

The Linguistic Needs and Preferences of Undergraduate Students of Zoology: A Case Study of Government College University

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Abstract

This study aims to specify the language needs of the undergraduate students of Zoology at G.C. University, Faisalabad. For that purpose, we developed a questionnaire to obtain students' opinions about their linguistic needs in different contexts. The questionnaire focuses to elicit responses concerning students' needs regarding language. The study reveals some interesting patterns such as students' preference for speaking skill, their liking for the British English, their claim that they need English not only in the country but also abroad, their eagerness to learn the grammar of the target language and their claim about their "good" current proficiency level in English. However there are certain predictable patterns as well. As the respondents are all students, their immediate linguistic needs are academic and the context where they require English most frequently is lecture room. This study is significant as it provides a background for the ESP practitioners and helps them to design courses and develop material for undergraduate students of Zoology.

Introduction

With the turn of the century, English for the specific purpose received special attention by the linguists and language practitioners. Under the umbrella term of ESP, further subdivisions such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Official Purpose (EOP), English for Business and Economy (EBC) etc. emerged (as cited by Gatehouse, 2001). Designing EAP courses is a difficult task as it involves not only course planning but the issues of material development as well as evaluation (Clark, 1999).

Our focus here in this study is on EAP as we aim to conduct a needs analysis of the undergraduate students of Zoology department in G.C. University, Faisalabad. Although the respondents have been taken from one department, I believe that the results of our study can be reasonably generalised as we are talking about the specific academic needs of the learners. Carter (1983) has stressed the importance of learners' self direction and the need of enabling students to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how. He suggests that this can be done through training learners to identify their needs and teaching them to make choices about their learning processes and the strategies that should be adopted during teaching. However, Gatehouse (2001) disagrees with this point and claims that it is unnecessary to teach learning strategies to the high ability learners who attend ESP and EAP courses.

With the evolution of English for Specific Purposes, focus on learners' needs and demands also has also been highlighted. Special courses have been designed and planned on the basis of needs of the learners, their instructors' preference and the trends in job market. But the issue of needs analysis has never been simple and straight forward. It is always tricky to determine learners' needs at a particular point of time as needs are dynamic. Clark (1999) draws attention to this phenomenon and points out that the needs of the learners may be measured during or after the course and we have to differentiate between stable and emerging needs of the learners. And then there is the issue of the subjective needs of the learners and the objective needs that instructor or future employees think are necessary for survival in job market. However, this complexity is not meant to deter but adds to the challenge of the task.

Basturkmen (1998) defines needs analysis as "the identification of difficulties and standard situations by observation of participants functioning in a target situation in conjunction with interviews and questionnaires." (para. 2) The aim of the needs analysis is to determine the current and future needs of the students and to find out gaps between the existing curriculum and the target proficiency (Basturkmen, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, needs analysis involves many dimensions of language teaching and learning. Cowling (2007) has discussed the complex task of material development in detail. He has highlighted the importance of triangulation to develop ESP material as it can authenticate and validate the material developed by ESP practitioner. Whereas Basturkmen (1998) has used mixed methods to consider the language needs of the learners.

Seedhouse (1997) discussed the importance and relevance of needs analysis data as it can be helpful in designing a course. He also suggests methods of needs analysis and how this analysis can provide a practical link between the perceived needs of the learners and classroom practices. This study is classroom oriented and focuses on the implementation and feasibility of needs analysis and the incorporation of results in the English language classroom. It provides theoretical support to ESP needs analysis without referring to its various dimensions.

Basturkmen (1998) conducted a needs analysis of undergraduate students at the College of Petroleum and Engineering, Kuwait University. She has used both qualitative and quantitative techniques to generate responses from students and faculty members about various aspects of learner needs such as language proficiency, expectations of language

course etc. She used the results of her study to design a language course tailored according to the needs of the learners and the demands of faculty members.

Rahman (2011) has also conducted a survey of the needs of the learners' needs regarding ELT in Najran University, Saudi Arabia. He offers various recommendations for teachers and language planners regarding the specific linguistic needs of the learners. He has also identified gender based differences in the learners' responses regarding their preference for four language skills. Rahman also recommends that teachers should conduct their own needs analysis in order to identify the immediate subjective needs of their students as the learners' preferences change and evolve according to their aims, abilities and proficiency.

Another interesting study conducted by Ferris (1998) highlights the contrast between students' and teachers' perception of language needs. In this study, respondents were selected from three universities and with the help of a questionnaire, their responses were elicited. Finally the opinions of both the groups were matched. Interestingly, major differences of opinion were traced between the responses of teachers and students regarding the context as well as the relative importance of various language skills. So the researcher raises questions about the validity of the interpretation of needs analysis data and its implications. This study also points to the multifarious nature of needs analysis research. This is in line with Clark's (1999) claim about the difference between objective and subjective needs of the learners.

