

# **Identifying English Language Needs of Undergraduates for Learner Friendly Courses through a Needs Analysis**

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## **Introduction**

This research is based on needs assessment in designing and improving existing curricula for English Language Courses conducted by the Department of English Language Teaching of the University of Colombo to provide a better curricula/ syllabus and lesson to undergraduates. Although education reforms in Sri Lanka in 1997 introduced General English as a new subject for General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L), English knowledge of the undergraduates differ widely when they enter the university. Some undergraduates are linguistically privileged while others are linguistically underprivileged and most of the undergraduates do not have the required standard in English. If the undergraduates enter English medium faculties of the universities and are linguistically underprivileged, they have to face a double challenge of improving English knowledge and simultaneously learning academic content. Furthermore, in some faculties it is compulsory to pass English to complete their degree. Therefore, a needs analysis is essential to find out the needs of these undergraduates in the different faculties.

## **Research Problem**

Difficulty in identifying the language needs of undergraduates to attain communicative capability in English.

## **Objective**

The objective of this research is to identify the needs of the undergraduates to design and revise the curricula / syllabus for the English Language Courses conducted by the Department of English Language Teaching of the University of Colombo by using a needs analysis. Most of the courses were designed without a needs analysis of the undergraduates and the concerns of the respective faculties. Therefore, this research was conducted in four different faculties of the University of Colombo in 2016/2017 to investigate the perceptions of different participants with respect to their English language needs to provide better language courses for them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Needs analysis can be defined as an information gathering process and when designing a curriculum, addressing the students' and institutional needs are necessary components. The importance of a needs analysis is emphasised by many researchers including

Hutchinson and Waters (1996), Jordan (1997). According to Soriano (1995) needs analysis collects and analyses data to determine what learners “want” and “needs” to learn, while an evaluation measures the effectiveness of a program to meet the needs of the learners. Furthermore, Johns (1991) mentioned that needs analysis is the first step in course design and it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. Therefore, needs analysis will give an assurance regarding the quality of the language courses from the point of view of the learner especially facilitating the learners to achieve their expected learning outcome with regard to language. Moreover, it helps in evaluating existing courses and can be used to change the courses appropriately.

### Methodology

This research was conducted by using a questionnaire based on the four point Likert Scale and data was analysed by using SPSS software package. A randomised sample of 550 undergraduates of three academic years namely first, second, third years, representing the four faculties, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Management and Faculty of Law was selected.

### Key Findings

According to the data it was discovered that most of the students in all four faculties use below 50% of English at home.

**Table 1: How much English do the Participants Use at Home?**

How much English do you use at home?	Faculty				Total
	Faculty of Arts	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Management	Faculty of Science	
0%	6.9%	14.4%	24.3%	7.3%	12.3%
10%	29.2%	30.1%	23.3%	24.7%	27.1%
20%	16.7%	24.0%	15.5%	20.7%	19.5%
30%	25.7%	17.1%	12.6%	16.0%	18.2%
40%	11.1%	8.2%	15.5%	16.0%	12.5%
50%	9.7%	4.8%	3.9%	10.0%	7.4%
60%	0.7%	1.4%	3.9%	2.7%	2.0%
70%				2.0%	0.6%
80%			1.0%	0.7%	0.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

When considering the results of the participants' General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) General English, in the Faculty of Arts 6.8% students obtained A passes in contrast to 32.2% who obtained an A passes in the Faculty of Science. The highest numbers of failures are in the Faculty of Law and the least number in the Faculty of Science.

**Table 2: A/L General English Results of the Participants**

A/L General English results	Faculty				Total
	Faculty of Arts	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Management	Faculty of Science	
A	6.8%	2.1%	11.9%	32.2%	13.5%
B	6.1%	6.9%	15.8%	24.2%	13.1%
C	18.9%	17.4%	37.6%	28.2%	24.5%
S	50.7%	45.1%	20.8%	12.8%	33.2%
W	5.4%	6.2%	4.0%		3.9%
F	12.2%	22.2%	9.9%	2.7%	11.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The participants' response for the reason in studying English at the university shows that 64.4% students in all the faculties want to study English to be confident in the society. In the Faculties of Law, Management and Science, to excel in their studies in the university is the second highest score whereas in the Faculty of Arts finding a good job is the second highest score.

