



Category: Research Article

Identification of ESL Target Needs of Business Stakeholders through Needs Analysis for Programme Development

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ABSTRACT**Article History***Published Online: 30 June, 2021***Keywords**

Target Needs, Stakeholders, Communicative Competence, Needs Analysis, English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

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Needs analysis in ESL curriculum development is an essential starting point in the design, revision, and development of syllabi or curricula. Stakeholders play a vibrant role in the process of needs analysis. Hence, the input in the process by prospective stakeholders is pivotal for curriculum concerns. It is important to identify what ESL competencies are expected from graduate employees once they are employed by the employers in the field of business. This study concerns the identification of Target Needs in respect of English language skills of the prospective graduates of the private sector business entities with the ultimate objective of ESL programme development. The sample of the study included 46 business stakeholders across the country and the Target Needs factors included the five English language skills; listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. The results indicated the frequent use of English language by the business stakeholders in business context. Further, it was revealed that all the five language skills are important but reading, writing, and speaking skills are the major priorities. As per respective mean values indicated in the analysis of target needs, the existing English language competencies of graduate employees were moderate in all the five language skills but speaking, writing, and grammar skills had lower moderate mean values.

1. Introduction

The challenges of education worldwide are a result of global trends of commercialization and marketization. By now, universities are more diversified, globalized, marketized, technologized, neo-liberalized, and privatized [1]. The influence of globalization and economic processes led universities worldwide to divert to market-based education through massification and diversification processes seeking to be in line with world class universities [2]. Hence, the concept of education in English medium in the world has been receiving special attention with curricular elements targeting and fostering students' competencies to function in international environments. Teaching and learning of English as a lingua-franca in universities would help to contribute to international and intellectual understandings [3]. The interest placed in the university sector, both at global level as well as at national level is a major concern. Therefore, there has been a clear shift in the interest towards English, from being "scholarly" to "economic".

Many universities started to market their programs as being taught in English in a further attempt to tap into the lucrative student market [4]. Countries such as France, Germany, and Japan that

had a strong policy of using only their national languages have now begun to use English as a medium of instructions [5]. In Sri Lanka, English is widely used as a medium of instruction at tertiary level except for the courses in humanities and fine arts. However, students at tertiary level English Medium Instructions (EMI) classes face many challenges to develop language proficiency while coping with their academic studies [6]. In order to uplift the existing standard of English language of the undergraduates, intensive English programmes and ESL programmes have been offered to undergraduates by the English Language Teaching Units, Departments of English Language Teaching, and English Language Teaching Centres of universities. Among the ESL courses offered are the English for Specific Purposes, Subject Specific English courses, and General English improvement courses.

The success or failure of ESL Programmes depends on how effectively the curriculum has been designed and implemented. One of the key factors in curriculum design is the identification of needs of the prospective stakeholders. The term "stakeholders" in the context of curriculum design

entails a diversified list. Stakeholders may include; students, teachers, authorities and staff members of the institution where the ESL programmes are conducted, prospective employers both state and the private sector, politicians, parents and national level policy makers and language planners. ESL Curriculum developers or course designers have sometimes paid less attention to the interests of stakeholders in respect of the courses and failed to identify the needs of relevant stakeholders [7].

This study is a part of a post-graduate degree in which the ESL Target Needs of the prospective job market stakeholders of Sri Lankan business organizations are identified for the purpose of identifying stakeholder needs that would help to implement new programmes, revise and improve existing curricula, and shape up the content of courses based on needs analysis. The main focus of the study is the English language skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar.

2. Literature Review

The term "Needs Analysis" in educational programmes is a diversified concept and is used as the primary step to be taken in educational programme development. The introduction of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in second language teaching enhanced the recognition of needs analysis [8,9] and the concept spread to other areas such as General English, Business English and English for Academic Purposes in language teaching. In ESL curriculum or programme development, needs analysis helps to identify the linguistic features that the learners need to produce in the target situation [10]. Brown [11] defines needs analysis as the identification of linguistic forms that the students will need to make use of in the prospective target language being learnt when they actually understand and produce language. With regard to needs analysis, a more comprehensive definition is given by Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman [12] which explains that needs analysis as a process by which an evaluator determines whether there is a need for a programme, and if so what programme areas/services are most appropriate to that end.

