

Analyzing the English Language Needs of University Law Students

Mr. Yenus Nurie

Bahir Dar University, P.O. Box 79, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.

*Corresponding author: Yenusn@gmail.com, Telephone: +251918020940

Abstract

While various studies have examined the English needs of learners, little or no needs analysis research has been conducted to compare ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learners' needs with the consideration of instructors' views. The present research was designed to reinforce cross-departmental understanding by integrating concepts of English skills and the genuine academic concern of students' learning needs at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Based on Dudley-Evans and St. John's (1998) theoretical framework of ESP needs analysis, a survey questionnaire was adapted and distributed to 42 EFL Law students and 4 English language instructors. The findings of this study show both discrepancies and similarities of perceptions between students and instructors on English skills and learning needs. The results indicate that both the students and their instructors emphasized the importance of productive skills (speaking and writing) over receptive skills (Reading and listening). The results also demonstrate that students and instructors had different perception of English skills learning needs, especially regarding reading and writing. An overwhelmingly majority of the students chose reading skill to be emphasized over the others, whereas the instructors' response to this question was "Writing". On the whole, this study suggests that learner needs analysis and curriculum development should be taken together in regard to the unique ESP academic settings. The theoretical implications of these findings for curriculum design and course delivery of ESP courses for university students and future research directions are also suggested.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, legal, communicative skills, English for Legal Academic Purposes, needs analysis

Introduction

With the current trend of globalization and the growing popularity of the Internet, the preeminent use of English language in various contexts is irrefutable. "Metaphorically, the way oxygen is important to survive, so is English to survive in today's competitive world" (Jha, 2014, p.17). Tseng (2014) also maintains that the students' strong English skills will help them to gain benefits in their future academic, professional, and personal domains. General English courses are provided to develop the overall English communicative proficiency of learners. Due to the increasing demand of English, however, the need to view a new perspective of language pedagogy called English for specific purpose emerged. The major emphasis of English for specific purpose is to help students achieve in the specific areas which they are studying. It also focuses on English skills that help students use for their future career and work places. However, Eslami (2010) maintained that the teaching of both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific purposes (ESP) have been criticized for not having sufficient findings related to the needs and requirement of students and instructors of the EAP courses.

The role of English skills in the legal pedagogy

In Ethiopia, both state and private universities have used English as a pedagogical tool to enhance learning and transfer science and technology. They also provide ESP courses like English for Lawyers

(EL) as a compulsory course in Law students' curriculum. Accordingly, English is particularly desirable in the context of (English as a Foreign Language) EFL university settings where academic achievement is mostly determined by the learner's English proficiency. This idea is reinforced by Jalil and Kamardun (2009) who claimed the necessity of English language in the legal profession and considered proficiency in the language as a prerequisite for effectiveness in law profession. They also stressed that Lawyers should be equipped with the necessary language skills to be able to deal with the complex legal terms, textbooks, journals, and reports.

This research considers the following pedagogically suggested methodological concerns to analyze students' English skills learning needs. Bhatia (1987) discusses three types of legal settings in which spoken legal English is conventionally used, but this study takes the first two contexts to determine students' English skills learning needs and help attain the desired objectives of this study. The first impetus of spoken English is its pedagogic purposes: for classroom lectures and mock trials or moots. The second function of spoken English is for academic purposes, which include for seminars and conferences. Finally, the author remarks the third use for professional utility, such as for lawyer-client consultation, and council-witness examination etc.

Bahitia (1993) has done a wide range of works on English for Legal Academic Purposes (ELAP). He divides legal writing into three main areas: academic legal writing (textbooks and legal journals); judicial writing (court judgments, case book and law reports); and legislative writing (Acts of Parliament, statutory instruments, contracts, agreement and all of which serve to legislate). He stresses on the importance of academic (legal) writing in studying and practicing law. Another important skill that law students need to learn in their academic years is how to read a legal text and case briefing. A case briefing is a written summary of the fundamental aspects of a decision. For the purpose of this study, the term "case briefing" is used to mean what Dunnewold (2010) elaborates as... "how to read a case and understand what to expect during a classroom Socratic exchange" (p.11).

