Teaching English for Specific Purposes at Tertiary Level in Sri Lanka: A Needs Analysis Approach

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Abstract. The main purpose of conducting this needs analysis was to revise the existing curriculum and syllabi for the course in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC) in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. The study used a descriptive method and was aimed at identifying learning needs of the students and the lecturers' perception about the importance of problematic areas in ESP programs in the Faculty. After reviewing the theoretical background about needs analysis (NA), a questionnaire was designed, piloted and administered to the first-year undergraduates in the Faculty. The questionnaire that carried 10 closed-ended questions was administered to all the students to collect responses on their requirements and perceptions of learning English as a Second Language. The number that consented to participate in the survey was 261. Nine lecturers involved in teaching English in the Faculty also participated in the study for a focus group discussion. The results suggest that the majority of the students in the Faculty use English to a great extent in their everyday work, and they are interested in improving it further. Except for a few students all the others were interested in learning English language as a core subject in their curriculum. However, the most interesting and important task for the students was speaking while it was reading skills for the lecturers. The overall results show a discrepancy between the perceptions of ESP learners in different language components and between learners and the lecturers. The study has implications for curriculum design and instructional delivery of ESP courses for the students in the Faculty. The implication of the findings would be the base of the teaching and learning process, especially in designing the learning materials for the English writing skill.

Key words: Needs analysis, English for Specific Purposes, undergraduates, Management

Introduction

The English language occupies a very strategic position as a global or international language and is used as a means of communication in a plethora of disciplines such as politics, diplomacy, industry, trade, science, technology, education, media, information technology, and popular cultures (Crystal, 1987; Huda, 2000; Jenkin, 2003; Lauder; 2008) and strong communication skills have been considered as an imperative in almost all facets of life (Dharmawardene & Wijewardene, 2021). Hence English has become a prerequisite in order to function as global citizens in this modern era. Additionally, in the arena of higher education one of the quality indicators of good universities is the English competence of their graduates (Jamilah, 2015).

'Needs' have been a fundamental component in producing "tailored-to-fit" instruction from the evolution of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach (Belcher, 2006). ESP was defined as an approach for meeting the needs of learners where the methodology used to describe language, models of learning, and needs analysis are essential elements for course design (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) further added that ESP is an approach to teaching a language, where the approach is based on the needs of learners.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays an important role in countries where English is used for both academic and specific purposes. However, ESP programs in many universities have been developed without conducting a systematic needs analysis from both the students' and lecturers' perspectives. The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions that ESP

students and lecturers have of the problematic areas in ESP programs so as to facilitate revising the existing ESL curriculum.

English for Management Purposes is a skill-based course designed to provide students with the vocabulary and language needed to understand and use terms related to business studies and economics. It seeks to provide the students with the professional language and vocabulary to successfully apply in their respective work environment.

In a country like Sri Lanka, where English is used to a large extent for academic purposes, ESP plays an important role. In addition, there has been a strong tendency to teach ESP, which is perceived to be a branch of English that can be separated from the general English. ESP has increasingly expanded so that it currently forms a considerable part of the curricula for all academic fields at universities (Eslami, Eslami-Rasekh, & Quiroz, 2007).

Despite the Sri Lankan government's high level of investment in English teaching programs, there is limited research addressing the effectiveness of these programs from learners' and instructors' perspectives. The current ESP practice in Sri Lankan universities is ad-hoc, lacking in course design, teacher training, sufficient instruction time, and proper evaluation. The challenges will necessarily involve developing true specific-purpose curricula based on learners' needs which would provide the appropriate context for sustainable language programs.

The study addresses the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the lecturers' perceptions of the importance of problematic areas in ESP classes?

RQ2: What are the ESP students' perceptions of the importance of problematic areas in ESP classes?

RQ3: Are there any significant differences between the learners' perceptions with regard to language components?

RQ4: Are there any significant differences between the learners' perceptions and their lecturers'?

