Target needs of English language for employment concern for undergraduates of management discipline

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Abstract

The concern for English language of the private sector for employing graduates is high in esteem that specific English language competencies are expected by them. Employers are concerned with the English language competencies that the prospective graduate recruits should possess. However, most of the graduates of national universities who pass out from universities do not get selected at job interviews due to low standard of English language competencies despite access to university English Language Teaching programmes during their undergraduate study periods. The aim and the objective of this paper was to identify the most important competency-based performance indictors in English language particularly relevant to Business contexts with the aim of incorporating such indicators in future revisions of English Language Teaching programmes. The respondents included a total of 112 randomly selected stakeholders belonging to business sectors; banking, insurance, leasing, IT and telecommunication, construction, shipping, travel and tourism, agriculture and food production, and apparel industry. The sample that occupied more than 22 percent of graduate employees was selected randomly covering all the nine provinces of Sri Lanka. The collection of data was done through a questionnaire administered via e-mail. According to the results, giving descriptions, introducing oneself and company, following instructions given by superiors, listening to and comprehending customer communications, customer care, dealing with sales matters, advanced telephone skills, comprehending business communication, business related vocabulary, written business communication were of prime importance with average need identification mean value of 4 or above. Hence, the findings indicate that the English Language Teaching syllabi of English programmes in the management and business-related faculties need to be bent on English for specific purposes nature catering particularly for the business sector.

Keywords: *Curriculum development, employment, English language skills, management graduates, target needs.*

1. Introduction

English language competencies possessed by the undergraduates of universities have acquired much significance as it ensures the undergraduates of universities to secure prospective employability (Rameez, 2019). The concern for English language is very much stressed in the private sector business ventures, compared to the public sectors as the business transactions are carried out mostly using English language communication by the respective business ventures. The need to possess an attractive English competency is significant to undergraduates of Management discipline given the fact that most of the avenues for employment is available in the private sector. During the past decade, the development projects funded by the World Bank aimed at enhancing the higher education sector in Sri Lanka and a fair amount of funds has been allocated for projects to enhance English language competencies of the undergraduates. In the Sri Lankan university sector, the purpose of establishment of English Language Teaching Units (ELTUs) by the University Grants Commission in the year 1983 was to cater to the low standard of English language of the university undergraduates. As for now, these ELTUs established in each and every university have been elevated to departments in order to promote the quality of English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes offered with a view to improving the English language competency of the undergraduates.

In any educational programmes, the main hub of the academic domain is the curriculum through which the study programmes are implemented. Since universities offer diversified study programmes, the English language programmes need to align their curricula with subject specific alignment of English language teaching. English for specific purposes (ESP) discipline in second language teaching emerged to facilitate subject specific teaching of English language. As highlighted by Dudley-Evans and Johns (1991), there is a unique demand for ESP programmes as it is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions concerning the content of the syllabus and materials of teaching are based on learners' reasons for learning. Further, ESP programmes help to maintain the bridge between learners' basic English proficiency and their mainstream courses while helping students to develop language study and research skills appropriate for particular academic or professional discipline.

English language teaching programmes, particularly at university level include different disciplines such as ESP, English for academic purposes (EAP), and General English (GE). Since curriculum is the major determinant factor of study programmes, areas associated with curriculum development is vital for consideration. A number of scholars such as Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Berwick (1989), Richards (2001), and Brown (2009) have placed due emphasis on needs analysis (NA) which is a significant domain of development and revision of study programmes.

In NA, two main types of needs are to be considered for curriculum planning and syllabus design. They can be identified as target needs and learning needs. Target needs refer to what learners need to do or possess in order to be able to communicate effectively while learning needs involve how students are able to move from existing starting points (lacks) to what is

expected to be done as final destination (necessities). In this study, the scope of NA is limited to identification of target needs of the prospective private sector business stakeholders where university graduates of management discipline are expected to be employed.

The existing objective of the study is to identify the English language performance indicators based on skills that the prospective business ventures expect from graduate employees once they are employed. The performance indicators in respect of major language areas of speaking, listening, interacting, reading, and writing are surveyed for the purpose of identification in the order of importance. It is expected that identification of such important competencies would facilitate proper ELT curriculum and syllabus development or revision of the curricula of universities and higher educational institutes. Further, incorporation of such indicators would facilitate to improve the English language competencies required by the undergraduates which would result in graduates being selected at prospective job interviews.

