



NEED ANALYSIS FOR CURRICULA REVISION AT THE FACULTY OF ARTS & CULTURE OF THE SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This study was conducted as a precursor to the curricula revision process at the Faculty of Arts & Culture of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Need analysis is an integral part of the curricula revision and presently the curricula of the English language courses offered by the Department of English Language Teaching of the university are to be revised. It is asserted that any curricula revision should be based on learners' needs in order to map the syllabi that are beneficial to the students and accepted by the stakeholders. That is, needs of the students should be identified before any meaningful curricula revision is carried out. Therefore, for this exercise third year undergraduate students from the faculty were selected and a questionnaire which identifies the students' needs with regard to different language skills was used. In addition, interview and informal discussions were held with the students. The analysis of the questionnaires and other interview data revealed the requirements and aspirations of the students in terms of a revised curriculum. Students like their teaching programme to have more emphasis on speaking and writing skills in order to match the language learning with their career goals. In addition, they feel that the present lesson materials should be supplemented with other speaking activities as they have much focus on grammar across the lessons. Hence, the outcome of this need analysis can be useful for the ongoing curricula revision activities.

Keywords: *curricular revision, need analysis, undergraduates, Sri Lanka,*

1. Introduction

Designing curricula is considered to be indispensable for the successfulness of teaching and learning where course designers, educators and practitioners must draw up a perfect plan to design and develop effective and appropriate curricula for any course of study that can cater to the needs of the learners. One way to achieve this goal of developing a proper befitting curriculum is to use needs analysis which is a powerful tool that can help clarify and validate the true needs of the learners (Akyel & Ozek, 2010). One of the basic assumptions of curricula development is that a sound educational programme should be based on an analysis of learners'



needs (Richards, 2001). In this sense, needs analysis (also called needs assessment) refers to the activities involved in gathering information which can serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001). It is the preliminary stage of designing courses, syllabuses, materials and other educational activities (Jordan, 1997, as cited in Ulum, 2015). Pratt (1980, as cited in Brown, 1995) explains that needs assessment points out an array of procedures for identifying and validating needs, and establishing priorities among them. The 'array of procedures' here indicates a variety of information-gathering tools that should be used in an analysis (ibid). Needs analysis which is directed mainly at the goals and content of a course investigates what and how much the learners already know and what they still need to know, and makes sure if the course contains relevant and useful things to learn (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Once the needs of the learners are identified through an analysis, they can be related in terms of goals and objectives of a particular course, which, in turn, will act as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies, as well as for reevaluating the precision and accuracy of the original needs assessment (Brown, 1995).

In case of language programmes, the needs will be language related (Brown, 1995). Needs analysis in language teaching is said to be paramount important and can be used for a number of different purposes such as identifying the language skills needed for a learner in order to perform a particular role such as a manager, university student, etc., to help determine whether an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students, to determine which students from a group are most in need of training in particular language skills, to identify the gap between what students are able to do and what they need to be able to do, to identify the direction that people in a reference group feel is important and to collect information about a particular problem learners are experiencing (Richards, 2001). A needs analysis may take place prior to, during, or after a language programme (ibid).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, as cited in Nation & Macalister, 2010) classify the needs into 'target' and 'learning' needs. So a needs analysis can be carried out to gather information about the 'target needs' and the 'learning needs' of the learners. Target needs refers to what the learners need to do in the target situation, while the learning needs relate to what the learners need to do in order to learn (Nation & Macalister, 2010). The analysis of target needs pays attention to necessities (what is necessary in the learners' use of language to function effectively in the target situation), lacks (what the learners lack) and wants (what the learners wish to learn or what they feel they need) (ibid). Alderson (1980) identifies the needs into four



types such as formal needs (the needs to meet the institutional requirements), actual or obligation needs (what the learner has to do with the language once he has learnt), hypothetical future needs (refers to the need to become a better professional in the future), and wants. The formal needs and wants are said to be process-oriented type, while the actual and hypothetical future needs are future oriented (Alderson, 1980, as cited in Todea & Demarcsek, 2016).

Hence, the objective of this study is to identify the different kinds of needs that the ESL (English as a Second Language) undergraduates require in a revised curriculum.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Participants

The participants of this needs analysis were a cohort of third year students from the faculty of Arts and Culture at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. A class, consisting of 50 students (40 female and 10 male students) aged between 23-26 years, was selected. These students belonged to average language proficiency group. Students have been divided into six different ability groups in the third year. English language is a compulsory subject for these students where it is mandatory for them to study English for three years throughout their six semesters. Since teaching languages, especially English, has been an ever more complex and challenging task for these students and they are of different levels in terms of knowledge and competency in English, the teachers need to provide them with a wide variety of suitable activities and materials that could satisfy the students' demands.