Literature Review

The purpose of the needs analysis in the teaching of English at tertiary level, is to investigate the present needs of the undergraduates in order to design an English for Specific Purposes course (Randhuli, 2021). The current needs of students in the different subject areas within a university context should be taken into account when developing EFL programs for tertiary level (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Revising EFL programs in this way can help teachers respond better to students' learning needs within their degree programs, which can improve their motivation to use English when discussing content-knowledge topics necessary for their academic and professional development (Trujeque-Moreno, *et al.,* 2021). This study was conducted, to provide input and insights into the teaching and learning of English language in institutions of public higher education. Similar findings were recorded in studies conducted by Criollo-Avendano (2010), Davies (2008, 2020) and González *et al.* (2004). In addition, this study focuses on the learning and innovations in education and responds to the demands placed on language training in this rapidly changing and globalizing world (Crystal, 1997; Hyland, 2007).

In order for English education to be effective, there needs to be an apt English curriculum, whilst learners need to be motivated and aware of the need to learn English (Suh *et al.*, 2021). This will pivot around the needs analysis which will determine the method and content of education. Needs analyses began in the field of language education as part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education (Suh *et al.*, 2021). Needs analysis has been defined by Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) as the process of prioritizing language needs of learners, so as to bring about reforms to the English curricula (Ko, 2014; Kwon, 2012).

ESP is based on the premise that the content and method of learning the language should be determined by investigating the needs of the learner and the situation in which English will be used. The function of needs assessment is to establish priorities after confirming the needs and finding out whether they are justified (Pratt, 1980). Hence, needs analysis for learners is a major factor for establishing a learner-centered curriculum (Suh *et al.,* 2021).

Assessment of needs from the individual learner's perspective is an important part of any instructional program design and it can benefit both teachers and students alike (Lytle, 1988). The learner-centered approach to language learning builds on the premise that teaching/learning programs should be responsive to learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991; Savignon & Wang, 2003). As Hamp-Lyons (2001) points out, ESP begins with the learner and the situation, whereas General English begins with the language. ESP curriculum development is guided by learner needs leading to a research area known as 'needs analysis' or 'needs assessment.'

Hence, the needs analysis initiates and guides ESP curriculum development, involving surveying the learners to collect data on their background and goals, linguistic and behavioral demands, and preferred learning/teaching strategies (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999). Students' needs assessment remains elemental to ESP (Allison *et al*., 1994; Brinton *et al*., 1989; Dudley-Evans, 1998; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997) and the unifying feature of any ESP course is the definition of objectives and content of each course according to learners' functional needs in the target language and how the students are expected to perform in conforming to the norms and conventions of their academic disciplines.

Needs assessment should be considered as an on-going process designed to gather and analyze information about the target language needs of learners in an existing or proposed setting and to find out whether the program's objectives and the learners' requirements are being achieved (Purpura & King, 2003; Santopietro & Peyton, 1991).

An important question in relation to needs analysis is how the notion of 'need' is to be conceptualized. According to Brindley (1989) the main source of the ambiguity in the concept of language needs is the distinction between various concepts of need, namely the distinction between 'necessities or demands', and learners' 'wants' and the methods of bridging the gap between these two. Similarly, Berwick (1989) defines 'need' as a measurable discrepancy or the gap between the existing conditions and the desired future state. Betti (2021) believes that the researchers need to go beyond the descriptive approach to needs analysis and consider critical needs analysis. Critical needs analysis acknowledges the existing demands but considers the target situation demands as a site of reform.

Betti (2021) further believes that needs analysis has so far surrendered to the domination of the institutes and authorities and suggests that we need to consider needs analysis as a political and subjective process and ESP classrooms as a site of struggle. Critical needs analysis assumes that institutions are hierarchical and those at the bottom are entitled to more power than they have and therefore areas where greater equality might be achieved should be explored. Therefore, it is incredibly important to consider the 'need' in relation to the unique characteristics of the educational context in which the study takes place (Hashim, 2020). Students' needs in different contexts are diverse and the analysis of needs can be effective if the academic language needs are accurately defined and seek utmost specificity within the specific target use (Betti, 2021).

In order to meet learners' needs, the particularly important task that any course designers have to do is to analyze their learners' needs so as to design appropriate course for them, to motivate them and to help them learn faster and more effectively. Needs analysis is regarded as criteria to ESP. "Essentially, needs assessment is a systematic and ongoing process of gathering information about students' needs and preferences, interpreting the information and

then making course decisions based on the interpretation in order to meet the needs" (Betti, 2021).

