

Investigating Needs Analysis of Undergraduate Students Majoring In Applied Linguistics

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Received 31 March 2024, Revised 20 April, Accepted 30 April 2024, Published 31 May 2024

ABSTRACT

English has long been considered an internationally accepted medium of communication. Therefore, to survive and succeed in the global environment, proficiency in English is imperative. Given the global needs of English, this study examined the needs, wants, and expectations of learners in functional English courses and possible ways to address them. The approach to the language learners' needs followed the standard dogmas. A survey was conducted among first-year students in the English Department at the University of Sindh. The research used a structured questionnaire to collect and analyze data from the committee. The committee provided clear instructions for completing the questionnaire. The results showed that most participants from remote areas received public-sector education and had average English language proficiency. The worrisome problem noted is that they lack speaking and writing skills in particular. Since English is used as a lingua franca, they believe it is important to acquire English language skills for personal and professional growth and future endeavors. The results suggest that participants should be given more exposure to English, with a focus on speaking and writing skills. It reveals an urgent need to include English primarily in the national curriculum and use it frequently to meet global demand for English.

Keywords: English language, Functional English, Learner's needs, Needs analysis survey, Lingua Franca language, National curriculum

How to Cite:

Bux, I., Khokhar, S., & Magsi, A. (2024). Investigating the needs analysis of undergraduate students majoring in applied linguistics: Investigating Needs Analysis of Undergraduate Students majoring in Applied Linguistics. *Jurnal Evolusi*, 5(1), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.61688/jev.v5i1.161>

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INTRODUCTION

Needs analysis is a fundamental component of establishing a course curriculum. Needs analysis shows students' existing knowledge and what they should learn. According to Lawi (1999), the term 'Needs Analysis' generally refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information, which will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of learners.

Final-year Applied Linguistics students from BS-I Applied Linguistics and Literature conducted a survey on 8 May. The purpose of the needs analysis is to identify learners' language skills and where students stand in all four language skills to establish a new curriculum aligned with students' needs.

To achieve the intended results, the following tools were used to identify the needs of language learners. These tools include observations, interviews, calls, discussions, and questionnaires. Among these tools, the committee focused heavily on the questionnaire. Moreover, the committee sought assistance from teachers and held meetings with them regarding students' performance. Thus, the committee prepared the needs analysis report based on observations from concerned mentors and the questionnaire.

The survey, comprising six sections, was shared with 60 BS-I Applied Linguistics and Literature students. The first-year scholars were chosen because they could best show their strengths and weaknesses in English through the questionnaire. The responses made this research impressive, as most students have English-medium schooling but were disappointed with their language skills, particularly speaking and writing. The discussion section further addresses these issues. This paper therefore examines why many students struggle with language skills despite English-medium schooling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to some well-known experts, needs analysis is a systematic approach to determining learners' language learning needs for creating efficient instructional material. In order to ensure that the content, objectives, and material are in line with the needs and wants of the learners. The syllabus is developed using the information gathered from the needs analysis. Scholars such as John Munby, Michael West, and Henry Widdowson have also contributed to understanding needs analysis in language education. They argue that needs analysis is central to syllabus design. Thus, they claim that a good syllabus requires an effective and efficient needs analysis. Much of the literature on needs analysis shows that the importance of needs analysis in curriculum development has been the subject of numerous research studies. Needs analysis, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), ensures the curriculum is adapted to students' actual requirements, boosting relevance and motivation. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), it aligns educational objectives with learners' specific linguistic and communicative needs. Nunan (1988) also claims that needs analysis helps to create learner-centered programs that maximize language learning. Some well-known lecturers of English at Benazir Bhutto University, Sheringal, Pakistan, have already conducted a similar study focused on the learning needs of undergraduate students majoring in English literature and linguistics. Their study concluded that a learner-centered course that meets students' needs and wants is what fresh learners need.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Needs Analysis report is based on primary data sources, primarily course observations and questionnaires. These primary sources were carefully selected as part of the data collection process. The data-collection instruments were rigorously designed to incorporate a balanced mix of qualitative and quantitative data sets. The needs analysis committee, consisting of final-year linguistics students, combined and developed these instruments. The objective is to carry out the task assigned by their respective supervisor effectively and ensure the appropriateness and reliability of the data collection process.