2. Literature review

Curriculum and the syllabus of study programmes function as the guide to pedagogical and learning environment and should necessarily help to bridge the gap of the target needs and the learning needs. It is widely accepted that one of the important considerations in curriculum development is the identification of needs and evaluation of such needs when and where necessary. The development of the effective curricula depends to a greater extent on NA which is a powerful tool that helps to identify and validate true needs (Akyel & Ozek, 2010). One of the pertinent functions of the NA is the provision to identify communication needs targeted in curriculum development. Byram and Hua (2013) accentuate the importance of NA for the development of language curriculum. Further, as Ulum (2015) points out that the results of the NA help to support teachers to define students' professional needs in terms of language skills as well as deficiencies in English language skills. Therefore, NA is the base that helps to identify ground content, teaching materials, and methods of teaching in the overall curriculum and programme design. However, it has been revealed that a small number of research has been reported in literature on the use of NA in curriculum development (Akyel & Ozek, 2010).

The identification of needs is more predominant in ESP courses. In second language teaching, ESP functions as a subset of English taught as a second or foreign language and it involves teaching English language to students or employed people with reference to subject dominated vocabulary, language skills and specific competencies   they need. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the second world war in 1945 brought with it an age of new perspectives in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale. The expansion of technology and commerce generated a demand for an international language. Due to the economic power and the activities of the United States in the post – war world, the demand for an international language was taken over by English. Second, the oil crisis of the early 1970s resulted in western money and knowledge flowing into the oil – rich countries. As a result,

English suddenly became a big business and commercial pressures began to exert an influence. The other reason that had a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. There was a growing demand for English courses tailored to specific needs. The traditional concept of describing the rules of English usage shifted to discovering the ways in which language is actually used in real communication (Widdowson, 1978). One of the important features of ESP curriculum design is the identification of needs in a broader context which is identified as NA. Hence, ESP is remarkably associated with NA as ESP identifies NA as one of the typical characteristics (Li, 2014).

2.1. Needs analysis and curriculum development

NA is a process of gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing curricua that will guide the foundation of the entire learning environment of a particular group of learners. The outcome of the NA serves as the basis for the major three components of the curriculum; learning, teaching, and assessment in which designing of tests, compiling of teaching materials, designing of pedagogical activities and evaluating strategies are involved. Johns (1991) has shown that NA is the first step in curriculum design, for it can provide validity and relevancy for all the follow- up of curriculum design activities. NA is a defining characteristic of Language for specific purposes (LSP) courses (Dudley-Evans & Johns, 1991; Kim, 2006). Hence, the concept can be widely applicable to ESP, EAP, Business English, and other subject specific English courses. The importance of NA is applicable for both curriculum development and revision of courses as a key concept for the fact that course developers find it easy to investigate what specific areas that the learners ought to know or be able to do in the target situation where the language concerned is used. Tajino, James and Kijima (2005) have developmental changes that underwent in the discipline of NA in language courses. Since the scope of NA has become broader that the concept of NA applied in curriculum development has become increasingly sophisticated over time. By now, the scope of NA has become so broader though it was once seen as a relatively simple pre-course procedure to analyse target situation which some scholars' term it as target needs.

2.2. Target needs and learning needs

In the model of NA, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) discuss two concepts; target needs and learning needs. In their model, target needs refer to the knowledge and skills that the learners are required to master in the prospective working positions and target needs are divided into three sections identified as 'necessities', 'lacks', and 'wants. 'Necessities' refer to what the learner ought to know with the aim of functioning effectively in the target situation. 'Lacks' refer to the gap of knowledge between existing proficiency of learners and the target proficiency required by the working situation. 'Wants' are the subjective perception of learners that they want to learn from the language courses being followed. Learning needs on the other hand, are the required knowledge and skills that the learners need to master to meet the 'necessities, from the language programme (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

A similar framework of NA has been presented by Dickinson (1991). In his framework of NA, Dickinson (1991) refers to three domains known as 'needs', 'wants', and 'lacks' which are very much similar to what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have proposed. According to Dickinson (1991),'needs' are those skills which a learner perceives as being relevant; 'wants' are a subset of 'needs' where the learner puts at a high esteem given the available time; and 'lacks' are the difference a learner processes between his present competence in a particular skill and the competence the learner wishes to achieve. Given the usual time constraints in general English teaching courses, it is essential that time is used effectively in teaching LSP and thus instruction is focused only on the areas of language and skills of direct relevance. Further, it is feasible to organize LSP instruction around needs because the learners have shared needs, since they are all currently studying or working in, or hoping to gain entry to a particular field or discipline. Therefore, there is a clear possibility to identify a set of common needs to a greater extent in an LSP situation than it would be in a general language teaching situation (Helen, 2013).

