

## Assessment of an ESL Course Module Design Based on Its Representation of the Target Learner Needs: An Experiential Study Conducted at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University

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### Abstract

ESL course modules developed with discipline-specific technical language contents are considered a compulsory component in all the undergraduate degree programmes in the state universities of Sri Lanka. These modules scaffold the English-medium instruction, enabling the undergraduates to improve their English language skills, which are necessary in following their selected degree programs. The reasons for considering it necessary to maintain an advanced competency level in English in university education are mainly the disparities in the education system in the country, which cause the students' demotivation and a lack of interest in studying English. Consequently, the perceived effectiveness of the ESL course modules offered to the undergraduates has also been much debated on their capability of presenting the language according to their specific English language needs. The study, therefore, explores the issue, utilizing a qualitative re-evaluation methodology, in which 30 volunteer participants have provided in-depth analyses of their learning experiences. Prior to the main study, a comprehensive Needs Analysis was conducted to identify the specific language requirements of the participants, and the data collection included their writings on specific language needs, interviews as well as structured questionnaire surveys conducted for 15 weeks. The collected data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, and it was understood that the offered course module is generally effective in addressing their basic language needs only. However, the study emphasised the need for more and more engaging and integrated language support, under which the students are grouped according to their language proficiency levels.

**Keywords-** ESL; language needs; EMI; undergraduates; perceived effectiveness

### Introduction

In many higher education institutes in Sri Lanka, the majority of undergraduates strive to be competent in the English language to pursue their higher education. However, many find it either impossible or challenging due to various reasons. Though the effectiveness of English language course modules offered to the undergraduates has been discussed by many scholars and in academia itself, the crux of English language competency remains unchanged and unanswered.

However, the role of the English language in the country cannot be merely ignored, as Mahroof claims, “with globalization English continues to play a distinctive role not only to cross borders but also for survival in Sri Lanka” (nd, Pg 15) emphasizing the importance of the English language as the “link language”. Referring to the same context, Ranasinha (2011/2012), comments that the importance of the English language as a medium of instruction was increased when the country was exposed to globalization. Subsequently, necessary changes regarding the medium of language were followed both in schools and in higher education institutions accordingly. (Pg 205) As she further discusses, a quite slow process of adapting to the changes in the university system resulted in a lack of communication skills among the undergraduates and the graduates when they are in the job market. (World Bank, 2009) This fact was further proven in a study conducted by the Open University of Sri Lanka on the language skills of the students- reading, listening, writing, and speaking in which the study results revealed “Skills wise, all institutions performed best in reading. The next best performance, skills wise, was in speech and listening. Writing proved to be the weakest skill” (Raheem & Wijetunga, 2009). Therefore, as identified, English language competency has become very challenging in the higher education sector since the students in the Higher Education Institutes are adult learners who have much more expectations and different perspectives in learning. Moreover, undergraduates, being adult learners may have other priorities than learning a second language, especially since they have a specific workload related to their degree that eventually makes the need of learning English belittled. This however encapsulates the crux, inadequate English language competency of undergraduates, as Perera (2013) comments, although the universities have taken several steps to improve the language proficiency of the students, many have not been fruitful. Reasons for the identified lack vary from the lack of interest of the students in language learning, issues in pedagogy, to the lack of facilities and opportunities to learn the language. Consequently, as Rahuman (2017) writes, “the final accusation comes to the faculty and the English Language Teaching Unit when the students record a high failure rate in English and lack the required language skills once they step into the job market,” explaining the consequences of the inadequate English Language competency of undergraduates and its impact on the responsibilities of academia. This furthermore affects the overall academic performance of the undergraduates, especially in the degree courses conducted in the English medium. This emphasizes the request to analyse the students’ needs and the interest in learning English as a second language to inspire the academia to revise the set objectives and the aims of ESL course modules opt for the changing requirements of the students as claimed by Nunan, (2004) as cited in De Silva and Devendra (nd), “an analysis of students needs and interests may be useful in identifying or revising the goals and objectives of a course module, deciding on methodology, and determining means of assessment and evaluation.” (Pg 09).

Subsequently, the designed study aimed to explore the essential English language requirements of the first-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Computing at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, focusing on the effectiveness of the first ESL course module offered by the university.

## **Materials and Methods**

A convenience sampling method was used in the study, in which the research cohort consisted of 30 voluntary participants, first-year IT undergraduates of General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Southern Campus, from different language proficiency levels and different ethnic backgrounds.

The first academic year in a university is foundational for undergraduates, especially in demanding degree programs like Information Technology and Information Systems. Therefore, the effectiveness of the ESL course modules in the first academic year is crucial for setting the foundation for future academic performances of the students since the lectures and assessments are conducted only in English. Additionally, it further facilitates the advanced English language course modules they have to follow in the university, along with the other course modules they learn.

The study was designed as a case study including a two - fold study in the form of a Needs Analysis and an ESL course evaluation which is limited to learner perspectives. The Needs Analysis, conducted at the very beginning of the study provided a profound background, especially in the purposes of identifying the English language needs of the participants and was foundational throughout the study. Similarly, a designed course evaluation, which was strictly limited to the learner perspectives supported the analysis of the perceived effectiveness of the offered course module in addressing the identified language needs of the learners.

The study was designed to be conducted during the first 15 weeks of the first academic year of first-year undergraduates, by collecting data both at the beginning and at the end of the study. Focus group interviews, structured questionnaires were used as the research tools to identify and discuss the English language needs of the undergraduates, their perspectives and the effectiveness of the ESL course modules in addressing the specific language requirements stated by them.