Besides, analyzing the students' needs will help teachers or course designers easily plan their syllabus as well as teaching methods. Thus, needs analysis can be said to be one of the best tools to know the learners' necessities, needs, and lacks in order to develop courses that have a reasonable content. Needs analysis is therefore a process for identification and defining valid curriculum and instructional and management objectives to facilitate learning in an environment that is closely related to the real-life situations of the student. It focuses on the settings and roles that learners are likely to face after they finish their courses.

Needs analysis provides insight into the type of activities that would benefit the target learners (Randhuli, 2021). Therefore, this needs analysis should be seen as an indispensable part of ESP syllabus design at the FMSC as it helps to link the present students' academic needs with the needs of their prospective employment. It was aimed at identifying learning needs of the students who learn English as a Second Language in the FMSC. Especially in ESP courses, the contexts need to be taken into account since more focus is placed on the utility value of language (Randhuli, 2021). The present study was therefore conducted in order to broaden the scope of studies undertaken so far in the area of students' and lecturers' perceptions of their language learning needs and to analyze the perception of ESP learners from different though related academic backgrounds in relation to the problematic areas in ESP.

Methodology

This needs analysis was conducted at the FMSC in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in April, 2022. The sample consisted of all (n=261) students who were learning English as a second language. Both male and female students represented the sample. They represented different geographical areas in the country. The entire sample had taken G.C.E. General English as a subject at their secondary school level before entering the University.

After obtaining their consent to participate in the online survey, their responses to an online questionnaire were recorded. The questionnaire that was administered to them carried 10 multiple choice questions. It was assessed for its face validity before administering it to the sample. Its reliability was assessed by piloting it to 5 randomly selected students in the same batch. They were later excluded from the main study. Each question assessed the participants' views or requirements on some aspect of English language learning in the University. The data which was collected using the Google form was tabulated and presented in the descriptive format. In addition, nine lecturers, involved in teaching in the University were interviewed to identify their perceptions on teaching ESP to their students.

The questionnaire used in this study was a modified version of the one used by Atai (2021), and Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004). In addition to some demographic information, students' ranks were put in order according to the importance of different language skills for their academic and professional goals and their perceived importance of different problematic areas in ESP courses. The faculty members' questionnaire asked for their perceptions of the importance of different problems in ESP instruction and implementation.

Results

Lecturers perceived the low level of students' language proficiency to be significantly more important than the students' preference of learning different language components. Limited vocabulary of the students, negative attitudes toward learning English, lack of availability of audio-visual materials, time limitation to practice speaking and outdated textbooks and materials were other areas that the lecturers perceived as important in ESP teaching.

The statistical procedures employed in the study included descriptive statistics for distinct items on the survey to examine overall frequencies, totals and percentages as illustrated below.
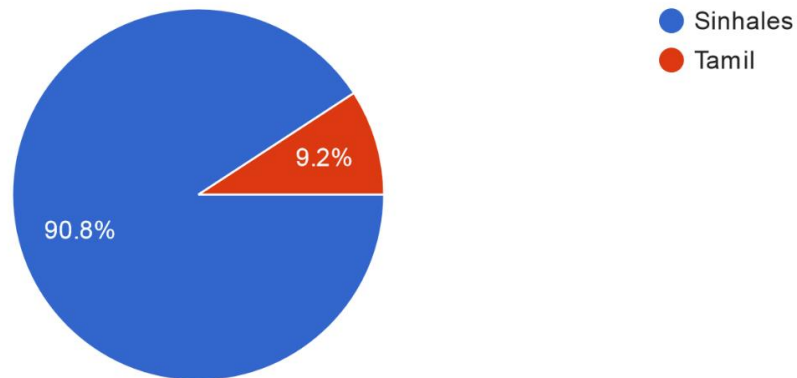