The present study builds upon all the previous data to rationalise its attempt to determine the academic needs of the learners regarding the use of English. Our main objective here is to find out the learners' perception about how they are going to use English in their academic life and what are their specific needs regarding language skill required in various contexts.

Methodology

In order to elicit responses from students, a questionnaire was designed. It was based on Munby's model of Communicative Needs Processor (as cited by Songhori, 2008). As Munby's model has been criticised for its redundancy (Le Ha, 2005) it has been modified and merged with needs analysis template available online at www.englishabc.co.uk.

The first part of the questionnaire aims to draw out personal informational. Part 2 is concerned with obtaining responses about the macro level e.g. context, preferred language

skills, medium of communication, current level of language proficiency and future aspirations. Part 3 is more specific and elicits responses about language at the micro level. It inquires about learners' inclination toward grammar teaching, accent, language learning strategies, the kind of reading material they would like to be used in the language class and the level of comprehension they want to attain.

As this study aims to provide a guideline to the course planners and English language teachers who teach English language course at under graduate level to the students of Zoology, the respondents were chosen randomly from Zoology department of G.C. University Faisalabad. Gender was not a variable here and the education level of all the respondents was also the same.

The results were analysed with the help of SPSS and frequencies and cross tabulation were used to measure the responses. The results of our study are given in the following section.

Results

Some very interesting patterns have emerged in this study. A majority of students i.e. 54 % rank study as their first objective for learning English. Fig.1 shows the ranking of study as a learning objective. On the other hand, work is ranked as the second objective by 46.2 % respondents as shown in Fig. 2. Interestingly, examination and a means of enhancing social status have come up as the lowest ranking objectives.

Fig. 1: Ranking of 'Study' as learning objective

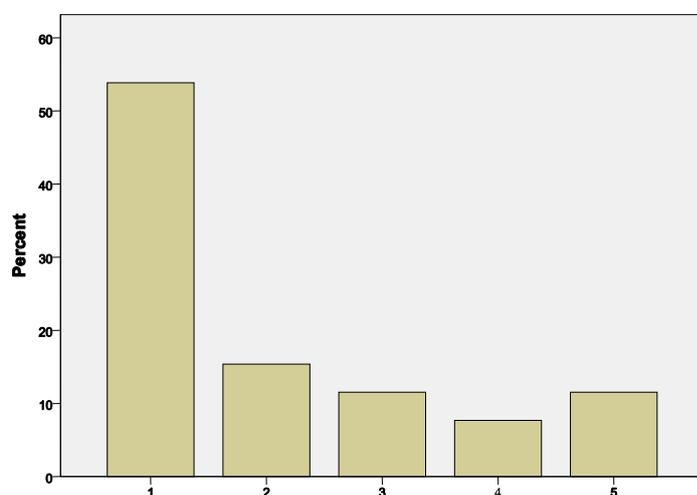
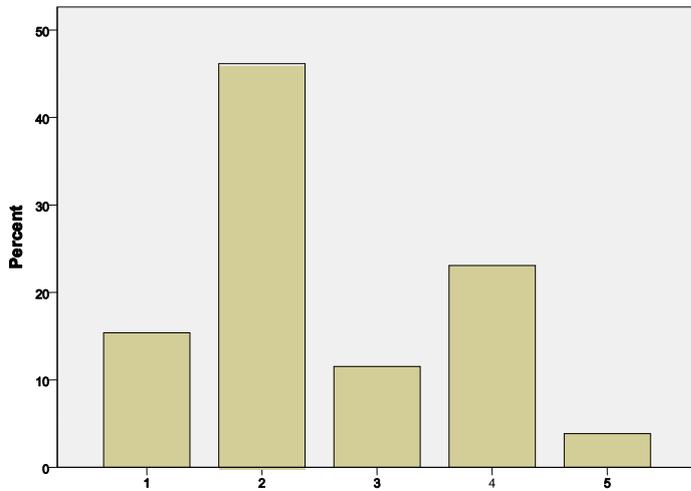
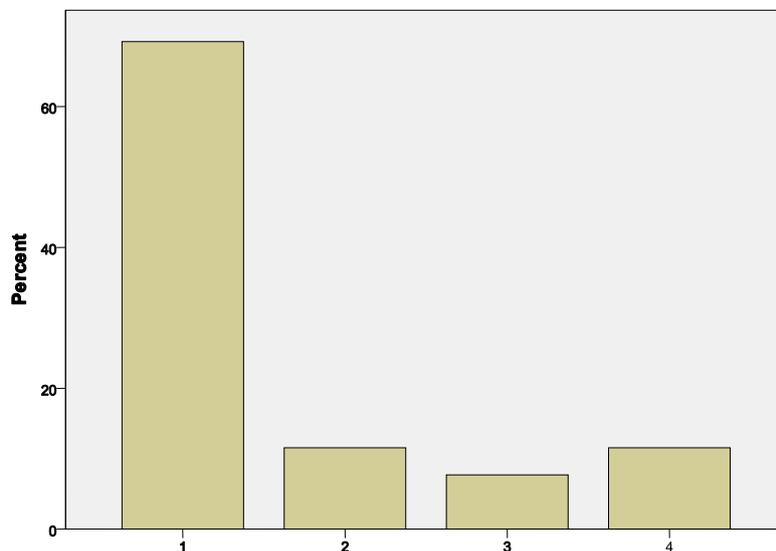