With respect to listening skills, Harmer (1991) suggested six materials that language teachers can use to develop listening skill and sub-skills. However, this study incorporates only four of the sub-skills relevant in the legal academic settings, and hence pertaining to the objectives of this study (listening to the gist of the text, listening for detailed information, listening for interactional purposes, academic listening and note taking). Thus, this study seeks to understand how important these sub-skills are for the students' field of study.

Theoretical framework

In the field of ESP, there are a number of models of needs analysis (Munby, 1978, Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, Robinson, 1991, West, 1994, Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). However, as they all share a common purpose in identifying language needs of learners, Dudley-Evans and St. John's (1998) theoretical framework of ESP needs analysis Model guides the major concern of this study. Ultimately, the advantage of using this theoretical framework of needs analysis is twofold. First, it underlines the importance of assessing learner's strengths and weakness in the target language, which the major aim of this study rests upon. Second, the model takes into account various factors that affect learning, such as reasons for learning (i.e. English for specific purpose in this case), and it underscores social interaction for effective language learning (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) needs analysis model

Approach	Specific Information for needs analysis
Language information about learners	Evaluates learners' current skills and language used (present situation analysis)
Learners lacks	Considers the gap between the present situation and professional information about learners
Learners' needs from course	Focuses on what is wanted from the course (short term needs)

Why needs analysis? From a pedagogical role perspective

The concept of “needs” has been defined by researchers on the basis of various perspectives. According to Richards (2001), a needs analysis refers to the procedures and activities that collect information about students’ need then validate and prioritize those needs to be the foundation for designing and evolving a curriculum that matches those needs. Jie (2013) traces the origin of needs analysis to the mid-1900s by Michael Philip West, who advocates that learners should learn English through reading and the purpose of learning English was to read. However, the concept of needs analysis was developed because of the works of the Council of Europe and works in ESP (English for Special Purposes) in 1970s. He further states that since 1980s, different concepts of needs analysis have emerged, including target-situation needs analysis, deficiency needs analysis, strategy needs analysis, means analysis, language audits, set-menu needs analysis, computer-based needs analysis, and so on.

However, research indicated that any needs analysis should look into variable language characteristics and implicated two important notions in designing needs analysis research. Deutch (2003) stated that 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. Further, Holmes and Celani (2006) stressed the importance of considering the ‘need’ in relation to the unique characteristics of the educational context in which the study takes place. In addition, Richards (2001) asserts that students’ needs are the core of any curriculum designed in which there should be a detailed need analysis conducted.

Empirical evidence on English skills needs analysis

The foundation of ESP is needs analysis, and needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a focused course (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, West, 1994, Brown, 1995, Jordan, 1997). The desire for English language needs analysis has increased dramatically for the last couple of decades. As Robinson (1991) maintains, *Needs Analysis (NA)* is generally viewed as a crucial part of ESP. In his research article entitled *Introduction to needs analysis*, Mehdi (2008) also maintained that the role of needs analysis in any ESP course is indisputable. Iwai et al. (1999) stated that needs analysis is not only the essential foundation of a successful systematic curriculum, but is also necessary to occasionally re-evaluating the goals and objectives of existing programs as the people involved and their needs change over time.

Choi (2012) conducted a needs analysis survey that aimed at examining ESL (English as a second language) learners’ perceptions of their English skills and learning needs, and found that “Speaking” to be the top one in their list for making improvement. Furthermore, studies that were conducted to assess the needs of tertiary level students in Hong Kong ELT context revealed that productive skills (writing and speaking) and acquisition of specialist vocabulary were the central language concerns of participants (Hyland, 1997, Jalil & Kamarudin, 2009, Littlewood & Liu, 1996, Evans & Green, 2007).

Tseng (2014) explored the needs of Taiwanese Arts Students, and found that conversation and writing as the most important English skills. Luankanokrat (2011) examined the English communication needs of employees at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Corporation (HSBC) in Thailand and found that reading was the most essential skill needed by the students and speaking skill was the least one. From academic perspective, Rahman (2012) investigated the English language needs of Computer Science undergraduate students at Putra University, Malaysia, and revealed that reading skills was needed by the undergraduates of computer science for academic purposes. Briefly, Jing (2013) stated, tertiary students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts are often faced with a gap between their limited command of second language English academic literacy and their much more developed first language academic literacy.