Figure 1: First language of the participants

More than 90% of the participants in the study was Sinhalese while about 9% consisted of native Tamil speaking students.
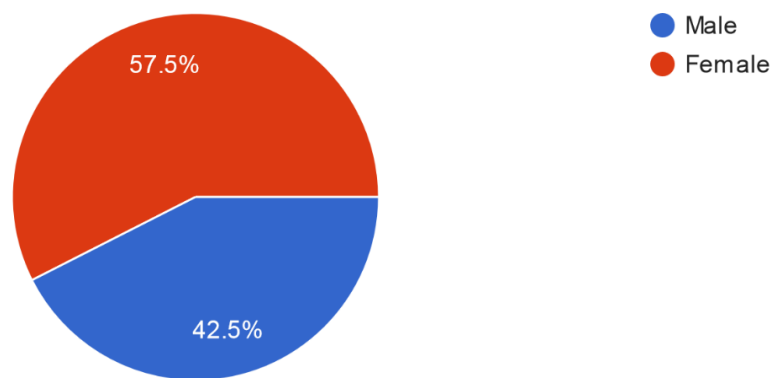

Figure 2: Gender of the participants

As shown in the Figure 2 above, the majority of the participants (57.5) was female while the male proportion was only 42.5%.
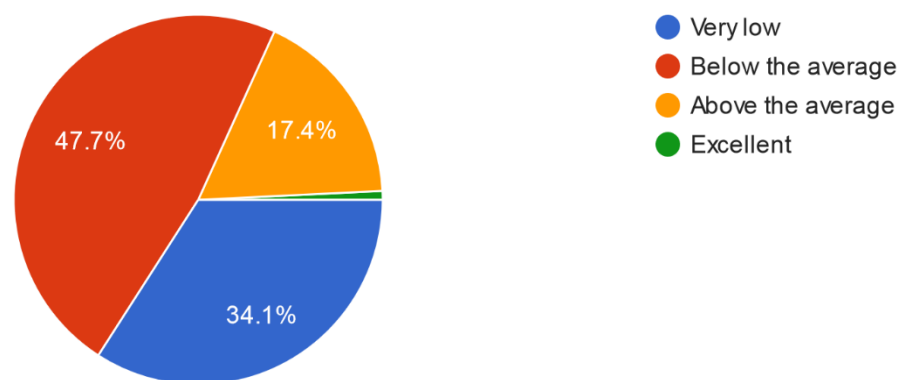

Figure 3: Level of proficiency in English

According to Figure 3 above, the majority (81.8%) believe that their English language proficiency level is either very low or below the average.
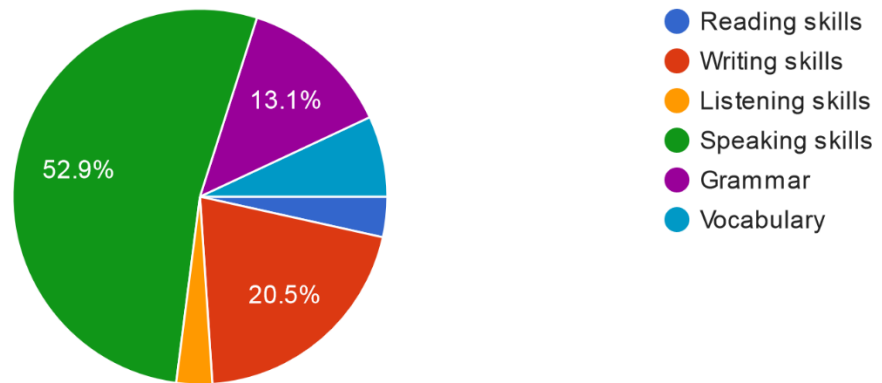
Figure 4: The specific areas that the students intend to improve mostly

As shown in Figure 4, the majority (52.9%) of the students expect to improve their speaking skills while very few (< 2%) wanted to improve their listening and reading skills.