Fig. 2: Work as the second highest ranking objective



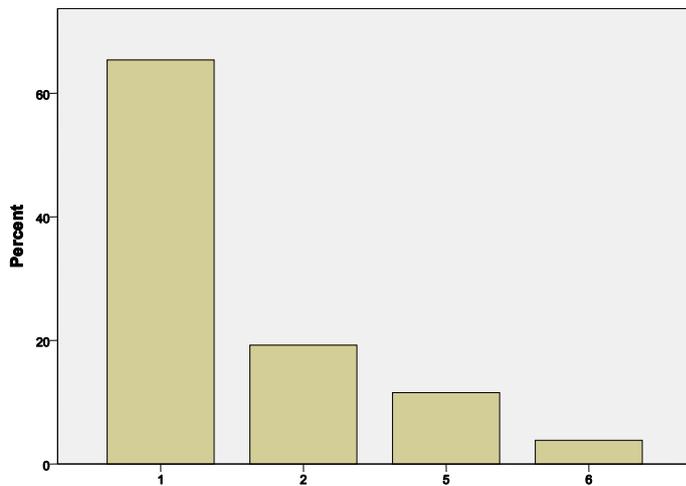
The speaking skill has been ranking as the top most priority of 69 % respondents whereas listening has been ranked as the least wanted skill.

Fig. 3: Speech as the highest ranking skill



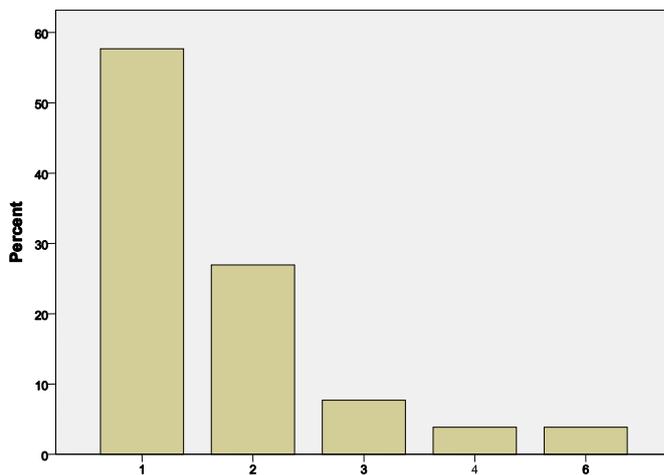
According to the respondents, they need English language mostly for face to face communication. As table 4 shows, 65.4 respondents agree with the premise. Whereas the second rank has been given to the official use of English.

Fig. 4: Ranking of face to face communication



As the respondents were all students, it is understandable that they need English in the lecture rooms. So this context has been ranked as the highest by 57.7 % respondents. Similarly, library has been ranked as the second learning objective by 38.5 respondents. The lowest ranking objective is travelling which has been given the sixth rank by 42.3 respondents.

