

## **Responding to English Language Needs of Undergraduates: Challenges and Constraints**

A study of the needs and expectations of students in the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) programme at the OUSL

***Radhika De Silva\* and Dinali Devendra***

*Department of Language Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka*

### **Abstract**

This article presents the findings of a study which investigated the needs and expectations of a group of students registered for an undergraduate degree programme offered in the medium of English which is the students' second language (L2), at the Open University of Sri Lanka. The study was conducted at the beginning of the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) Course which is offered to these undergraduates to enhance their core academic English language skills. The views of the teachers of main subject disciplines about the importance of English for successful functioning in their respective academic disciplines were also investigated. The challenges, constraints and possibilities in meeting the needs and expectations of these stakeholders are also discussed.

**Keywords:** EAP, EGAP, Stakeholder needs, expectations

### **Background**

Learner-centred approaches to curriculum development have been a major trend in language teaching in the past two decades. The main characteristic of a learner-centred approach is the importance given to learners' needs and their expectations in the curriculum design process (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). An analysis of students' needs and interests may be useful in identifying or revising the goals and objectives of a course, deciding on methodology, and determining means of assessment and evaluation (Nunan, 2004).

According to Widdowson (1983), English for Specific Purposes can be categorized according to the specificity of the aims of the course. He proposes that the designers need to "look for ways of defining the aims of our students in communicative terms by

\* Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Radhika De Silva, Dept. of Language Studies, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, The Open University of Sri Lanka (email: krsil@ou.ac.lk)

devising a means of analysis which preserves the essential features of language use” (Widdowson, 1983, p.6). Based on Widdowson’s view, Bruce (2005) suggests the need for a discourse-focused approach to General English for Academic Purposes syllabus and course design which “relates to cognitive genres; is not discipline-specific; and uses a top-down approach in order to develop capacity as well as competence (enabling learners to reapply discourse knowledge in varying situations and forms)” (p.240). The course design is thus informed by a variety of data which includes the intentions, needs and plans of principal stakeholders of the course. Bruce (2003, cited in Bruce, 2005) proposes four rhetorical types of cognitive genres in academic discourse and one of the needs specified by Bruce is to ‘identify discourse categories that are not discipline specific (cognitive rather than social genres) for use in the instruction of groups of students preparing for studies in a variety of disciplines’ (p.244).

Different approaches to EAP have been debated in the research literature. Some researchers (Pennycook, 1998) argue that EAP approaches are based on dominant western academic cultures with zero tolerance of other cultures and traditions. The value of a socio-cultural dimension to academic literacy is highlighted by some researchers (Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990) and according to them, in the area of academic writing, communicative purposes are shared and communicative conventions are sanctioned by specific discourse communities. Some others believe that academic language is embedded within disciplinary cultures (Freedman, 1999; Hansen, 2000) and they question the generalizability of an academic discourse across various disciplines in a university. Samuda (2001) criticizes various approaches used in EAP teaching and stresses the importance of learner needs in curricular design. As Fox (2009) points out, EAP curricular design and instruction should be informed by diagnostic assessment of ‘individual student needs and strengths’ which are essential in supporting efficient and effective language development and ‘works well in tandem with traditional EAP approaches’ (p.38). Fox also comments on the value of a diagnostic approach in identifying the factors that affect students’ academic success other than their language proficiency (*i.e.* motivation).

As Benesch (1996) points out, ‘needs analysis is a subjective process’ which depends on the ‘analyst’s ideology’ whereas critical needs analysis attempts to identify areas where ‘greater equality might be achieved’ (p.736) by giving more power to lower levels in

the hierarchical order *i.e.* students. Benesch (2009) discussing the demands of globalization and their impact on EAP students, teachers, and curricula, claim that the critical EAP does not encourage decontextualised topics which may create problems for teachers and students: 'Instead, grounded in the theoretical construct of situatedness, critical EAP finds its subjects in the daily and academic lives of students, presenting those topics respectfully to promote deep emotional connection and intellectual engagement' (p. 84-85).