Data Collection

Course Observation

Through focused course observations, we compiled comprehensive data on current classroom practices. The prevailing teaching methodologies focus on analysis, specifically measuring the level of teacher-student interaction in classroom practice. This includes the teacher-student relationship, collaborative practices, and the use of students' native language for instruction. The materials and resources used in the classroom setting were systematically recorded. However, an immersive observation of the student ratio was conducted.

Questionnaire

The introductory part of the questionnaire measures the four foundational language skills in English: speaking, listening, reading, and Writing. The next segment assesses participants' previous experience with English language courses. The third section aims to identify students' preferred methods for learning English. The fourth part of the questionnaire is directed to measure the anxiety of the learners regarding English language learning and the factors that contribute to anxiety. The fifth section aims to identify participants' actual needs and determine how the upcoming course can be improved to better address them. The concluding section aims to identify participants' expectations for the English course.

Data Collection Process

The committee received official authorization for its Needs Analysis from the Institute of English Language and Literature. The committee took an oath to present survey results with accuracy, objectivity, and transparency, without personal bias or manipulation of the data sets. After approval, the data collection process began with qualitative data collection from students through a structured questionnaire.

The needs analysis committee visited the students' classrooms and distributed the questionnaire to sixty students. The committee guided participants on the questionnaire. The committee supervised the survey to ensure the questionnaire's reliability and validity and to prevent any discrepancies in data collection. Participants still made some errors in their answers, which the committee considered invalid. However, the committee highlighted these errors separately.

The committee based its results on observations and analysis of the survey forms completed by fresh language students. The survey findings, while statistically sound, are subject to the limitations of any opinion survey. For example, respondents may have different views and perspectives on the terms used, and they may not fully appreciate the interrelationship among the questions in the questionnaire.

a. Sample Design, Data Collection Method, and ResponseRate

The target population included all persons aged 18 to 25 studying in the English Department of Sindh University, Jamshoro. A random sample of 32 male respondents and 28 female respondents target population was successfully questioned. The response rate was 60% for males and 40% for females.

b. Questionnaire

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, a copy of which is provided earlier in the report. Each survey took about 5 minutes and included 32 questions. The questionnaire consists of several major parts to assess the following:

c. Demographics

Most respondents were Sindhi-speaking and had a background in English-medium schooling in the public sector. Most belonged to rural areas and had average English-speaking ability.

d. Language Skills Measurement

Among speaking, reading, writing, and listening, most students said they are average speakers, excellent at reading and understanding, good at writing, and comfortable speaking English. I think this reflects their private-sector, English-medium schooling background, and their speaking skills are weak because, in rural areas, the atmosphere does not support dialogue in English.

e. Background Towards the English Language

Although they are part of the English-medium schooling system and read English from day one of their education, only a few think they need to take an actual English language course outside their regular curriculum.

f. Learning Behavior

Most students want to learn English through visual methods because it's a natural human practice: we remember and memorize what we see and physically experience, especially when communicating in English in our daily lives.

g. Anxiety Towards the English Language

As students in the English department, most people are not shy about speaking English in front of their mates; this is because most of them are at the same level. For listening, like music, movies, podcasts, and social media, they find it easy to understand the language. For writing purposes, they always feel a certain amount of pressure that they will be judged by the people around them, especially the teachers, for their grammatical errors.

h. Learner's Need

The respondents think the department will help them grow in their careers and speak fluent English; nevertheless, in most cases, being in this department is not helping them as much as they thought it would, especially in speaking sessions. For that, they want the administration to focus more on speaking English as part of the syllabus, with assignments that include some fun and games.

i. Learner's Expectations from English Course

They chose this department because, in every career and path of life, English is integral and key to writing, learning, listening, and speaking. It is the official language and is spoken in every part of Pakistan and internationally too. It helps people get jobs, teach in schools and colleges, pursue further studies, and appear in competitive exams like CSS.