Fig. 5: Lecture room as the highest ranking context for English usage

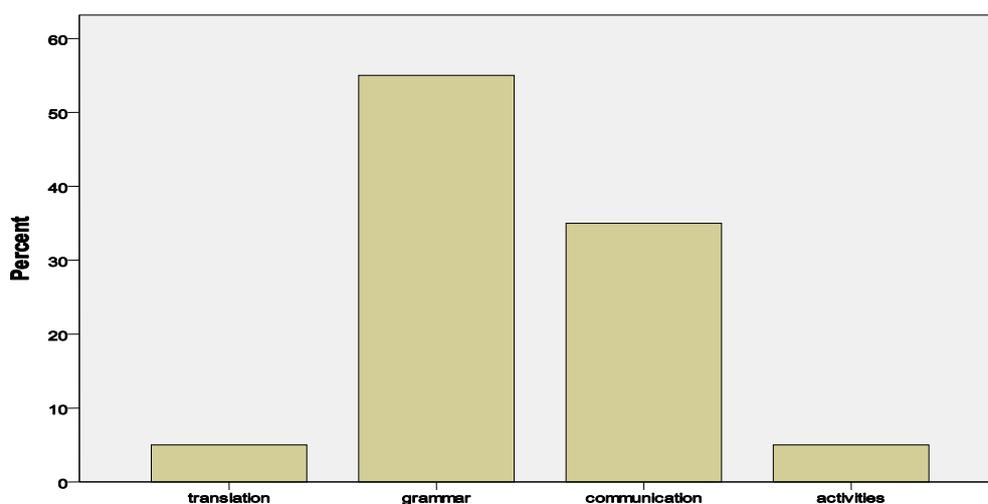


When asked whether they need English for using it inside the country or abroad, the respondents replied that they need English in both the contexts. So 50 % respondents have chosen each context. As for the frequency of classes, the opinion seems rather divided and

only a small majority of 39.3 % respondents prefer to have daily English language classes and the similar percentage of people vote for two hours lecture on English language.

As far as the teaching methods are concerned, 55 % respondents prefer a method that concentrates on grammar and the structures of language. Fig. 6 shows the respondents' preference for teaching methods.

Fig. 6: Preference for teaching methods

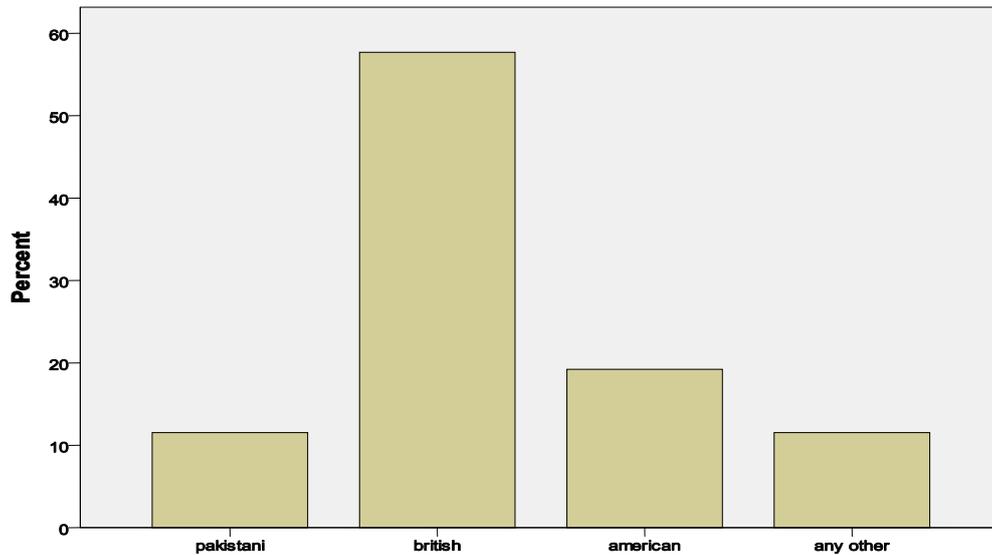


The present study has also set out to obtain respondents' opinions about their current linguistic ability and their future aspirations about their language level. All the respondents agree that their current proficiency level is either very good or fairly good. Yet they want to improve it in future and want their linguistic ability in reading comprehension, fluency, accuracy in speech and writing and the range of vocabulary.

Another interesting finding is that when respondents were asked about their desired level of linguistic comprehension, 54 % of them agreed that they wanted to comprehend every word of the linguistic material they were exposed to.