Belcher (2006) reviews the current debates on needs analysis with particular relevance to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and claims that while some critical pedagogists (*e.g.* Canagarajah, 2002; Philipson, 1992) view addressing learner needs in ESP as supporting expansion of English to fields of education, employment, research and technology and strengthening of its position in the non-English dominant world, others with EAP experience (*e.g.* Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1997) 'have constructed conceptual bridges between critical and pragmatically needs-based perspectives on pedagogy' (p. 143). Benesch (2001) emphasizes the need to redefine needs analysis to include 'rights analysis' which is a more democratic approach that takes into consideration target situation needs as well. According to Benesch, language curriculum design should be informed by 'a framework for understanding and responding to power relations' (p. 108) which empowers students with confidence to challenge undesirable situations and this is possible only if instructors attempt to 'discover what is possible, desirable, and beneficial at a certain moment with a particular group of students' (p.109).

Alexander, Argent and Spencer (2008), discussing the expectations of non-native speaker students in the UK, point out the danger in stereotyping those students since each individual student has his/her own individual expectations and needs. They examine the distinctive features of EAP in relation to context, people and teaching learning content and claim that understanding of these features is useful in identifying students' needs and determining how to meet those needs. EAP teachers, according to them, have a crucial role to play in 'relating to academic communities as language experts' which may benefit EAP students (p.15).

In distance learning contexts, the learners' ideas about their needs and preferences and their perceptions of the learning context have been considered as key factors which determine their language

learning. According to White (2003), “distance language learning changes the teaching-learning relationship that students have been confronted with for much of their lives” and “they need to be supported in finding ways of effectively managing themselves and their learning experiences” (p. 98). In order to provide learners with necessary support, it is essential to have an understanding of their perceptions, needs, expectations and their plans for language learning.

### **Studies on Needs Analysis**

A variety of studies have been conducted in diverse contexts which have explored the needs, expectations and perceptions of students in relation to courses that support EAP skills.

Dooley (2010) explored the experiences and perceptions of a group of international students studying in Australia using semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that students had problems in using academic language skills such as making formal presentations, engaging in group discussions, research skills, and referencing. In addition to these academic skills, students expressed their concern about the disparity of English proficiency levels among students, intercultural communication and even about having too many speakers of Chinese languages. According to Dooley, ‘the most urgent need from the students’ perspective was to improve their English language skills in the most efficient way possible, to enable them to cope with their assigned tasks’ (p.187). They were very keen about developing their oral communication skills and were worried especially about the inability to contribute meaningfully in group discussions, and about the difficulties in articulating sophisticated ideas and abstract concepts in English.

Evans and Green’s (2007) large scale survey of the EAP needs of Cantonese speaking students in Hong Kong revealed that students’ difficulties related largely to the fields of academic writing (style, grammar and cohesion) and academic speaking (particularly grammar, fluency and pronunciation). Even though the study highlighted the need for further enhancement of vocabulary and grammar, the authors contend that this does not justify a return to remedial general English language course and that the best approach would be to further focus on existing EAP programmes to address identified needs. The researchers further note the practical constraints such as the limited number of

classroom hours per semester that impinge on accommodating a wide range of needs.

Chostelidou's (2010) study of the English language needs of accountancy students enrolled in a Tertiary Institute in Greece highlights the multiplicity of student needs that need to be considered in developing English language support courses. The study revealed that there was a requirement for a highly specific ESP course to fulfil their immediate needs. However students also wished to develop language skills to help them function as professionals in the accountancy business in the long term. Therefore both short term and long term needs are to be taken into account in this particular context. This issue of the complexity of needs is further highlighted by Chien and Hsu (2010) whose study indicated that students' basic English skills in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing need to be further developed before specific needs were addressed in the context of an ESP programme.

Exploring the needs of international students studying in the UK (specifically Chinese students), Edwards and Ran (2006) found that in addition to the emotional challenges they face in adjusting to life in the UK, these students have specific needs which are a result of their Confucian heritage. Those students whose English language proficiency is limited have to rely on their native speaker friends, supervisors or commercial services when doing their academic work. Edwards and Ran opine that the needs of these students are too complex to be dealt with in a support course for English and the universities need to address their specific needs with flexibility, rather than attempting to absorb them into the existing structures.

A needs analysis survey conducted by Chowdhury and Haider (2012) in an Asian context (Bangladesh) using 40 undergraduates and four EAP teachers found that the existing EAP courses have major drawbacks in meeting learners' expectations in using acquired skills for both academic and professional purposes. These students felt reading, writing and speaking skills are more important to them than listening. However, the teachers were of the view that the students are unable to see the relevance of the English course in their main course of study and they consider it as an obstacle which has to be removed. Chowdhury and Haider recommend improvement in current EAP material through

incorporation of materials relevant to core subjects and by giving more emphasis to productive skills *i.e.* writing and speaking.