Local needs analysis studies also investigated the English skills needs of Ethiopian university students. For example, Biniam (2013) investigated the English language needs of medical students in relation to academic requirements, and revealed that students need all English language skills for their academic study since their competence was found to be good in writing and reading and average in speaking and listening skills. Further, Aklilu (2015) investigated the communicative needs of civil engineering students at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia, and the findings showed that writing skills and sub-skills were most needed by civil engineering students followed by reading and speaking skills. Medhanit (2010) also examined students’ perception towards Technical report writing course and revealed that due to students’ poor English language proficiency, there are problems with regard to delivering

the course according to the specified objectives and purposes. According to Jha (2014), Ethiopian students often complain of being dismissed from university because of their incompetence in English. The students can express their subject-matter knowledge in L1 (first language) but not in English

Gersten, Chard, and Baker (2000) asserted that increasingly, researchers, policy makers, and leaders of advocacy groups are questioning the rate and the degree to which educational research is translated into classroom practice. In this connection, Tarone and Yule (1989) cited in Iwai (1999) asserted that needs analysis helps teachers understand “local needs” of students or the needs of a particular group of students and make practical decisions in pedagogy and assessment for improvement. In light of all the empirical evidence reported above and the literature reviewed on the role of needs analysis for the success of ESP, the researcher proposed that it is tremendously important to consider learner needs analysis to meet academic requirements and satisfy the specific needs of students.

Research questions

1. What are students’ perceptions of their English skills and learning needs?
2. What are the English instructors’ perceptions of their students’ English skills and learning needs?

Methods

Participants

Senior students were considered to have considerable views and better awareness in English needs, so from the total population of 203 3rd, 4th and 5th year Law students at Bahir Dar University in 2016/17 academic year, 42 students were randomly selected. Four of the “English for Lawyers” course instructors also participated in the study.

Data collection and procedure

In light of the theoretical framework of ESP needs analysis, a needs analysis questionnaire was adopted to examine the perception of instructors and students’ English skills learning needs, and was distributed to 42 Law students and four instructors at Bahir Dar University. The 16 items questionnaire related to the perception of the needs of language skills were ranked on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). In addition, to ensure the comprehensiveness of the responses of the data from the questionnaire items, participants were also asked to rate the English skill(s) that they perceive the most serious and the skill (s) they need to be emphasized in their English course.

Data analysis

To assess the students’ English language skills needs, the students were asked to indicate their agreement for the five-point scale. Both students and their instructors completed the questionnaire approximately in 35 minutes. The responses of the participants were registered and calculated in the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program. The data obtained from both the students and instructors’ questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively using the mean value of the each item obtained from the responses of the participants.

Results

Table 2: Students’ and Instructors’ perception of Students’ English skills learning needs

English Skills Needs	Students’			Instructors’		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Reading	2.89	42	2.76866	3.19	4	1.73205
Speaking	3.36	42	2.61551	3.81	4	1.25831
Writing	3.26	42	2.61784	4.19	4	.95743
Listening	2.76	42	2.16468	3.63	4	.57735

Table 2 shows that speaking and writing were the skills students need to have improved most. Inferring from the mean values (2.89, 3.36, 3.26 and 2.76), the students emphasized all the four skills for their academic study. Specifically, with a mean average value of 3.36, the students agreed that speaking skill as the most important communicative English skill necessary for their academic achievement. The second most important English skill that received the highest attention was writing (with a mean of 3.26). The students rated the two receptive skills (reading and listening) with an average mean of 2.89 and 2.76 respectively. Instructors were asked to respond their perception on their students' English skills that need to have improvement the most, and the results showed that Writing with a mean of 4.19 and speaking with a mean of 3.81 were what the instructors perceived their students need to have improved most.