Figure 5: The level of motivation of the student to learn English

According to the responses shown in Figure 5 more than 60% of the students have an adequate level of motivation or an interest in learning English.
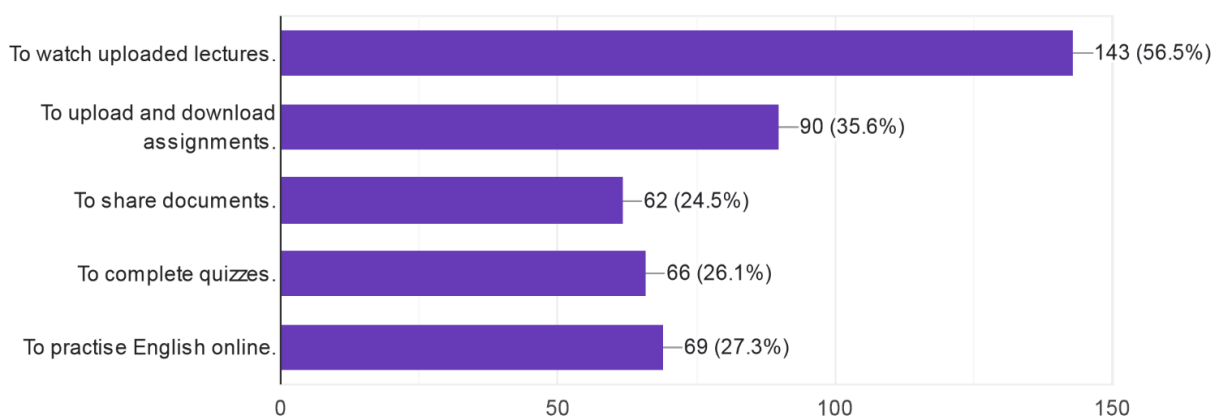

Figure 6: Occasions on which they use online learning platforms

Figure 6 shows that 56.5% of the students use the Learning Management System (LMS) to access online lectures uploaded by their lecturers. Only about 30% of them use it for language practicing.
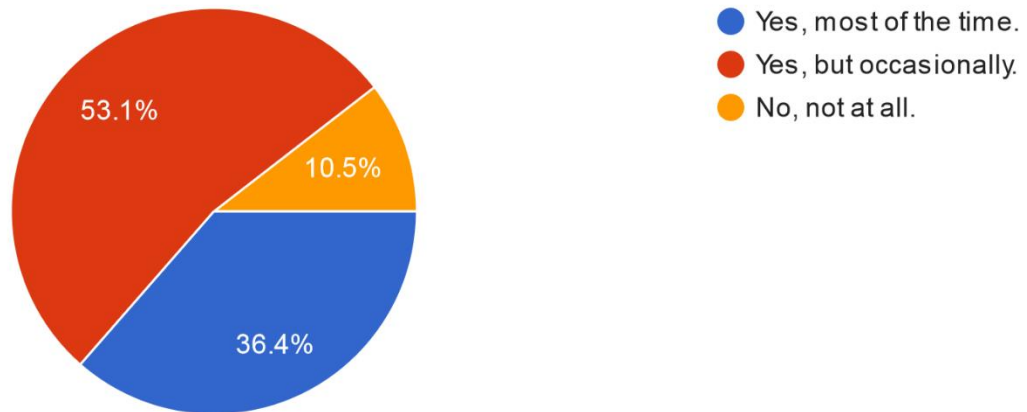
Figure 7: The students' preferences on their lecturers using the first language when teaching English

As the above chart shows, more than 50% of the students expect their lecturers to use their native languages occasionally while teaching English in the class. However, 10% of the participants disliked it.
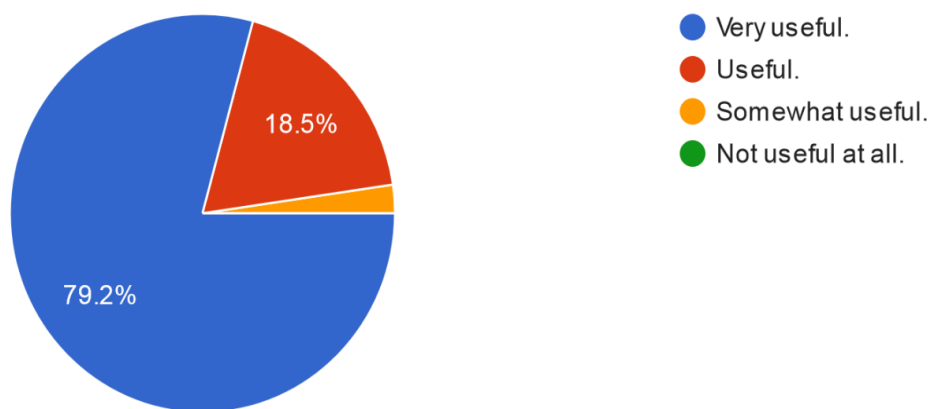