Mazdayasna and Tahririan's (2008) study of the ESP needs of Iranian undergraduate medical sciences students showed that they believed that reading comprehension followed by listening, speaking and writing skills were important skills that needed to be addressed. This view was also supported by the subject specific instructors who also attached greater importance to these skills than the students. The study is also important in that it also indicated the constraints and obstacles that impinged on fulfilling these identified student needs. These included limitation of time, the number of students in class, the teaching methodology used and the perceived limitations of the English Language Instructors.

Fox, Cheng, Berman, Song and Myles (2006) stress the importance of taking into consideration 'the heterogeneity and 'positioning' of the population under investigation' when making generalizations and predictions about learner needs, academic performance and when making recommendations for language support programmes (p. 2). Investigating L2 undergraduates in three Canadian universities, they found that it is necessary to develop students' learning and social skills, their ability to make strategic choices regarding academic and social support that develops English and providing formal EAP or ESP instruction to support successful academic acculturation of these students.

### **English Language Teaching and Learning in Sri Lanka: Expectations and Perceptions**

In an ethnographic study which investigated student motivation, attitudes and their subjectivities to learn English using lived experiences of Tamil EAP students in northern Sri Lanka, Canagarajah (2001) found that students expected the course to be grammar-oriented and they disliked skills or activity based teaching of English in the EAP classroom. Canagarajah noted a drastic fall in student attendance which he attributes to the irrelevance of material used for teaching.

Investigating the perceptions of university students on the role of English language proficiency in higher education, career choice and mobility, Ranasinghe and Ranasinghe (2012) found that the respondents believed knowledge of English is necessary to perform well in higher education and they considered it as 'a means for upward career mobility and better career prospects' (p.204). The impact of English on students' performance in main academic programmes was surveyed by Vidanapathirana (2009) with reference to the B.A. in Social Sciences Degree programme at OUSL and he found that there was a significant association between students' performance in English and their performance in main subjects in the Social Sciences. Vidanapathirana reports that 'the success rate (percentage of learners completing the programme) as well as the quality of success (learners securing good passes) are invariably linked to competence in the English language' (p. 70).

Another study (Perera, 2006) which used first year undergraduates in a Sri Lankan national university found that students 'have an overwhelming desire to learn English brought about by their perception of English as the direct link to future employment and success'(p.51). Perera found that fulfilling this need through a single level course was not feasible and describes an attempt to introduce a lower-level course to support the needs of low-proficiency students. As Ratwatte and Herath (2006) point out 'this is a good example of change in language education policy that needs to take place not only at national level but at institutional levels as well if we are to meet needs of different student populations and achieve the goal of teaching English' (p. ix). According to Perera (2006), limited contact hours allocated for English by the faculty administration is a huge constraint in addressing the needs of these students.

The performance in English of a group of doctors registered at the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka who followed a training course for IELTS (International English Language Testing Service) was investigated by Raheem, Medawattegedara, and Miththapala (2007). The findings revealed that the trainees had not been able to reach the required standard in the skill of Writing for postgraduate training abroad even after receiving training for eight months. Raheem and Wijetunge (2009) report the findings of a recent study which investigated the undergraduate English Language Proficiency in the Sri Lankan University system using Test of English Proficiency (TEP)

specifically designed for this purpose. This test evaluated the proficiency in all four language skills: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speech. They used a systematic sample to include students from 12 universities, studying different disciplines i.e. Engineering, Science, Medicine, Social Sciences and Management/Accountancy. Raheem and Wijetunge (ibid) note that out of the four skills, the weakest performance was in the Writing skill.

How the views on English have changed over time and how opinions about English differ among different social groups in Sri Lanka were investigated in a study by Ratwatte (2012). She examined the opinions expressed in the written media (English) by English speaking authors and compared those with the opinions expressed by the 'masses (those who have an inadequate knowledge of English)' (p.181). The study revealed that there is agreement as well as mismatch between the opinions expressed by these two speech communities. The views held by the learners' society *i.e.* English is necessary for employment and tertiary education have an influence on the learners while 'the relevance of English for other spheres seems to be one largely held by the 'English-fluent' segment of society.' As Ratwatte (2012) points out, there is a resistance to learning 'when the learner cannot see the usefulness of a task or the relevance to his life' (p.200).