2.2 Methods

In order to gather information about the students' linguistic expectations of learning English at the university, a questionnaire survey, interview and informal discussions with the students were conducted. Since questionnaires can be used with large number of participants and they are useful to obtain information that is relatively easy to tabulate and analyze, the most important data collection tool used for the analysis was the questionnaire survey, where a questionnaire bearing a number of closed and open ended questions was designed, developed and distributed to the target group of students. The prepared questionnaire was pilot tested so as to identify the ambiguities and other problems in the questions before it was administered to the students. An unstructured interview and informal discussions with the students were also conducted in order to collect additional data and to get a general idea about the needs of the students. During the discussion held with the students, they were asked to state their personal



opinion about the contents of the present syllabi and their needs as university students. The students' cooperation at the questionnaire survey and their active participation and responses in the discussions were of much help to gather useful data needed for the analysis.

Needs of the students regarding their language course and linguistics expectations were found largely in terms of four language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as with some important aspects such as teaching of grammar.

And finally, the collected data was analyzed to identify the needs of the students.

3. Findings

This section explains the findings of the need assessment carried out with a group of third year students at the university. A wide range of information about the needs and the linguistic expectations of the students was gathered through the data collection tools such as a questionnaire survey, interview, and informal discussions with the students. Plenty of data needed for the analysis was collected through the analysis of questionnaire which contained a number of open and closed ended questions and through informal discussions held during special meetings with the target group of students. From the data collected, it could be comprehended that the students had expressed their opinions of their language expectations with regard to their present level of English language proficiency and requirements since the students were of different levels of language competency and their own individual requirements also varied. The general feedback regarding the level of students' satisfaction with the course was neither completely negative nor highly positive, instead, a number of suggestions were put forth.

The overall findings from the students regarding their language course and linguistics expectations are discussed here largely in terms of four language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as with some important aspects such as teaching of grammar. All these four basic skills were considered to be very important for these students, whereas they stated that they needed these four skills for their university study because of its frequent usage, and the students are also expected to use them very often in different situations in their day-to-day life .

3.1 Reading Skills



In terms of reading skill, 60 %t of the students stated that they had less difficulty (sometimes or very rarely) with reading than the other skills, and they wanted to improve other skills, mainly speaking and writing more than the reading skill. On the other hand, a number of students who are presently following their special degrees in English medium (e.g. geography, economics) mentioned that though the general reading comprehension passages used during English lectures were easy for them to understand, they wanted the reading classes be based on subject specific reading materials. That is, the students who are following the special degrees in English stated that it would be much desirable for them if the reading materials used during English classes are integrated with their content areas. Moreover, they needed to read journal articles and textbooks related to their fields of study in order to complete their assignments and develop lecture notes. On contrary to this, a few students mentioned that they often had difficulty in comprehending reading texts given during English classes due to their lack of vocabulary knowledge.

While reviewing the textbook “English for Life” with regard to reading activities, though the readings in the textbook have not been that much suitable for third year students, reading passages had been chosen additionally from the book named “Select Readings” and integrated into the syllabi. “Select Readings” is a reading course for students of English where interesting authentic reading passages serve as springboards for reading skills development, vocabulary building, and thought-provoking discussions and writings. Therefore, as the students’ requirements were met with the reading materials used, there arose no special need among the students to include other reading activities into the curriculum.

3.2 Writing Skills

Writing was the most difficult skill indicated by almost every student. Many students have troubles in writing simple texts and all the students including those who were of good language proficiency in reading, speaking, etc. found it very difficult in writing academic essays. The students’ expectations were to teach them formal letter writings, curriculum vitae, report writings, thesis writing and some other formal writings. As for them, the only problem they encounter in writing lies in choosing suitable vocabularies, following the appropriate style, using suitable forms of sentences and organizing the content while working with academic writings.

Hence, in terms of writing, most of the students were not satisfied with the writing activities taught and practiced during English lectures. Being undergraduate students they require



different types of writing activities in order to fulfill their present as well as future needs. They also highly emphasized that more writing activities must be integrated into their curriculum which could help meet their requirements as undergraduates. It was also found from the study that the students prefer a different approach to teaching writing from the lecturers as they are not content with the present way of teaching nor the materials used.