FINDINGS

According to a famous saying, "Language is the road map of a culture. As a developing country, we are always influenced by people who speak English fluently, and those with strong language skills will have more options in their careers and personal lives. After reading all of the responses, it is clear that everyone is eager to learn more and believes that enrolling in an English language program would help them advance professionally while also enabling them to converse more fluently in their personal lives. However, working in this area typically does not benefit them as much as they anticipated; for that reason, I recommend placing greater

emphasis on presentations. The classroom should give more attention to speaking than to listening, writing, and reading.

DISCUSSION

This section presents an analysis of the results obtained from a needs assessment survey conducted to evaluate the language skill proficiency of BS-1 Linguistics and Literature students in the context of the Functional English subject. The survey aimed to identify students' strengths and areas for improvement, focusing on speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. The findings are discussed below and are compared with relevant studies conducted since 2018.

- a. **Speaking Skills:** The survey results indicate that 58% of the respondents rated their speaking skills as average, while 32% perceived their speaking skills as good. This distribution highlights a significant proportion of students with moderate speaking proficiency. In contrast, a higher proportion of students reported having outstanding or excellent speaking skills in the study by Smith et al. (2019) (Smith et al., 2019). These differences may reflect variations in survey design, setting, or student populations.
- b. **Listening Skills:** The study found that 20% of participants thought their listening abilities were ordinary, 53% thought they were good, and 24% said they were outstanding. The results suggest that most students have strong listening skills. This observation is consistent with the findings of Johnson and Lee (2018), who also reported a higher percentage of students with good to excellent listening skills (Johnson & Lee, 2018).
- c. **Writing Skills:** Regarding writing skills, 15% of respondents assessed their skills as poor, while 53% considered them to be average. This indicates a clear need to improve writing proficiency among the surveyed students. In contrast, the study by Thompson and Carter (2020) reported a lower percentage of students with poor writing skills (Thompson & Carter, 2020). This variation could stem from differences in assessment criteria or instructional approaches.
- d. **Reading Skills:** The survey outcomes related to reading skills demonstrated that 45% of participants perceived their reading skills as good, and an additional 44% rated them as excellent. This distribution indicates a generally high level of reading proficiency. The results concur with those of Green and Martinez (2018), who also observed a substantial percentage of students possessing good to excellent reading skills (Green & Martinez, 2018).

Comparative Analysis

Comparing the present survey findings with studies conducted since 2018, variations in perceptions of language skill proficiency are evident. While similarities appear in certain areas, such as reading skills, disparities in other domains like speaking, listening, and writing skills warrant further investigation. Differences in survey methodologies, participant demographics, and instructional strategies may contribute to the observed discrepancies. The survey results shed light on students' learning preferences and their attitudes toward different modes of instruction, thereby providing valuable insights for curriculum design and pedagogical practices.

Regarding learning preferences, the results indicate a strong inclination toward visual material (62%), followed by kinesthetic (23%) and auditory (15%) modalities. This aligns with previous research by Smith et al. (2018) and Johnson and Brown (2020), who also observed a predilection for visual and kinesthetic learning styles among language learners. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating diverse visual aids and interactive activities to enhance the cohort's learning experience.

Furthermore, the survey revealed a strong preference for in-person classes (70%), with minimal inclination toward online classes (2%). Notably, 28% of respondents said they would be open to participating in both forms

of instruction. The results of Wilson et al. (2019), who reported a preference for face-to-face engagement and the perceived advantages of in-the-moment discussion and prompt feedback, align with this trend.

The surveyed linguistics and literature students clearly prefer multimodal, interactive, and physical learning experiences. Thus, the curriculum should aim to integrate a variety of visual aids, hands-on activities, and in-person interactions. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the small percentage of students open to online learning, suggesting a need to refine virtual instructional strategies to cater to diverse preferences.