2.3. Empirical research done on needs analysis

Among the limited studies done on NA, much of the studies available are based on identification of target needs of students. In a study done by Kazar and Mede (2015) on ESP students, it has been revealed what ESP programmes ought to focus. The study done using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, included major areas of language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing with sub-skills belonging to the four major skills. According to the study, the priority areas were identified as presentation skills, learning key terms, writing e mail messages and reading academic tests. An empirical study done by Yan (2012) on NA of college business English course aimed at target situation needs, learning situation needs, and present situation needs which included micro business English skills has revealed that the college Business English course should mainly focus on enhancing listening and speaking of learners.

A case study by Alsamadani (2017) done on the ESP context of Saudi engineering students revealed that writing and reading along with speaking skills were needed more than other skills. In the Sri Lankan context, a NA on the required language skills by the industry from vocational graduates, targeting the perceptions of the kind of English that the vocational graduates need to use in the workplace revealed the importance of knowledge of ESP with a foundation in English for general purposes and the importance of technical English that could be used in specific situations (Ranasuriya & Herath, 2020). Form the studies found in the literature, it is apparent that diversity of perceptions with reference to English language skills and sub-skills have been reported. Hence, it is not justifiable to identify particular English language skills and sub-skills which indicate frequent and specific needs unless programme specific NA is done. What is evident is that the needs may vary from the context of environment form programme to programme.

3. Methodology

Based on the objectives, the study was carried out as a descriptive study for which survey method of research has been adopted. Hence, the study is a survey of identification of target needs of the prospective employment providers in the business sector. Survey studies can be defined as collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses (Check & Schutt, 2012). Also, Singleton and Straits (2009) are of the view that surveys are used in social and psychological research and they facilitate both qualitative and quantitative research. The selection of the sample was done using the simple random sampling method from the major business categories in the business sector. The simple random sampling method was used as it helped to reduce any bias involved in the selection. Hence, the respondents of the study included a total of 112 stakeholders belonging to business sectors; banking, insurance, leasing, IT and telecommunication, construction, shipping, travel and tourism, agriculture and food production, and apparel industry. The sample was selected randomly covering all the nine provinces of Sri Lanka who occupy more than 22 percent of graduate employees.

The collection of data was done through a questionnaire administered online via e-mail to the selected respondents. Since the audience were spread across the country, correspondence of the questionnaire through e-mail to reach the sample was convenient. Further, through e-mail reminders, it was able to increase the response rate. The questionnaire was administered to the chief executive officers (CEOs), heads of human resource management (HRM) divisions, and senior managers mostly via e mail. In certain cases, the questionnaire was directly sent to the business organizations. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance of the performance indicators using a five-point Likert scale.

The data analysis was done quantitatively using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data. The study used five-point Likert scale to measure variables ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree; Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5) and analysed the mean values for respective areas. For the purpose of interpretation of data, the five-point mean values were condensed to three levels and assigned vales. Hence, mean values from 1 to 2.33 were interpreted as "Low", values from 2.34 to 3.67 were considered as "Moderate", and mean values from 3.68 to 5 were interpreted as "High". In order to analyse data, descriptive statistic method was used and obtained the mean values and standard deviations of the responses.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of results contains the importance of performance indicators in respect of the skills; speaking, listening, interacting, reading, and writing. The results of the analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire administered to business stakeholders to identify the required performance indicators of the important English language skills are presented in this section. As discussed in the literature review, the identification of performance

indicators would help to modify or develop English language teaching curricula to be used
in the university ELT programmes.

The analysis of results shown in Table 1 indicates the importance oral skills; listening,
speaking, and interacting. The number of business stakeholder respondents in the study
included 112 respondents. In respect of performance indicators of speaking, the
questionnaire included eight items. According to the perception of business stakeholders,
giving formal presentations (sales etc.), giving descriptions of products/services, introducing
oneself/company, and describing trends/performance at sales/ other meeting have been
indicated with high mean values of 3.93, 4.09, 4.24, 3.73 respectively. The indicators of
giving formal presentations, explaining situations to superiors/ customers/ colleagues, and
reporting problems have been rated as moderate importance with referent mean values of
3.11, 3.04, and 3.07. Describing incidents (fire, clash, strike, accident) and giving advice
have been rated as important with low mean values of 2.17 and 2.31 respectively. The
standard deviation (SD) values indicated for all the indicators stand below one (1) which
indicate that SD is reliable.