Table 3: Participants' perceptions of students' reading sub-skills needs

Reading sub-skills	Students'			Instructors'		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Identifying information in case briefing	2.81	42	1.174	3.00	4	.816
Critical reading skills and reasoning	3.33	42	1.097	3.25	4	.816
Understanding legal terms and texts	3.02	42	.811	3.75	4	.500
Comprehending academic articles	2.40	42	1.231	2.75	4	.500

It was depicted in table 3 above that the students would like to have improved most on critical reading skills and reasoning with a mean of 3.33 and standard deviation of 1.097, understanding legal terms and texts with a mean of 3.02 and standard deviation of .811. The students' high interest to develop their critical reading skills and skills related to comprehending legal texts might not be surprising as the field requires more conventionalized and high standard of reading proficiency. Regarding instructors' perceptions of students' "Reading sub-skills" needs, understanding legal terms and texts with a mean of 3.75 and critical reading skills and reasoning with a mean of 3.25 were found to be the two most important reading sub-skills the instructors held a belief that their students need to improve, whereas identifying information in case briefing and comprehending academic articles received a lower mean of 3.00 and 2.75 respectively.

Table 4: Participants' perceptions of students' speaking sub-skills needs

Speaking sub-skills	Students'			Instructors'		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Making speech in seminars and conferences	3.71	42	.864	3.00	4	.816
Delivering oral presentations and reports	2.98	42	1.278	4.50	4	.577
Speaking in mock trials or moots	4.12	42	.705	4.25	4	.500
Asking questions to teachers and speaking in group or pair work	2.67	42	1.074	3.50	4	.577

Participants' perceptions of students' speaking sub-skills needs

With regard to the most perceived needs of speaking sub-skills, the two major chosen speaking sub-skills that the students reported they need to have improved were speaking in mock trials or moots with a mean of 4.12 and standard deviation of .705 and making speech in seminars and conferences with a mean of 3.71 and standard deviation of .864. The data in table 3 also depicts instructors' perception of the "Speaking" sub-skills that students need to have improvement most. The majority of the respondents chose delivering oral presentations and reports first with a mean of 4.50, which was followed by speaking in mock trials or moots with a mean of 4.25.

Table 5: Participants' perceptions of students' writing sub-skills needs

Writing sub-skills	Students'			Instructors'		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Writing argumentative essays and project works	3.07	42	1.237	4.50	4	.577
Writing law reports and legal cases	3.12	42	.803	4.00	4	.000
Summarizing or paraphrasing, editing and referencing legal texts	3.81	42	1.087	4.75	4	.500
Writing and reviewing law journals	3.02	42	1.047	3.50	4	.577

Participants' perceptions of students' writing sub-skills needs

It was indicated that summarizing or paraphrasing, editing and referencing legal texts with a mean of 3.81 and standard deviation of 1.087 and writing law reports and legal cases with a mean of 3.12 and std deviation of .803 were the "Writing" sub-skills that the students perceived to have improved most. The responses obtained from instructors depicted that all the writing sub-skills received high mean value ranging from 3.50 to 4.75. The first two most important "Writing sub-skills" that the instructors perceived their students' needed to have improved most were summarizing or paraphrasing, editing and referencing legal texts with a mean of 4.75 and writing argumentative essays and project works with a mean of 4.50.

Table 6: Participants' perceptions of students' listening sub-skills needs

Listening sub-skills	Students'			Instructors'		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Listening to guest lecturers for the gist of the text	2.14	42	.751	3.00	4	.000
Listening for detailed information in seminar presentations and reports	3.52	42	.994	4.00	4	.000
Academic listening and note taking	2.31	42	.924	3.50	4	.577
Listening for interactional purposes during mock trials or moots	2.62	42	1.147	4.00	4	.000

Participants' perceptions of students' listening sub-skills needs

The students responses in terms of listening sub-skills showed a relatively little interest on listening skill in general and listening sub-skills except in listening for detailed information in seminar presentations and reports, which received the highest mean value of 3.52. The students' responses for the other three sub-skills were listening to guest lecturers for the gist of the text with a mean value of 2.14, academic listening and note taking (2.31) and listening for interactional purposes during mock trials or moots (2.62). Overall, the data showed that listening was the skill the students perceived the least needed skill compared to the other skills. On the other hand, the two listening sub-skills that the instructors need to have their students improved were listening for detailed information in seminar presentations and reports and listening for interactional purposes during mock trials or moots received equal responses with a mean of 4.0.