Needs analysis is a 'pragmatic activity' [13] which is useful in designing and delivering curricula [14,15,16]. According to Johns [17], needs analysis is the initial step of the curriculum development in any courses and it provides more validity to course design activities. The subsequent end results of needs analysis are proposed by Brown [15]. According to him, the results of needs analysis facilitate material development, design learning activities, prepare tests, and programme evaluation strategies.

2.1 Models of needs analysis

Experts in the field of second language teaching in general and ESP in particular have proposed different models for needs analysis process. Among the models of needs analysis are; the systematic approach [18], sociolinguistic model [19], learning-centred approach [8], learner-centred approach [20], and task-based approach [21].

2.1.1 Systematic approach

The systematic approach with reference to needs analysis is presented by Richterich & Chancerel [18]. In this approach, needs of adults who learn a foreign language are identified and due concern is given to learners as they are the centre of attention. In the needs analysis process, Richterich & Chancerel [18] recommend more than one type of data collection such as surveys, interviews, and attitude scales.

2.1.2 Sociolinguistic approach

Munby's [19] model of sociolinguistic domains for needs analysis defines the content of purpose-specific language programmes. In his model, 'target situations' of communicative competence are specified. Munby's [19] model includes a profile of communication such as communicative events, purposive domain, medium of communication, mode of communication, channel of communication, setting of communication, dialect and so on. In this approach, once the profile is created, communication needs are identified into a syllabus.

2.1.3 Learning-centred approach

In the learning-centred approach proposed by Hutchinson & Waters [8], more attention is paid to how learners learn rather than identifying language needs. Hutchinson & Waters [8] argue that learner needs are identified from two directions of needs. They are; target needs and learning needs. What learners need to know and do can be considered as target needs while in learning needs, factors such as learning background, age, gender, attitudes towards English, and methods of teaching are considered.

2.1.4 Learner-centred approach

A significant contribution to learner-centred approach has been done by Berwick [14] and Brindley [20]. The approach consists of three dimensions with regard to defining needs. Perceived vs. felt needs, product vs. process needs, and objective vs. subjective needs are the three ways to look at learner needs. As for Berwick [14], perceived needs are originated from the experts in ESL while felt needs are originated from learners. In the product-oriented interpretation, learner needs are the specific language that learners require in the

target situations. In the process-oriented context, the attention is on how individuals respond to their learning situations. Finally, the objective needs are identified prior to a course while subjective needs are addressed during the process of the delivery of the course. Brindley [20] points out that objective needs can be derived from various kinds of factual information about learners, their real-life situations where language is used, current proficiency of language and its difficulties. In the case of subjective needs, they can be derived from information based on affective and cognitive factors.

2.1.5 Task-based approach

The principle that underpins the task-based approach in needs analysis is based on the argument that linguistic elements such as notions, functions, and lexical items are not considered focal point of teaching and learning as learners are far more active and cognitive independent. Cognitive independent is a quality of personality trait of learners, based on which the intellectual abilities and competencies associated with the willingness and desire for independence in acquiring knowledge are highlighted and solve various educational problems [21].

The teachers' erroneous belief is that students learn what you teach. In the task-based approach, tasks are the units of analysis and samples of discourse typically involved in the performance of target tasks. Munby [19] defines that the tasks are similar to communicative events. In the task-based approach, language variables such as pronunciation and meaning of adjectives rather than sociolinguistic variables such as dialects and semantics are highlighted [19].

2.2 Trends in introduction of needs analysis

During the past, needs analysis emerged as a discipline in the Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). By now, the scope of needs analysis has become so diversified in terms of the disciplines that use needs analyses. Though, it was once seen as relatively simple with pre-course procedure which analysed language and communication in the target situation, needs analysis has now become so sophisticated and widespread over the time [22].

According to West [23], early needs analyses focused on language requirements of a target situation to establish priorities in language teaching such as functions, tasks or skills needed in a course. When time passed, the scope has widened and included present situation analysis that included assessment of learners' current abilities to perform the skills, tasks, or functions. Further, the scope of needs analysis included; investigation of

learners' subjective needs (what learners need to learn), in addition to investigation of objective needs (what learners need to learn based on target situation analysis), investigation of learning needs (learners' preferred styles and strategies, methods of teaching), and means analysis (assessment of the teaching content, how the course is run and the knowledge of the teachers on ESP and so on).