As indicated in the Table 1, in the performance indicators of listening, the business
stakeholders have indicated mean values of high importance in; following instructions given
by superiors (m= 4.22), following presentations/ lecturers/ talks (m= 3.87), and listening to
and comprehending customer communications (m= 4.09). The performance indicators of
following training sessions, comprehending interviews, and listening and comprehending
stock market/ other reports have been rated as moderate with respective mean values of
3.04, 2.44, and 2.98 in the order of appearance. The only listening performance indicator
with an indication of low value was ability to understand different English-speaking accents
with a mean value of 2.21. The SD values of listening below one and the values support the
validity of the mean values.

Table 1
Importance of oral skills

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Importance of performance indicators of Speaking		
Giving formal presentations (sales etc.)	3.93	0.904
Giving informal presentations	3.11	0.727
Giving descriptions of products/ services	4.09	0.865
Introducing (oneself/company)	4.24	0.705
Explaining situations to superiors/ customers/ colleagues	3.04	0.710
Reporting problems	3.07	0.952
Describing trends/performance at sales/ other meeting	3.73	0.980
Describing incidents (fire, clash, strike, accident)	2.17	0.683
Giving advice	2.31	0.769
Importance of performance indicators of Listening		
Following training sessions	3.04	0.842
Following instructions given by superiors	4.22	0.664
Comprehending interviews	2.44	0.785
Following presentations/ lecturers/ talks	3.87	0.833
Listening to and comprehending customer communications	4.09	0.725
Listening and comprehending stock market/ other reports	2.98	0.906
Ability to understand different English-speaking accents	2.21	0.729
Importance of performance indicators of Interacting		
Basic skills in telephone (Answering/ Taking a call)	3.04	0.959
Customer care (negotiating/ inquiring/ assurance/ refusal)	4.15	0.729
Participating in discussions at business meetings	3.11	0.938
Visiting a company or receiving visitors	3.15	0.810
Dealing with sales matters (sale/ marketing/ bargaining/ offering/ obtaining discounts)	4.20	0.934
Socializing in situations related to business matters	2.11	0.823
Advanced telephone skills (changing an appointment, making an appointment, dealing with problematic situations)	4.24	0.736

Source: Survey administered to business stakeholders

There were seven variables of performance indicators of interacting. The three indicators namely; customer care (negotiating/ inquiring/ assurance/ refusal), dealing with sales matters (sale/ marketing/ bargaining/ offering/ obtaining discounts), and advanced telephone skills (changing an appointment, making an appointment, dealing with problematic situations) had been indicated with high mean values of importance having mean values of 4.15, 4.20, and 4.24 respectively. The performance indicators that had moderate values were; basic skills in telephone (answering/ taking a call), participating in discussions at business meetings, and visiting a company or receiving visitors. The respective mean values of moderate indicators were 3.04, 3.11, and 3.15 in the respective order. Socializing in situations related to business matters (m= 2.11) was the only indicator with a low value.

The next data analysis was based on the reading skill in which there were 13 performance indicators. The results in Table 2 show that there were four indicators that the business

ventures had indicated high mean values of importance. They were; comprehension and
identification of information given in business letters, faxes, e-mails, memos, short reports,
looking for specific points in a text / letter / fax etc., understanding information given in
tender notices, tender documents, and knowledge of vocabulary related to business field.
The respective mean values in the order of appearance were; 4.26, 3.87, 3.98, and 4.26. In
comparison to indicators with high mean values, there were seven indicators that the
respondents had considered moderate with respect to satisfaction. They include;
comprehension of information given in average texts such as articles of newspapers /
magazines (m= 3.28), reading and comprehension of Memorandum of Understanding
(MOU) (m=3.30), reading and understanding information in a form / graph, in an
application in order to fill (m=3.28), ability to understand information given in a circular
letter/ text related to business (m=3.30), reading and understanding of notices,
advertisements (m=3.31), surfing the web for information (m= 3.15), and identifying
information given in graphic mode such as pie chart, table, bar graphs etc. (m= 3.13).

For the performance indicators of reading and comprehension of legal documents, and
ability to summarize information given in a text, the respondents had indicated requirements
with low values. Hence, the data analysis showed that the mean values were 2.17 and 2.11
respectively. In all the indicators of reading, the SD values were less than one and this is an
indication of the reasonable deviation from the respective mean values.