The study revealed insightful patterns in students' future aims, reflecting evolving trends in linguistics and literature education. Notably, the dominant career path identified among respondents was competitive exams, with 47% of participants expressing an inclination towards such examinations. This finding aligns with Smith et al. (2019), who similarly reported substantial interest in competitive exams among language and literature students. Furthermore, 30% of respondents indicated a desire to enter teaching. This result aligns with the findings of Johnson and Williams (2020), who noted growing enthusiasm for pedagogical roles among linguistic and literary scholars. This shift may reflect growing recognition of the importance of language and literature education in society. Interestingly, the current study differs from Thompson and Martin (2018), in which a larger proportion of students expressed aspirations for higher studies. In the present study, only 8% of participants indicated a preference for pursuing advanced degrees. This could imply a shift in students' perceptions of the practical applications of their linguistic and literary studies. Notably, 7% of respondents aspire to become writers. This result aligns with Fitzgerald (2017), who noted a consistent interest in creative writing and authorship within the linguistics and literature discipline.

Recommendations

To enhance materials and teaching methodologies for BS-1 Linguistics and Literature students, several recommendations can be made based on the presented analysis and related studies since 2018:

- a. ***Speaking Skills Enhancement:*** Given the significant proportion of students with moderate speaking proficiency, instructional strategies should emphasize oral communication practice. Incorporating group discussions, debates, and role-playing activities aligns with Smith et al.'s (2019) findings, which emphasized the benefits of interactive speaking exercises for language development. Using contextually relevant topics could foster engagement and support real-life language use.
- b. ***Writing Proficiency Improvement:*** Considering the substantial need for improved writing skills, pedagogical approaches should emphasize structured writing exercises and explicit feedback. Thompson and Carter's (2020) findings highlight the importance of clear assessment criteria and targeted writing tasks. Integrating peer review sessions can encourage collaborative learning and diverse perspectives, enhancing writing proficiency as suggested by Thompson and Martin (2018).
- c. ***Personalized Listening Skill Development:*** Although a majority exhibit good listening skills, addressing the 20% of students with average listening abilities requires targeted interventions. Individualized listening exercises that incorporate authentic audio materials could cater to varying levels of competence. Implementing self-assessment tools, as Johnson and Lee (2018) advocate, can promote metacognitive awareness and strengthen listening strategies.
- d. ***Balanced Instructional Modalities:*** Acknowledging students' learning preferences, integrating a mix of visual aids, hands-on activities, and face-to-face interactions aligns with the predilections observed (Smith et al., 2018; Johnson & Brown, 2020). Adapting materials to support kinesthetic and auditory learners could create a more holistic learning environment. Developing online resources for the small percentage of students open to virtual learning ensures inclusivity (Wilson et al., 2019).

- e. Career-Driven Curriculum Design: Recognizing the shift in students' career aspirations, aligning curriculum content with competitive exam preparation and teaching skills development is advisable. Incorporating content that bridges linguistic and literary studies with competitive exam content can enhance students' employability. Integrating pedagogical training can cater to the growing interest in teaching roles, as noted by Johnson and Williams (2020). These recommendations, supported by the findings and comparative analysis, emphasize tailored pedagogical strategies catering to students' diverse learning preferences and evolving career aspirations. The proposed changes aim to enrich the educational experience and better prepare students for the dynamic demands of the linguistics and literature field.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study of learners' needs and expectations for a functional English course, comprehension of English is necessary to succeed in an international setting. The study of first-semester students at the University of Sindh showed that students educated in either the private or public sector had average English language ability. They lag far behind in English language skills, especially speaking and writing. Students acknowledge the importance of English nationally and internationally. Therefore, these students need maximum exposure to the target language to strengthen their weak areas. The study stresses the need to add English to the curriculum. Moreover, it is necessary to ensure adequate focus on it. Candidates should be well prepared to meet international-level language demands. Adding English to the curriculum will not only benefit learners but also improve students' competency. This aligns with global requirements.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The paper is a collective effort of BS Applied Linguistics students, IELL, University of Sindh.

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