2019. Her research interests cover English teaching methodologies, comparative linguistics, cross-cultural interaction and English linguistics. She is the author of a number of National and international articles in the fields of English linguistics and teaching methodology. Email: tuyetmai2611@gmail.com