ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEEDS OF NON-NATIVE FOREIGN STUDENTS IN NEW ZEALAND

By

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Abstract

This paper will investigate the English language needs of non-native foreign students who are studying at the University of Otago, New Zealand. These students comprise of students from Asia (China, Thailand, Korea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia to name a few) and Europe. For these students English is their second or third language and they face proficiency problems. To them, mastery of English is most important because all the courses in the university are taught in English and unless the students are proficient to operate in English, they will lose out and face difficulties in securing good grades for their subjects. Findings of this research will provide insights for the curriculum developers and English teachers at public universities especially in Malaysia that have been accepting students from Asia and the Middle East. The present curriculum need to be reviewed or a new curriculum need to be designed to meet the English needs of their non-native foreign students.

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Non-native foreign students at the University of Otago, New Zealand come from Asia (China, Thailand, Korea, Japan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia to name a few) and Europe. For these students English is their second or third language and many face proficiency problems. A mastery of English is most important because all the courses in the university are taught in English and unless the students are proficient to operate in English, they will lose out and face difficulties in securing good grades for their subjects. This research paper will investigate on the students' English language needs.

Findings of this research will provide insights for comparison on students' needs in public universities Malaysia and that of University of Otago, New Zealand. There has been an influx of students from Asia and the Middle East to Malaysian universities with the change in the government policy. Thus, the findings depict a better understanding of the learners' needs and help to define English programme goals, whether to review their present curriculum or design a new curriculum to meet the students' academic and social needs.

B. APPROACH

Before any course is drawn up, a learner analysis has to be made. Nunan (1985:7) justifies needs analysis as 'Pedagogically, the most powerful argument in favour of a needs-based course is a motivational one … One way of improving motivation is to orientate content towards those areas that most interest learners and which are perceived by them as being more relevant.'

Mackay and Palmer (1981:3) found that many well intentioned programs have foundered because either no consideration was given to the actual use the learner intended to make of the language or because the list of uses drawn up by the course designer was based on imagination rather than an objective assessment of the learners' situation, and prove to be inaccurate and in many cases entirely inappropriate to his real needs.

Brindley (1989:70) divides needs into objective and subjective needs. The objective needs are derived from factual information about the learner and his usage of the language in the real life situation. The learner's current language proficiency and difficulties are taken into consideration. However, the subjective needs refer to the learner's wants and expectations. These are taken into consideration along with the language learning styles and strategies.

This research is guided by the protocol of Hutchinson and Waters (1987:6) and refined by Basturkmen (1998) model of needs analysis. It is a quantitative research through the implementation of structured questionnaires. The questionnaire meant for the students is adapted along the lines put forward by Basturkmen (1998).

The following research questions will be investigated:-

i.   What are the English language skills, in order of perceived importance that the students need for their success in other subjects?

ii.   What are the important language-based tasks that the students need for their other subjects in English?

From the outset, the researchers have identified non-native foreign students who are doing English intermediate level at the University of Otago, New Zealand as respondents. These students need English for their academic and social purposes.

There is limitation to this research because the researchers could not triangulate the information gathered from the questionnaire with key informants (English language teachers at the university). These teachers who are teaching the students could not be interviewed.

The researchers believe that information gathered from the questionnaire would depict a better understanding of the learners' concern if they could be triangulated with

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information gathered from interviews. This will provide considerable insights into the language needs of the respondents.

C. RESULTS

The findings of this research are tabulated and shown below:-

Table 1: Experience English before entering the university

	frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Studied English as a subject	7	41.2	41.2	41.2
Attended an English medium school	6	35.3	35.3	76.5
Lived abroad	3	17.6	17.6	94.1
Other-not specified	1	5.9	5.9	100.0
Total	17	100.0	100.0	
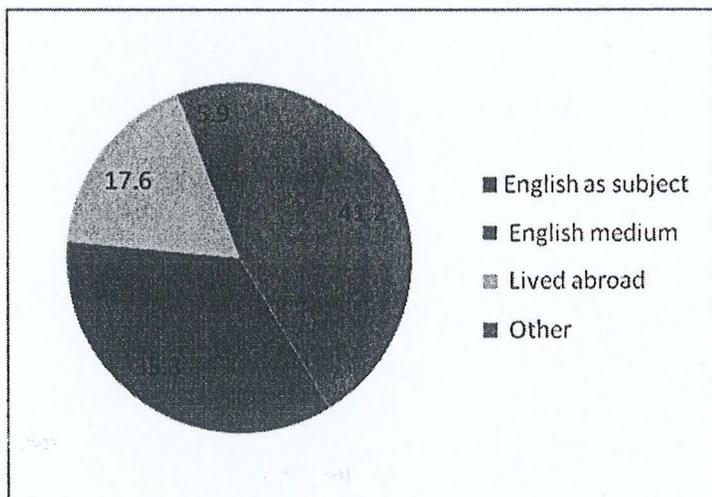
From Table 1, it can be seen that 41.2 % studied English as a subject in school, 35.3 % attended an English medium school and 17.6% have experienced living abroad before entering University of Otago, New Zealand. The information is also given in the form of a pie chart.