Though the textbook used for the chosen group of students, “English for Life – Intermediate level student’s book”, consists of many lessons integrating all the skills required for a second language learner, the needs of the students identified through the needs analysis were varied and the content of the textbook was not much satisfactory for the majority of the students. In terms of the writing skill, it was the much needed skill in which the students wanted mastery during their study. The students’ expectations were of becoming proficient in academic writing that could benefit throughout their career as they were university students. They wanted to learn to write reports, thesis, research articles, formal letters, emails and curriculum vitae. On contrary to the expectations of the students, the book included a limited number of writing tasks and the activities designed to develop writing skill could not meet their expected needs. They were comparatively very simple and easy tasks for an undergraduate student. For instance, the writings the students are asked to produce include writing own introduction following the given model, writing advice, etc. Instead, the students’ requirements were more on academic writing.

3.3 Speaking Skills

Students stated that though they had the ability to manage speaking in English especially in informal contexts, they found themselves struggling while dealing with formal situations like making academic presentations, during oral tests, attending interviews for some extra courses, etc. In addition to this, majority of the students (75%) who participated in the study also mentioned that they were not confident enough to speak in English in front of a group of people because they felt anxious which leads to fear that they would make mistakes in their English. So these students suggested doing more oral presentations, conversations and other oral activities in English classes so as to develop their fluency in speaking. The students also stated the need of developing speaking skill for their future requirements such as doing research/thesis presentations, facing interviews and for some other communicative purposes. Hence, according to the findings, it was suggested by the students that integrating more real life formal speaking activities into the syllabi would be beneficial.



When it comes to speaking, though the text book has consisted of a number of speaking activities, more focus is given to informal conversations and interviews. Since the students needed speaking practice for conversations and interviews, as found out from the needs analysis, the kind of speaking activities designed in the textbook seem to cater to their requirements to a certain extent. In addition to this, as the students needed more exposure for making oral presentation, lots of oral activities like presentations and some other effective oral activities must be integrated into the syllabi as per students' needs.

3.4 Listening Skills

Only around 30% of the students felt listening is an important skill for them. The students who follow their degrees in English medium mentioned their difficulty of understanding the lecture (especially lengthy descriptions) and taking effective notes during lecture because they did not have more exposure to listening to English in their English classes. In addition, some students expressed their difficulties about understanding the pronunciation of words during formal meetings and in gatherings. As a result, they fail to react well to certain situations and feel embarrassed. Therefore, the students from the target group expressed the need for including more listening activities into the syllabus content.

As for listening, the overall findings indicated that the students, especially those who followed English medium education, had expressed a kind of dissatisfaction about not having listening activities into their curriculum.

3.5 Teaching grammar

With regard to teaching grammar, two kinds of opinions were identified among the students. For the majority, grammar seemed to be less favoured area of learning because they were very tedious of grammar as it requires the students to learn and use rules. Furthermore, they are being taught the same grammar rules for several years from school to university. Despite the fact that teaching of grammar was not appreciated by the majority of the interviewed students, some expressed their willingness to learn grammar and also suggested to include more grammar activities, acknowledging the fact that no matter how boring it might seem at a given time. Further they added the reason for their preference that learning a language requires grammar and they cannot properly learn it without adequately mastering its rules. For this reasons these students argued that grammar must be integrated into the curriculum.



When looking at the content of “English for Life” textbook, there is a heavy focus on grammar than the other skills. So based on the needs of the students, the integration of grammar rules must be balanced with the teaching of other four skills based on the students’ needs that the curricula should ensure this balancing.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

The students’ linguistic expectations have also been the matter of fact that needs to be given special consideration, especially for those who follow their degrees in English medium. The needs of the students therefore were seen as different from what they are being taught during their course of study. Hence, if the students’ needs are identified, the content of the course can be tailored accordingly. Since a proper needs analysis would benefit to get a clear notion about the students’ linguistic expectations, and also may help designing materials that would be better tailored to suit the students’ needs and requirements in terms of knowledge, abilities and skills (Todea & Demarcsek, 2016), the needs analysis was carried out.

In this study, it was revealed that there is a need to integrate some important skills into the teaching and learning as put forth by the students. The curriculum must be designed according to the needs of the students where more focus was required and requested for speaking and writing activities. As the students seem not much in favour of the present syllabi, it is advisable to include areas that cater to the needs identified from the analysis. In addition, since most of the needs of the students are different from what they are being taught from textbooks, attention must be made to revise the syllabi of third year students to incorporate writing, speaking, and some listening activities as well as with the teaching of grammar, which could cater to the requirements of the learners’ needs. In this connection, the faculty should consider allocating more teaching hours and facilities to have smaller class size too. Developing online modules for vocabulary learning and grammar practices can be other future changes that would bring benefits to the ESL students.

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