Figure 8: Students' perspectives on learning vocabulary in English relevant to their field of study

Figure 8 shows that the majority, about 80% of the students think that learning specific English vocabulary would be very useful for them.
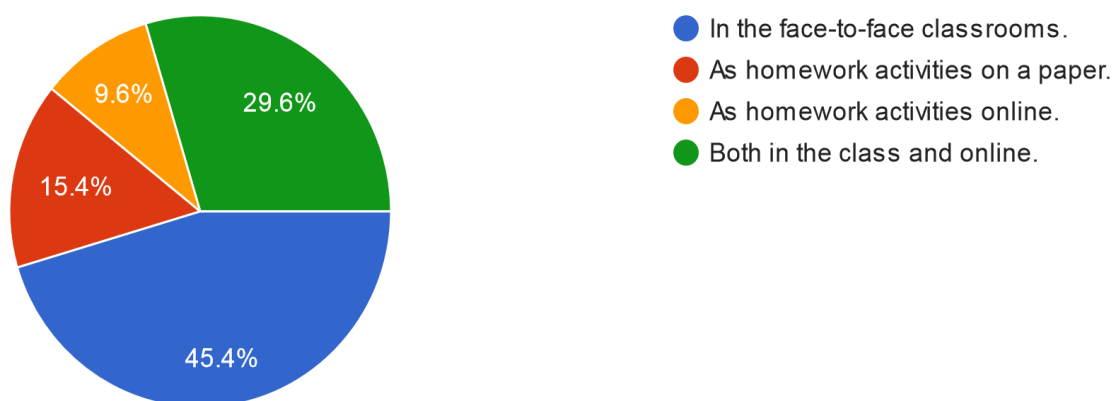

Figure 9: The students' perspectives on practicing reading comprehension

Figure 9 shows that the majority (45.4%) of the students prefer practicing reading comprehension using the face-to-face mode. Only 9.6% preferred in practicing reading comprehension using the online mode as homework activities.
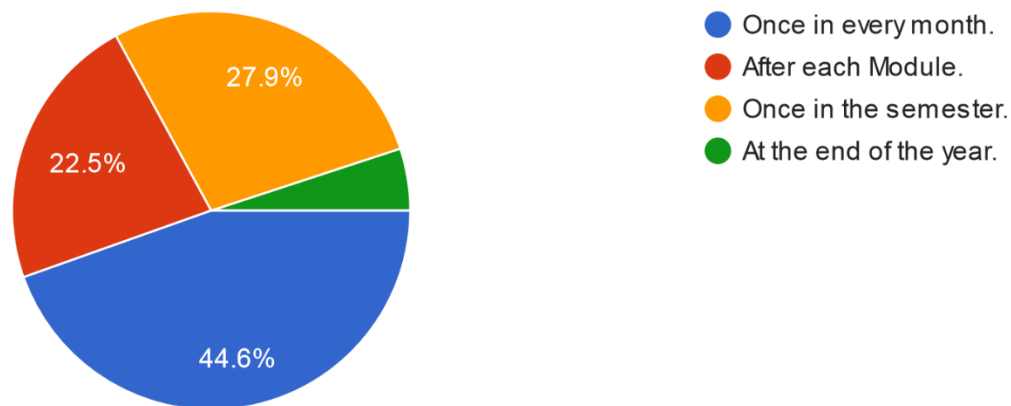

Figure 10: Students' perspectives on assessments

According to Figure 10, the majority (44.6%) of the students prefer to be assessed in every month. Summative assessments that are being executed at the end of the year were preferred by less than 5% of the participants.

What is notable is that lecturers (n=9, 100%) did not perceive speaking component to be as important as students did with a significant difference between the two groups. Faculty members (n=7) further believe that the students do not participate in class activities as much as they should, and with the students' low English language proficiency, more teacher-centered classes are required to effectively teach large ESP classes which have been segregated according to effective needs analyses.