The Needs Analysis was conducted in the first phase of the study through collecting data by requesting the participants to write a short composition of what they expected to learn by following an ESL course module at the university. They were furthermore allowed to use their preferred language to write the compositions. Similarly, a series of focus group interviews was also conducted before the study, as it provided the researcher with a deep insight into the specific language needs that were highlighted in the compositions of the participants.

At the end of the 15 academic weeks, the same group of participants were again interviewed and given a structured questionnaire, which was prepared based on their responses to the needs analysis, to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the ESL course module in addressing their language needs. Moreover, structured interviews were also employed to address the perspectives of the learners on the ESL course module they were offered to address their required language needs.

## **Results**

The Needs Analysis conducted at the initial stage of the study revealed that the participants of the research were from non-English backgrounds since the first language of all the participants were Sinhala. This highlighted the diversity of the English language needs of the participants, indicating their diverse English language proficiency levels.

According to the responses of the participants to the Needs Analysis, participants indicated four main language needs, including academic needs, emphasizing their needs of excelling in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Communication needs of the undergraduates were identified as another highlighted language need that they want to achieve by following an ESL course module, implying their urgent need to improve both oral and written competency in English. According to the respondents, they needed English language competency, both oral and written, as they wanted to communicate with the academia for their educational purposes during the lectures and in the mentoring programs conducted by the faculty. Moreover, the study revealed the participants' awareness on the necessity of the English language in society.

Especially, their interpretations of English language competency as a "class marker" were evident during the interviews and conversations held with the students. Moreover, participants revealed their understanding of the need for English language competency for their future professional pursuits (occupational needs) since most of the participants believed that English language competency was an extra qualification for securing their place in the professional world, especially for their future career development.

As identified in the conducted Needs Analysis, the participants highlighted the necessity of addressing their academic needs with an effective ESL course module. The interviews held with the participants at the end of the study revealed that the ESL course module offered to them could scaffold them, providing a thorough understanding of grammar, improving vocabulary and engaging them in writing practice. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of having tutorial sessions in the module, hours allotted for them to do relevant language activities, followed by a discussion with the lecturer. The participants considered this a positive remark that helped them improve their English language skills. Furthermore, the participants considered the difficulties in note-taking as a challenge and insisted on the practical sessions that would make them skilled in note-taking methods. Subsequently, the participants highlighted the need to improve their speaking skills, which was often less concerned due to the strict timeline and the content of the course modules. Similarly, many students in an ESL classroom were identified as another challenge that limits the speaking activities during the sessions. A participant remarked, "It is good if we can do speaking activities during the lecture, because we find it difficult to talk in English" emphasizing the urgent need for speaking skills. The need to improve their listening skills was also discussed, referring to the "speed" of the lecture delivery of some lecturers and the difficulties of the participants in understanding the lectures due to their less improved vocabulary and less knowledge of grammatical structures.

As stated by the participants, communication need was another significant aspect of language that they wanted to perceive by following an ESL course module offered to them at the university. Both speaking and written communication skills in English were required by them, for the purpose of official and personal communication purposes. Consequently, the results of the study revealed that most of the participants were satisfied with the provided knowledge on grammar during the lectures, allowing them to improve their written communication skills in English, while the ESL course module did not emphasize very much on improving the oral communication skills of the undergraduates.

As per the language learning experience of the participants, they were ambitious of an improvement in their English language competency with the help of the ESL course modules offered to them at the university. Social needs highlighted in the Needs Analysis have been acquired by the participants through the ESL course module offered to them, especially by making students confident in their language and motivating them to use the target language in public. However, since the participants have not yet experienced the role of the English language in a work environment, their lack of experience was a gap in the study, which invites future research pursuits.

## **Discussion**

Despite how successful and effective the ESL course module is in addressing the English language needs of the undergraduates in the university, still few causes would hinder the success. As identified by analysing the responses of the participants during the study, such few significant factors were identified, including the lack of a proper grading system according to the language proficiency level of the students, large language classrooms and less student engagement.

As many participants of the study stated, the lack of a proper grading system for the students according to their language proficiency level was a significant drawback that hindered the effectiveness of the course module offered to the students. This fact places the learners in a more challenging position, as a class would consist of students from basic to advanced language proficiency levels. This would obviously result in negative learning experiences for many learners, as often they are given activities that are not relevant to their language proficiency level. Similarly, the lecturer also experienced this situation as more challenging as they were placed with a more challenging task of preparing lesson materials and lectures for a class with learners from different language proficiency levels. Consequently, this fact has been identified by the participants as one of the main drawbacks to be addressed in the language classroom. This fact further led to less student engagement in the language learning process,

which was identified as another hindrance to the effectiveness of a language classroom in addressing the specific language needs of the participants.

As suggested by the participants, the effectiveness of the ESL course module offered to the undergraduate could be much enhanced by having a grading the students on their language proficiency level, adopting an active pedagogy, giving continuous feedback to the learners and adopting of technology in the language learning process.

Significantly, what was highlighted throughout the research was the effort for a successful involvement of the ESL course module in addressing the language needs of the fresh undergraduates, amidst many challenges, indicating the opportunities for a positive change that would overcome the drawbacks for a successful course module delivery.

## **Conclusion**

In an academic context in which the English language proficiency was essential for a learner, the study highlights the effectiveness of the ESL course module offered to a group of first-year undergraduates in their first semester, for assisting their specific English language needs. The study identified the contexts of academic, communication, social and professional contexts, insisting on the basic language requirements of the participants in the conducted Needs Analysis. By conducting focused group interviews and through structured questionnaires, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the ESL course module in addressing the specific language needs was conducted, applying qualitative content analysis. The results indicated positive feedback from the learners on the effectiveness of the ESL course module they followed in supporting their specific language needs. The conducted study furthermore invited further research pursuits for a longitudinal study on the same context and comparative studies on the impact of demographic factors on the effectiveness of the language learning process.

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