Previous studies on learner needs, as discussed above, have identified a wide variety of learner needs and how they vary in different contexts. While stressing the importance of taking into account the heterogeneity of the student population, the context, and individual learner needs in course design and delivery, they discuss the issues and constraints in addressing those in different contexts.

Previous studies on learner needs, as discussed above, have identified a wide variety of learner needs and how they vary in different contexts. While stressing the importance of taking into account the heterogeneity of the student population, the context, and individual learner needs in course design and delivery, they discuss the issues and constraints in addressing those in different contexts. Hence, it was considered important to carry out a study which would reveal the needs and expectations of main stakeholders of the English for General Academic Purposes Course at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

The present study attempted to answer the following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the needs and expectations of a group of students registered for an English for General Academic Purposes course at the Open University of Sri Lanka?
2. What English language skills do the lecturers in academic departments think are necessary for students' successful completion of the degree?
3. What are the challenges faced by EAP course designers when addressing stakeholder needs and expectations?

### **Methodology**

The study used 100 essays written by 100 students registered for the English for General Academic Purposes course from the Faculty of Natural Sciences and a questionnaire to 26 lecturers from the Faculty of Natural Sciences as data collection instruments.

The present study explores the students' needs and expectations through a piece of writing (a timed essay) written by the students on a given topic prior to the beginning of their English course. The rubrics for the task guided the students to structure their essay on their needs to learn English, their expectations of the EGAP course and their plans to improve their English. Their performance in writing was evaluated separately by a set of marking examiners and the researchers were not involved in that process. The scripts were selected randomly for the research study later. A random sample of 100 essays was used in the study and the data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. A Content Analysis of the essays was carried out by coding the data using a coding scheme which was designed using a sample of data. Content Analysis is considered as an unobtrusive method of data collection as it does not involve the researcher interacting with the people being studied. The essays did not contain the students' names. A sample of data was coded by both researchers

independently and the discrepancies in coding were removed after a discussion. The inter-coder reliability was above 0.9 for most of the categories. The presence of a particular category was counted as “1” (irrespective of the number of occurrences) while the absence of it was counted as “0”.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Types of Needs (Total)

	N	Min	Max	Sum	M (SD)
Academic Needs Total	100	0	6	219	2.19 (1.14)
Social Needs Total	100	0	3	96	0.96 (0.76)
Occupational Needs Total	100	0	3	71	0.71 (0.80)

As shown in Table 1, the needs that were mentioned in the informants’ essays (N = 100) were identified and coded under three main categories, namely, Academic needs, Social needs and Occupational needs (mentioning of a particular type of need was counted only once irrespective of the frequency of occurrence) and descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS 16.0. Out of the three kinds of needs, the highest mean was found for the need for using English for academic purposes. The need to use English for social purposes had the next highest mean while the need for English for occupational purposes had the lowest mean out of the three types.

### Academic Needs

As shown in Table 2, the Academic Needs Total found in students’ written texts was 219 and the highest mean was reported for Academic Needs with a narrow angle (required to fulfil immediate needs relating to study programme). Academic Needs with a wide angle and technological needs had the second highest mean. The mean for the need for the mastery of all four skills was the next highest. The results show a few instances where the informants mentioned the need of English to interact with peers and the staff. None of the students, however, reported that English is necessary to communicate with the academic institution.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Academic Needs

	N	Min	Max	Sum	M(SD)
Academic Needs Wide	100	0	1	55	0.55(0.50)
Academic Needs Narrow	100	0	1	65	0.65(0.48)
Interaction with peers for academic purposes	100	0	1	11	0.11(0.31)
Interaction with staff for academic purposes	100	0	1	5	0.05(0.22)
Interaction with institution for academic purposes	100	0	0	0	0(0)
Need for four skills	100	0	1	37	0.37(0.48)
Technological needs	100	0	1	55	0.55(0.50)
Academic Needs Total	100	0	6	219	2.19(1.14)

The responses indicated that a significant percentage of participants in this study have an in depth understanding of the role played by language proficiency in attaining academic goals. In relation to science as a broad field of study (academic wide) learners showed a sophisticated understanding of the role played by English in the communication and dissemination of scientific knowledge. Learners thus showed an awareness of the need for a common language that could serve the needs of the scientific community. Learners were also able to cite specific areas such as scientific vocabulary that would require a common set of core terms to facilitate communication.