Conclusion

The results generated by the given instrument; the close-ended questionnaire identified that the speaking skill was the most important skills for management students. This finding is however contradictory to the conclusions of the studies done by Labassi (2009) and Rais (2007) where ESP courses focus on reading skills. The writing skill, in which students were reported to have a low proficiency level as a result of the scant attention given to it, was perceived by students as one of the least important targeted needs. This finding is consistent with the findings of the study done by Basturkmen (1998) which reported that writing was not very important for ESP students. The implication of this was that students seemed to underestimate the importance of different language skills without considering their specific academic or professional needs. Indeed, it has been reported that 'the questionnaire might have unreal answers, vague responses that require clarification (Rizk, 2006)'. Hence, this fact should be taken into account when designing an ESP course for management students.

The variations in the results about the importance of language skills can be accounted for by the type of the ESP course which tends to be language-based where much focus was put on grammar and vocabulary. Such a course cannot be responsive to all students' needs. Students may at best attain a 'textbook' type of knowledge of ESP or English but may not be able to use English in the professional world of management.

On the basis of the results, a number of recommendations were offered to upgrade the ESP course for management students. A highly structured ESP course for the discipline of management, integrating academic skills with subject or field-specific skills, derived directly from the learners' discipline should be framed. Such a course, if based on the needs analysis,

is expected to facilitate the process of mastering both academic and subject-matter specific aspects of the target language as well as motivate students to become actively involved in the process of learning. That is, a needs-based syllabus is expected to accommodate the ESP needs in terms of skills at the macro and micro levels. However, worthy of note is that needs analysis is not a process administered once and for all at the beginning of the course; rather, it should be an on-going process repeated during the life of the ESP program.

The findings of the study support the view that the students need to increase their general proficiency in English. Limited vocabulary, slow reading speed, poor listening, speaking, writing and reading comprehension were ranked highly by the majority of the students.

The results show that students prefer face-to-face learning rather than online learning and demand more involvement in class activities. It is possible that teachers' perception of students' low English language proficiency and low motivation leads to teachers' lower use of student-centered activities. Teachers need to make constant efforts to keep up to date with new teaching methods to be able to facilitate interactive classrooms with students of different English proficiency levels. Appropriate institutional support, such as providing professional development, releasing time, and funds for teachers (Parkhurst & Bodwell, 2005) are needed to help familiarize the teachers with the new methodologies.

Our study, similar to other studies in previous research in ESP needs analysis in some other contexts (Robinson, 1991; Ferris, 1998) has revealed that there are discrepancies among the perceptions of the lecturers and students. The results show that instructors may not always be the best judge of students' needs and challenges.

There were also differences among diverse groups of students based on their field of study. The findings of this study, like those of Atai (2000), Ferris and Tagg (1996), and Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008) stress the importance of examining the precise needs of students in different academic fields in order to prepare them most effectively for the tasks and expectations that lie ahead of them. The results of the present study, similar to Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh's (2004) study of general English students in Iran, demonstrate that although students in the FMSC show more interest in communicative activities, the use of the grammar translation method with a heavy emphasis on grammar and translation is still prominent in many universities. Lecturers may therefore need to apply diverse communicative activities in language classrooms to give ESP students opportunities to practice using English in different context and focus more on self-regulated learning.

As Benesch (1996) asserts, needs analysis is a political and subjective process. Critical needs analysis assumes that institutions are hierarchical and those at the bottom are often entitled to more power than they have. Based on this ideology, learners, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy in top-down educational systems such as in Sri Lanka, need to be given more power and their voices should be heard in order to facilitate reform. Possibilities for change do exist even in the existing structures of the country. Faculty members need to become aware of what their students *demand,* versus what the institutions deem necessary and take action accordingly.

Because needs analysis is by definition context-specific (Ferris, 1998: 314), it is hoped that this study has shed light on the needs of Sri Lankan ESP students from the management discipline and has brought into focus the discrepancies between students' perceptions and lecturers' perceptions of students' language learning needs and problems in ESP instruction and delivery.

Our findings revealed that there are many factors that one should take into account when designing ESP courses for students in the field of management. Use of technology in face-to-face mode classrooms and applying student-centered approaches to teaching while giving priority to enhance speaking skills of the students are among the important issues to consider based on the opinions of ESP students in this study.

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