The categories of needs analysis, as Basturkmen [24] has presented in Table 1 include; target situation analysis, present situation analysis, learner factor analysis, and teaching context analysis. Target situation analysis includes the prospective language skills and competencies that the learners ought to have particularly in the workplace. The present study is in line with the target situation analysis described earlier. However, for curriculum development concerns, the area of target situation analysis alone is insufficient.

A comprehensive analysis, as Bsturkmen [24] has presented in Table 1, is necessary for curriculum development. The second area presented in the table is a discipline where learners' existing language competencies in relation to target needs are analysed. The third area refers to much neglected learning environment [25] and students' perceptions and needs relevant to the course. The final area, teaching context analysis, is the environment of the LSP and what the course and the teacher can offer for students.

Table 1: Types of analysis

<i>Type of analysis</i>	<i>Aims to identify</i>
1.Target situation analysis	Language-related tasks, activities, and skills that the learners should ideally be able to perform in the profession, work, or study situation they wish to enter or advance in.
2.Present situation analysis	The level of the learners' ability to perform the language related tasks, activities, and skills in relation to the demands of the target situation.
3. Learner factor analysis	Learner factors, such as their motivation, how they learn, and their perceptions of needs and wants in relation to the LSP course
4.Teaching context analysis	Factors related to the environment in which the LSP course will run and what the course and teacher can realistically offer.

Source: Basturkmen (2013)

3. Methodology

The objective of the study was to identify the 'Target Needs' of the business stakeholders with regard to English language competencies required to work in the prospective job market of private sector business organisations where graduates from management discipline are expected to be employed. The needs analysis focused on "Target Needs" would help to answer the following research question.

1. What are the English language proficiency needs of the private sector business stakeholders (Target Needs)?

The study was a quantitative research and the design adopted was survey in nature. Survey research is defined and approved by scholars in the field of research as an effective and convenient design to obtain information from a fair sample of respondents [26,27,28].

The questionnaire administered consisted of four sections. Section A was intended to obtain general information, section B was to identify the existing English language competency levels of employees, section C dealt with the importance of English language skills, and section D was the overall use of English in day-to-day business affairs. The analysis of data was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM Version 21).

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire administered to the business stakeholders with regard to required English Language Competencies were used to identify the 'Target Needs' pertaining to the job market in the private sector. As discussed in the literature survey, "Needs Analysis" is an elementary and a vital aspect in the course design and curriculum planning process and the "Need Analysis" helps to identify the target English language proficiency needs of the job market where the graduates are expected to be employed.

The information pertaining to the areas of business falls into eight categories. As shown in Table 2, out of the 46 respondents of business stakeholders, five informants (10.86%) belonged to Banking/ Insurance/ Leasing sectors and another five belonged to the Apparel sector. The Construction sector, It/Telecommunication sector and the Agriculture/ Food production sectors comprised four respondents in each case making it 8.69% out of the total respondents. The Sales and Marketing sector had seven respondents (15.21%) and the Travel and Tourism sector comprised six

respondents (13.04%) while the Shipping sector comprised three respondents (6.52%). Eight of the others did not disclose their sectors and they constituted 8 and the percentage was 17.39%.

Table 2: General Information with regard to the sample of business stakeholders

	Category	Response rate	%
Type of Business	Banking/ Insurance/ Leasing	5	10.86
	IT/ Telecommunication	4	8.69
	Construction	4	8.69
	Apparel	5	10.86
	Sales + Marketing	7	15.21
	Agriculture/ Food Production	4	8.69
	Travel + Tourism	6	13.04
	Shipping	3	6.52
	Other	8	17.39
Main Location	Northern	0	0
	Western	24	52.17
	Wayamba	4	8.69
	North Central	2	4.34
	Sabaragamuwa	1	2.17
	Central	7	15.21
	Southern	4	8.69
	Eastern	2	4.34
	Uva	2	4.34
Employees	Non – graduates	23833	91.26
	Graduates	2280	8.73

N = 46

Out of the total sample, the identification of the location of the business with regard to the province revealed that more than half of the business ventures, 52.17%, belonged to the Western Province in Sri Lanka while the Central Province had little less than one fifth of business places (15.21%). Further analysis of Table 2 shows that Southern and Wayamba Provinces comprised 8.69%. The sample comprised 4.34% of business stakeholders from the North Central, Eastern and Uva provinces in each case. Sabaragamuwa had the least number of business ventures in the survey with 2.17% of the sample. However, the sample does not represent any of the business ventures from the Northern Province.