Purpose of using English

Table 2.1: Use English for study

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	14	82.4	82.4	82.4

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	No	3	17.6	17.6	100.0
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.2: Use English for socialization

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	11	64.7	64.7	64.7
	No	6	35.3	35.3	100.0
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.3: Use English at home

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	3	17.7	17.7	17.7
	No	14	82.3	82.3	100.0
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

The learner may have his own agenda in learning English, it may be for an immediate usage (passing of university examinations), socialization, at home, career advancement (promotion at the work place) or for the purpose of meeting the language requirements of the employer.

From Table 2.1, the researchers found that 82.4% need English for their studies. The subjects that they are following are taught in English so obviously they need English to operate efficiently. Besides that 64.7% say they need English for socialization and only 17.7% use English at home. The students are more comfortable using their first language at home.

Table 3: English skills in order of perceived importance

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Reading	7	41.2	41.2	41.2
Listening	3	17.6	17.6	58.8
Speaking	4	23.5	23.5	82.4
Writing	3	17.6	17.6	100.0
Total	17	100.0	100.0	
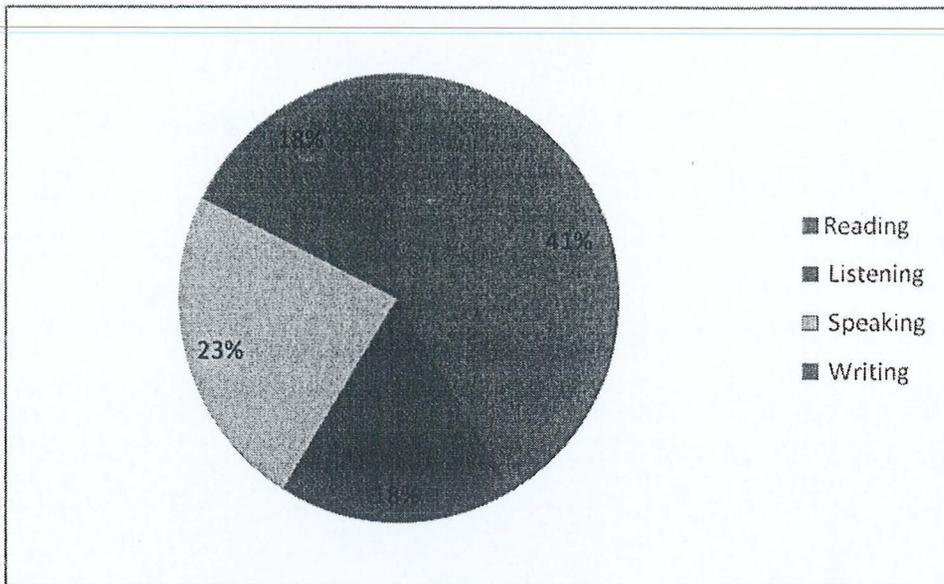
Wilkins (1974:58) however, states 'the first principle of a sound approach to language teaching is to know what the objectives of teaching are.' He also mentions that it is necessary to predict what kind of language skills will be of greatest value to the learner. So it implies that a preliminary analysis of the learner needs and expectations will be a prerequisite in any course design whether for general or specific purposes.

From Table 3 and also shown in the form of pie chart, 41.2 % of the students say reading is the most important skill. It can be deduced that the students need to comprehend text and reading materials which are all in English and perceive that proficiency in reading is important for their success in other subjects.

23.5% perceive speaking as the second most important skill. This communicative skill is next important and not only is it useful during lectures but also when socializing. When asking and answering questions, they need speaking skill and accuracy in this skill will serve them well during their stay in New Zealand.

17.6% choose listening and writing together as the last important skills. It can be deduced that the students feel the two skills are least important.