**Table 3: Why do the students need English?**

	Faculty				Total
	Faculty of Arts	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Management	Faculty of Science	
a. to study well in the university	7.4%	13.0%	11.5%	16.4%	12.1%
b. to talk with others	6.7%	4.1%	2.9%	2.1%	4.0%
c. to understand what others say	2.0%	0.7%	1.9%	1.4%	1.5%
d. to get a good job	12.1%	9.6%	9.6%	5.5%	9.2%
e. to be more confident in the society	67.1%	69.2%	57.7%	61.6%	64.4%

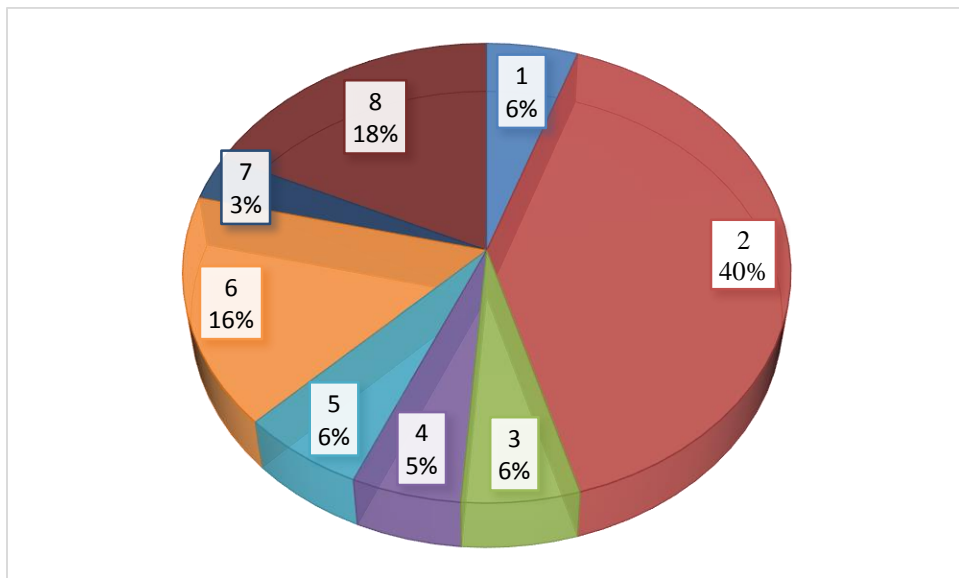
When inquired about the most important areas that these students require to improve in English, speaking in English was the first preference for 83% of the sample. Presentation skills and grammar were also found to be important areas that need improvement.