The sample of 46 business stakeholders had a total of 26113 employees of which 23833 (91.26%)

were non-graduates while 2280 (8.73%) were graduates.

Table 3 represents analysis of data obtained through the questionnaire administered to officials of the respective Human Resources Departments of the sample business organizations focusing on Target Needs in the areas of; (1) Existing English language competency needs, (2) Importance of English language skills for the organization, and (3). Use of English in day-to-day business operations. The existing English language competency levels of the graduate employees were analyzed by asking the respondents to rate the five major English language skills, namely Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Grammar using five-point Likert scale options, i.e., Very Satisfactory, Satisfactory, Moderate, Weak and Very Weak with values of 5,4,3,2 and 1 in their respective order. As per the data, the standard deviations in all the three areas indicated in the table are less than 1. Thus, the values indicate that the mean values are homogeneously distributed and the reliability of all the mean values are adequately maintained.

For the purpose of data interpretation, the mean values obtained from the 5-point Likert scale were condensed to three ranges. The first range with mean values from 1-2.33 is interpreted as weak/not important/not at all used. The second mean value range from 2.33- 3.67 is considered as moderate and the third category from 3.67-5 is interpreted as satisfactory/important/frequently used.

Table- 3: Analysis of Target needs

	Mean	Std. Deviation
(1). Existing English Language Competency levels		
a. Listening	3.24	.794
b. Speaking	2.50	.806
c. Reading	3.28	.807
d. Writing	2.87	.934
e. Grammar	2.61	.881
(2). Importance of English Language skills		
a. Listening	3.86	.753
b. Speaking	4.43	.750
c. Reading	4.17	.797
d. Writing	4.07	.854
e. Grammar	3.93	.952
(3). Use of English in day-to-day business affairs		
	4.15	.868

N= 46

The analysis of results as shown in Table 3 indicates that the competency levels of all the five language skills namely; Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Grammar were moderate with respective mean values of 3.24, 2.50, 3.28, 2.87, and 2.61 respectively. However, Speaking, Writing, and Grammar skills had lower mean values of the same range.

The data of the next question of the importance of English language skills in the day-to-day business operations were obtained through a five-point Likert scale with the options, 'very important', 'important', 'moderate', 'not important', and 'not very important' with values of 5,4,3,2, and 1 respectively. The responses by the private sector business stakeholders indicate that Speaking, Reading, and Writing skills with mean values of 4.43, 4.17 and 4.07 respectively falls under 'very important'. Also, mean values of Grammar (3.93) and Listening (3.86) skills too correspond to 'very important' category but with lesser mean values compared to the others.

The five-point Likert scale values, i.e., very frequently (5), frequently (4), moderate (3), seldom (2), and not at all (1) used to ascertain the extent to which the business stakeholders' use English in day-to-day business operations indicate a mean value of 4.15. This indicates that majority of business ventures use English "very frequently".

5. Conclusion

The current study investigated the Target Needs in relation to English language competencies of the business stakeholders who would probably employ graduates who pass out from faculties of management discipline. The needs analysis done included; existing English language competency levels, importance of English language skills, and use of English in day-to-day business affairs. English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar were the areas included in the needs analysis survey. As per the data, the English language competency levels of graduate employees were moderate in Listening and Reading with higher mean values while Speaking, Writing, and Grammar skills too were moderate with lower mean values. The results indicate that Speaking, Writing, and Grammar skills need further attention of the ELT programmes. The second and the third areas which represent the importance of English language skills and the use of English in day-to-day business affairs have direct relationship to Target Needs. Hence, the data reveal that all the five skills are 'important'

and that the stakeholders use English 'frequently' in the business context.

Therefore, the undergraduates who study in the faculties of management discipline need to possess a sound knowledge of English if they seek employment in the private sector. Out of the five skills, they ought to possess a sound proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking skills, as the most important skills that the institutions use in the business affairs.

Since the population of the study represented only 46 business or commercial organizations, out of the vast number of business ventures in Sri Lanka, the sample may be inadequate in size to recommend specific conclusions. Hence, it is a limitation of the study. However, the findings of the study could be effectively incorporated into ESL programme and curriculum development in universities.

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