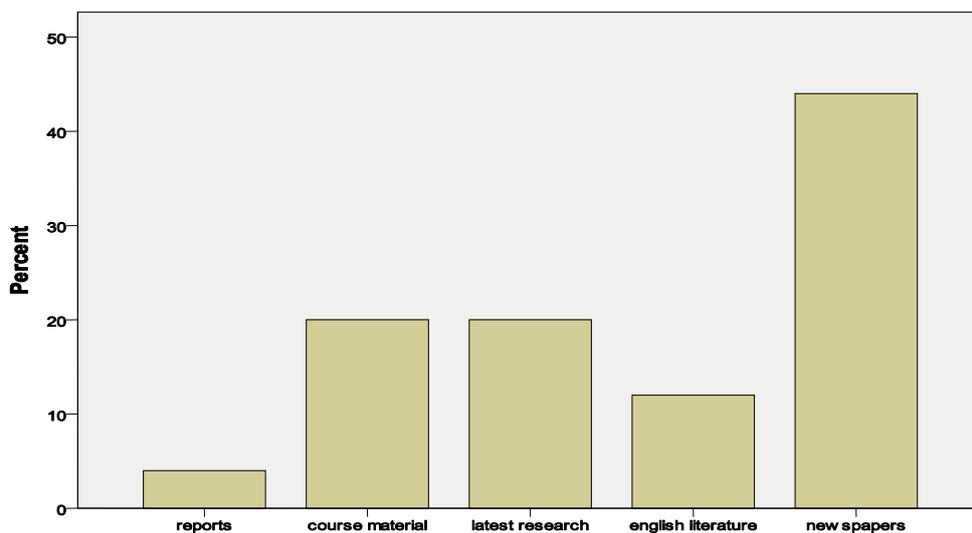
Next is the issue of accent. As Fig. 7 depicts, 57.7 % respondents desire to acquire British accent. This preference has important pedagogical implications which are further discussed in the findings section.

Fig. 7: Preference for accent



As for the reading material that the respondents want to be able to comprehend, newspapers and journals rank highest with 44 %. Fig. 8 highlights the order of preference for the reading material by the respondents.

Fig. 8: Preferences for reading material



Inquiry about the respondents' preferred learning habits yields some interesting results. 57.7 % respondents prefer to work with only one partner whereas self-help and role play have been the least popular strategies with 22.2 and 27 % respectively.

These results offer some very useful insight into what students believe are their linguistic needs regarding English language. The implications of these results are discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

An investigation of the linguistic needs of the students of Zoology at under graduate level indicates certain definite patterns. As our respondents are all students, it is only understandable that their top most needs are academic and they want to use English language for academic purposes in academic settings. In line with the needs of the students of many other disciplines, they need enhanced spoken skill for face to face communication and to understand lectures.

However this clashes strangely with the fact that many students have confessed that they need English rather infrequently (“sometimes”). But the opinion seems to be divided here as 48.3 % respondents believe that they use English language quite frequently in their lives. A majority of them also prefer to have daily classes but the desired study hours per week are merely two.

Grammar continues to be the mantra with the Zoology students too. They prefer a teaching style that concentrates on grammar. This is in line with their previous learning experience. In Pakistan, language learning has always been synonymous with learning grammar. Although respondents claim that they need English for oral purpose, they feel that the knowledge of grammar is essential for them to be efficient language users. Yet they are very confident about their language proficiency and claim that their linguistic capabilities are either good or very good. And they still want to improve in future! A degree of exaggeration may be safely allowed here as the respondents feel reluctant to share their language deficiencies.

The same perfectionist attitude is evident in the respondents’ desire to learn every word of the linguistic material they are exposed to. Being the users of English as a second language, respondents feel unsure of their needs and want to understand every word, not caring that even the native speakers cannot aspire to that level of linguistic proficiency. So it depends on the language teacher to set reasonable targets of proficiency while offering students a sense of achievement at the same time.

Another interesting opinion is the respondents' desire to learn British accent. This is reflective of our social standards based on colonial legacy. The language of the 'masters' still attracts. In fact there are a large number of people who believe that all Pakistanis use British English. The concept of World Englishes holds no value for them. Now it depends on the future teachers to comply with the demand of the respondents or acquaint them with the concept of Pakistani English.

As for the reading material, 44 % respondents want to be able to read and comprehend English newspapers. Strangely, only 20 % of them desire the comprehension of course material and latest research. It might be due to the fact that the ability to read English papers is a greater marker of social status than the comprehension of course material.

Then there is the respondents' preference for the learning strategies. Most of the learners feel comfortable while working with only one partner. Moreover teacher directed lesson is not very popular as only 34.6 % respondents find it enjoyable whereas 30 % respondents find it slightly enjoyable. So the task of the course planner and the teacher is to keep all these points in mind while designing a course for the students of Zoology at undergraduate level.

Conclusion

The present survey concentrates on exploring the academic needs of the learners before offering them mandatory language courses at undergraduate level. It helps provide a guideline to the planners and language teachers alike to chalk out their courses and lesson plans. Yet this guideline will be incomplete without surveying teachers' opinions and extensive surveys of job market where certain language skills are needed and preferred by the employees. This study is just one aspect of the needs analysis triangle. However I hope that it can provide further grounds for the other aspects of needs analysis. I also hope that the results of this study provide a solid background to EAP practitioners for designing courses for the students of Zoology. However the results may not be too generalized as they focus the academic use of English and the aspects of material development and evaluation have not been addressed here.

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