**Table 4: The first preference for the most important areas to improve**

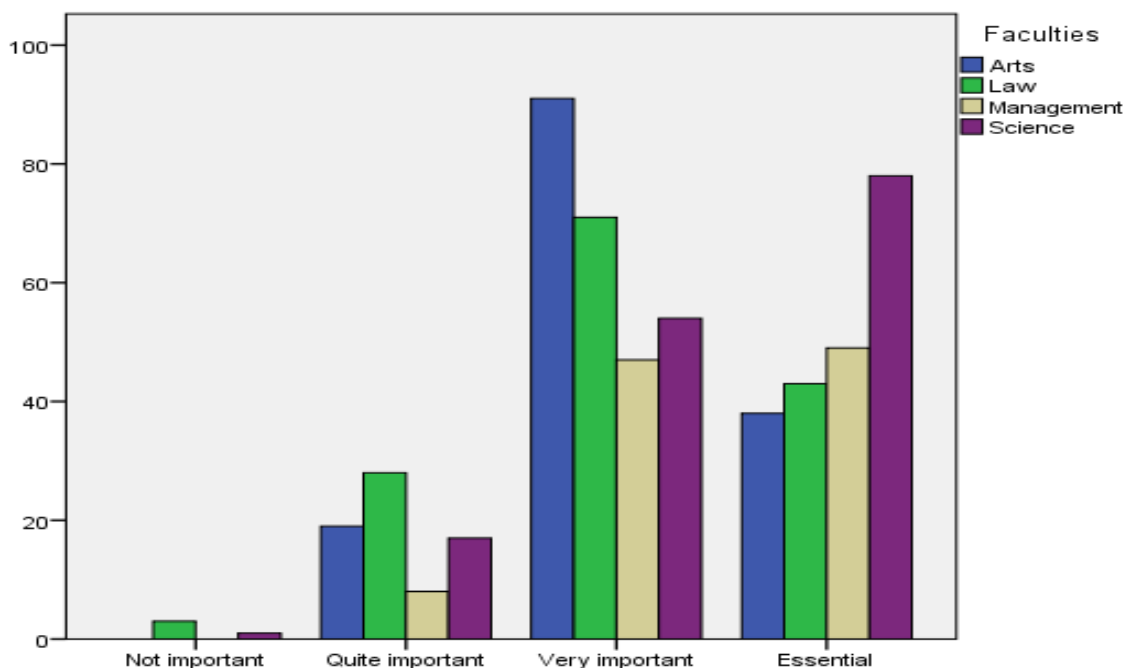
	Faculty				Total
	Faculty of Arts	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Management	Faculty of Science	
Reading	71	81	43	63	258
Writing	82	110	64	70	326
Listening and note taking	76	84	53	72	285
Speaking	125	127	90	116	458
Grammar	100	114	64	70	348
Presentation skills	87	114	81	114	396

Oral communication was the biggest problematic area for 40 percent of the undergraduates in the sample. According to the data, grammar is difficult for 18 percent of undergraduates and learning new words (vocabulary) is difficult for 16 percent of the undergraduates.

**Figure 1: The biggest problematic area for the students**



In relation to listening, listening to lectures in English, obtaining specific information and taking notes are very important to all the students.

**Figure 2: How important is listening to lectures in English**

Asking and answering questions in class, giving presentations, speaking accurately and fluently, and pronunciation are very important and essential according to data. Reading and answering questions, understanding vocabulary and reading quickly and efficiently as reading sub skills are common to all students. Writing skills, writing grammatically, linking sentences in writing and writing research proposals/ report are considered very important and essential needs.

According to the data the best way for the majority of students to learn in all four faculties are small groups and pair work. According to responses given by students, working individually is another option for best way to learn. However a majority of students of all faculties are of the opinion that being in a large group is not beneficial for learning. Only a small percentage has commented that it is the best way to learn.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The main purpose of this research was to identify the needs of the learner and to recognize the necessary changes to the curriculum / syllabus and to the lessons in order to provide learner friendly and more effective courses to undergraduate in the University of Colombo through the use of a needs analysis.

Although the students do not possess uniform needs according to the data, speaking is the most important area that the students in all four faculties want to improve, and it is evident from the responses given by the students that speech is a very difficult area for them. Hence, it is recommended that more attention be paid to improve speaking skills. Further, grammar and vocabulary are very important sections of a language and they contribute to the success in all four language skills. Therefore, the findings will be

beneficial for curriculum /syllabus designers and lesson writers to consider giving additional activities to improve grammar and vocabulary.

For curriculum/syllabus and lesson preparation, it is very important to know how the students learn best, since different students have different learning practices. Furthermore, it is essential to meet the learning needs and the best learning practices, as lesson developers can develop lessons accordingly. This will also provide a very good insight for administrators to avoid grouping large numbers of students in English classes and also for module / lesson writers in all four faculties to include small group and pair work activities in their modules/lessons.

Therefore, according to the research it can be concluded that a needs analysis helps to clearly identify students' needs, so that curriculum, syllabus and modules designers could design language courses according to students' needs and their preferences.

**Keywords:** Curriculum; Design; English Language; Needs Analysis; Undergraduates

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