Important language based-tasks that the students need for their other subjects

Table 4: Importance of reading tasks in English for other subjects

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Mean
textbooks	11	64.7	64.7	1.35
articles in journal	5	29.4	29.4	1.82
manuals	3	17.6	17.6	2.0

course handouts	11	64.7	64.7	1.35
texts on computer	6	35.3	35.3	1.71
instructions for assignments/projects	12	70.6	70.6	1.29
instructions for labs	6	35.3	35.3	1.76
study notes	11	64.7	64.7	1.35

Widdowson (1987:97) provides two interpretations to the meaning of 'learner needs' and the first expression refers to what the learner needs to do with the language once he has learned it. This is goal-oriented of needs and needs related to terminal behaviours, the ends of learning. The other expression refers to what the learner needs to do in order to actually acquire the language. This is a process-oriented definition of needs and needs related to transitional behaviours, the means of learning.

Table 4 shows that more than 70 % (the mean is 1.29) of the students choose reading task 'instruction for assignments/ projects' because it is an important task that can help them in their other subjects. And the next important English based tasks preferred are reading textbooks, course handouts and study notes. The students find these three tasks are equally important. The mean value is 1.35. Reading manuals in English is least important and the researchers deduced that this task is not applicable in their other subjects because not all of them are taking technical subjects.

Table 5: Importance of writing tasks in English for other subjects

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Mean
lab reports	6	35.3	35.3	1.65
assignments	14	82.4	82.4	1.18
field-trip reports	8	47.1	47.1	1.65
projects (short)	7	41.2	41.2	1.59
taking notes in lectures	9	52.9	52.9	1.65
answering questions related to part of text book	10	58.8	58.8	1.65

From Table 5, more than 80% (with a mean value of 1.18) of the students find writing of assignments in English as very important for their other subjects. Writing answers in

English for questions related to part text book is the second highest (and the mean is 1.65) that contribute to the students other subjects. The researchers identify that writing lab reports in English will not help them in their other subjects and the reason could be these reports have special format and writing is for specific purposes. It is not applicable for all of their other subjects.

Table 6: Importance of listening and speaking tasks in English for other subjects

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Mean
following lectures	12	70.6	70.6	1.29
following question / answer sessions in class	8	47.1	47.1	1.53
listening to oral presentations	8	47.1	47.1	1.53
listening to instructions	8	47.1	47.1	1.53
listening to instructions for assignments	12	70.6	70.6	1.29
participating in discussions	7	41.2	41.2	1.71
asking questions in class	5	29.4	29.4	1.88
giving oral presentations	7	41.2	41.2	1.76

Table 6 shows that 70.6 % of the participants find following lectures in English is important because all other subjects are conducted in English and this task (listening) helps them especially when their lecturers are native speakers. Another finding is that 70.6% also listening to instructions for assignments as equally important because the students must be able to grasp what the lecturers want them to do in order to meet the deadline.

It is an interesting finding that 29.4 % say asking questions in class is least important for their other subjects. The researchers deduce that the students are passive in class and too shy of participating in class activities either they are afraid of making mistakes or they could consult their friends after class. So asking questions is not a big issue to them.

D. CONCLUSIONS

The researchers find that the language skills in order of perceived importance that the students need for their success in other subjects are firstly reading, next speaking, followed by writing and listening. Some of the tasks in English that are important for the students other subjects are - reading instruction for assignments or projects; reading

textbooks, study notes and course handouts; writing assignments; answering questions that are related to part of text book; listening to lectures, instructions for assignments, question/answer sessions and giving oral presentations;.

The findings of this research depict a better understanding of the students' English language needs. And these findings also provide insights especially for language centres at Malaysian public universities that have been accepting students from Asia and the Middle East, whether they need to review their present curriculum or design a new curriculum tailored towards meeting the needs of their foreign students.

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Biodata
Shahrier Pawanchik is a senior lecturer at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, Malaysia. His area of specialization is Teaching of English as a Second Language and English for Specific Purposes. And as a researcher, his interest is on English needs of adult learners in distance education. He has expanded his interest to include English needs of indigenous students in primary, secondary and tertiary levels. These students' needs are rarely analyzed and are simply intuited for them. By focusing on learning needs and target needs, enable the researcher to determine the needs according to priorities for which a learner or group of learners requires the language in order to operate effectively. Findings of his research will provide insights for teachers and curriculum developers to develop or design new courses to meet the students' needs.