Table 7: English skill(s) to be emphasized

English Skills	Students'			Instructors'		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Reading	3.53	42	2.50157	2.77	4	1.92865
Speaking	3.40	42	2.94599	3.47	4	2.46644
Writing	3.26	42	3.06236	3.85	4	1.37895
Listening	2.51	42	2.13442	3.16	4	1.49747

Participants' perceptions of English skill(s) to be emphasized

It was depicted in the table above that the vast majority of the students with an average mean of 3.53, 3.40 and 3.26 agreed that reading, speaking and writing respectively were the most useful English skills, indicating that with the exception of listening skill which received the least mean (2.51), all the skills should be emphasized in their English course. The instructors' responses indicated that "Writing" skill with a mean of 3.85, "Speaking" skill with a mean of 3.47 and "Listening" skill with a mean of 3.16 were the three English Skills they need to be emphasized in their English course. Reading skill was not chosen by the majority of the instructors, indicating they have reservation with the use of the reading as they did in their response to which students' English skill need to have improved.

Differences in perceptions

Regarding the perception of which students' English skills need improvement, both instructors and students emphasized the importance of the two productive English skills (speaking and writing). The results also demonstrate that students and instructors had different perception of English skills learning needs, especially regarding reading and writing. An overwhelmingly majority of the students with a mean of 3.53 chose reading skill to be emphasized over the others, whereas the instructors' response to this question was "Writing" with a mean of 3.85.

Discussion

The major findings of this study revealed that most of the respondents rated high on speaking and writing, indicating that these two skills as the most important skills the students need to have improved most. This observation is consistent with the survey study by Tseng (2014) who explored the needs of Taiwanese Arts Students, and found that conversation and writing as the most important communicative English skills. In a similar ESP context, Jalil & Kamarudin (2009) revealed that productive skills constitute problematic areas for law students. The fact that speaking was chosen by an overwhelmingly majority of the students as the first priority for improvement may be because they might be concerned on holding a high value for speaking as the field of Law and Legal profession tacitly require one to have a good command of speaking skill in various legal proceedings and cases. The results of this study in this case is supported by Bhatia (1987) who enumerates three types of legal settings in which spoken legal English is conventionally used. The first impetus of spoken English is its pedagogic purposes: for classroom lectures and mock trials or moots. The second function of spoken English is for academic purposes, which include for seminars and conferences.

Most of the writing sub-skills were considered by the majority of the students as the most important skills they need to have improved, and this may be due to the fact that writing is pervasive in all parts of academic study. In connection, Choi (2012) claimed that writing is a core skill to be assessed in most of the language tests and examinations and to be used in assignments. The students' response in this study concerning listening was also similar to the results of Choi (2012), which revealed that listening was the skill that students needed the least among all English skills. One possible reason that the students expressed their view of "Reading" skill to be emphasized in their English course might be emanated from the students' everyday exposure of reading academic texts, legal texts and journals which are written in English. The study of Khamklin (2007) also showed that reading was used the most, which further implicates that reading is an indispensable skill not only for their academic success but also for their future career. Similarly, Rahman (2012) investigated the English language needs of Computer Science undergraduate students at Putra University, Malaysia, and revealed that reading skills was needed by the undergraduates of computer science for academic purposes.

Conclusion

The results of this study exhibited almost a similar pattern of learner needs to their instructors, indicating common perception and understanding between students and instructors. Regarding which communicative English skills should receive more attention in their English course, the students showed little interest to distinguish one or two skills over the others. This finding was consistent with the study of Dzameshie's (1997) who claimed that the proficiency of English skills is indispensable to university

education. The findings of this research also showed a more positive attitude towards the two productive skills (speaking and writing) than receptive skills (reading and listening). This research suggests that ESP curriculum designers and teachers need to revisit learners' learning objectives and design the course: "English for Lawyers" in the best way that suits the target needs of students. As this research was not without limitations, future research can be conducted on other schools and colleges and even universities in relation its replication and application to ESP.

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