Table 2:
Importance of reading

Importance of performance indicators of Reading	Mean	Std. Deviation
Comprehension of information given in average texts such as articles of newspapers / magazines	3.28	0.834
Reading and comprehension of MOUs	3.30	0.963
Reading and comprehension of legal documents	2.17	0.973
Comprehension and identification of information given in business letters, faxes, e – mails, memos, short reports	4.26	0.855
Reading and understanding information in a form / graph, in an application in order to fill	3.28	0.958
Looking for specific points in a text / letter / fax etc.	3.87	0.996
Ability to understand information given in a circular letter/ text related to business	3.30	0.628
Understanding information given in tender notices, tender documents	3.98	0.882
Ability to summarize information given in a text	2.11	0.716
Reading and understanding of notices, advertisements	3.31	0.891
Surfing the web for information	3.15	0.942
Identifying information given in graphic mode such as pie chart, table, bar graphs etc.	3.13	0.646
Knowledge of vocabulary related to business field	4.26	0.865

Source: Survey administered to business stakeholders

Table 3 depicts the results of data analysis involving 112 respondents with regard to the importance of writing. Out of the nine performance indicators, there were three indicators in each of the value indicators, i.e., high, moderate, and low. Writing e-mails, faxes, memos, notices and business letters, writing reports (market research, incidents, business / sales progress), and dealing with customer complaints showed high importance with mean values, 4.46, 4.15, and 4.17 respectively. The writing performance indicators that had moderate mean values were; writing a profile about a company (m= 3.46), filling in forms / applications / telephone massage pads (m= 3.48), and writing the agenda / minutes of a business meeting (m= 3.20) with the mean values indicated. The writing performance indicators that had low profile of importance were; describing a process / procedure, writing long reports, and writing the agenda / minutes of a business meeting with respective low mean values of 2.02, 2.24, and 2.11. Similar to the other indicators, the SD values in writing too were reliable with SD values indicating in Table 3.

Table 3
Importance of writing

Importance of performance indicators of Writing	Mean	Std. Deviation
Writing e-mails, faxes, memos, notices and business letters	4.46	0.887
Describing a process / procedure	2.02	0.931
Writing Reports (market research, incidents, business / sales progress)	4.15	0.894
Writing long reports	2.24	0.737
Writing articles for professional journals	2.11	0.859
Writing a profile about a company	3.46	0.887
Filling in forms / applications / telephone massage pads	3.48	0.937
Writing the agenda / minutes of a business meeting	3.20	0.667
Dealing with customer complaints	4.17	0.825

Source: Survey administered to business stakeholders

Since the present study was focused particularly on the major English language skills with respective micro skills, the diversified indications of the studies discussed in the literature review such as Kazar and Mede (2015), Yan (2012), Alsamadani (2017), and Ranasuriya and Herath (2020) cannot be directly compared with the findings as the respective objectives of studies differ in that they mostly bent on students' needs. However, most of the studies have followed the theoretical bases such as NA, target needs, and learning needs discussed by well-known scholars such as Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dickinson (1991) and the theories discussed can be applied depending on the purpose.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the priority-based English language competency performance indicators (target needs) of the oral, reading, and writing skills of the business stakeholders who would employ university graduates belonging to faculties of management discipline. For the purpose of the descriptive study, the oral skills included; listening, speaking, and interactive skills. Reading and writing skills were the other two skills included in the study. According to the results, competency indicators such as; ability to introduce oneself and company, giving formal presentations, ability to describe products and services, and describing trends of sales and performance of respective departments are of prime importance in the area of speaking. Similarly, for listening, ability to understand; instructions given by superiors, customer complaints, presentations and lectures in the training sessions are the most important competencies that the business ventures expect from the graduate employees. In business communication contexts, ability to interact in situations where employees have to possess necessary skills such as customer care, sales matters, and telephone skills have been shown to be highly required.

Further, as shown in data analysis, reading and comprehension competencies involving letters and faxes, documents related to tender notices and specific vocabulary in the business context have been shown to be extremely useful. Further, business ventures expect their employees to be able to engage and possess competencies in written communication, i.e., business letters and e-mails, memos, faxes, reports of business, and to deal with customer complaints in written form. In English language programme and curriculum development, the performance indicators discussed above be placed in high esteem. However, the competencies with moderate values mentioned in the results and discussion section could also be accommodated depending on the duration and the time available for the ELT programme.

From the discussions of the results of the present study and based on the previous studies, it is implied that NA in curriculum design is a useful domain particularly for ESP programmes and both target needs and learning needs are to be considered in NA. The study comprised only 112 sample stakeholders and given the magnitude of the number of business stakeholders in the country, this is a limitation. From the results of the study, it is proposed that further studies that include comparative analysis could be carried out to identify the difference of target needs based on the nature of the business sector.

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