*“To interact/communicate with the academic community in Sri Lanka and in the world”*

*“Scientists will invent new things and new concepts, solutions and new unexplored things. With the use of their knowledge they used to store their new inventions (inventions) and exploring in books. So therefore they must use a world language that anyone can understand”.*

*“Science is international. So there are many words in science subject in English such as chemical names. So we must know English well for understand and use correct vocabulary of names.”*

Learners also showed an understanding of the pace at which new knowledge expands in the diverse fields of scientific research. It was also indicated that access to this knowledge was dependent on successfully accessing new technological resources which demanded competency in English.

*“Science is a subject that is changing every day. So I should update my knowledge according to that. So if I am an expert in English I can go through internet and other resources and very easily update my knowledge.”*

In addition to this understanding of the need for English to obtain scientific knowledge, a significant proportion of learners also showed an understanding of the importance of more particular and specific needs: in this case coping with the demands of the B.Sc. programme at OUSL.

*“I have choosed a BSc degree at Open University for my higher studies. It’s a valuable degree and the other important thing is we have to do it in the English medium.”*

*“We have to do this degree programme in English medium. Therefore our English knowledge is very essential for our studies.”*

The motivation for learning English was also connected with a comprehensive understanding of the specific academic tasks that needed to be completed as part of their studies (academic narrow).

*“it is very good opportunity have a good English knowledge to complete their projects, action researches and general researchers recommended by those degree programmes.”*

The results revealed therefore that the category of academic needs was one of the chief factors that motivated learners to enhance their competency in language. Learner had a holistic understanding of the relationship between language and the development of scientific knowledge. They could also point out the specificities of language requirements in relation to the Degree

programme that they intended to pursue at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

### Social Needs

In addition to the academic aspects that students cited as requiring enhanced language proficiency, learners were also aware of other dimensions that could be enhanced by the knowledge of English. Students cited social needs as one major factor that motivated them to develop their proficiency in English.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for Social Needs

	N	Min	Max	Sum	M(SD)
Social Needs-Recreational	100	0	1	28	0.28(0.45)
Social Needs-Communication	100	0	1	45	0.45(0.50)
Social- Personality Development	100	0	1	26	0.26(0.44)
Social Needs Total	100	0	3	96	0.96(0.76)

As shown in Table 3, the need to use English for social purposes was also expressed by the sample and these social needs were coded for three main categories. The highest number of instances was for the need to use English for Communication (for interpersonal interaction and for various other functions) while the need to use English for recreational purposes and for personality development was also felt by a considerable number of students.

Many learners felt that English was required to interact and communicate in a range of social contexts and situations. Some of these situations cited were pragmatic while others referred to general communication among family and peers.

*“You may go on supermarket or silk shop or jewellery shop they speak on English. Then we want to have spoken English to that movement”.*

*“When we are communicate with others we use some English words, even when we are talking Sinhala”*

*“I will try speaking in English with my parents, my sister and my friends”*

One interesting facet that emerged during data analysis was that learners did not feel that English was required for day to day

communication within the academic institution. Learners did not indicate that English would be required to interact with their peers and the academic institution. This is a matter of some concern as communication within the institution would be one way of developing language skills to be used in other contexts.

Many learners also cited personality development as one area that required attention during the course of their university education. Enhancement of English language skills was seen as a means of developing self-confidence and dealing with challenging situations.

*“I like to speak in English among others. When I speak in English feels to me to increase my self confidence.”*

*“When we speak in English our personality will also be colourful.”*

*“I think that if I know English with no any mistake I can face any challenge with no doubt.”*

A small proportion of learners felt that English allowed them to participate in a range of recreational activities and leisure pursuits.

*“I would like to read English novels, also like to watch English films and like to listen to English songs. So without learning English I cannot think about novels, films and songs”*

*“I love to read books not only science but also almost anything. And I love to hear English music and subtitled English films”*

Thus, the analysis of data indicated that social needs (comprising a range of specific areas) were also another factor that motivated learning of English. These needs would necessarily have to be taken into account in the development of language enhancement programmes for this target audience. These expanding needs mean that programmes designed for university undergraduates would have to pay attention to reading, writing as well as speech and listening.

## Occupational Needs

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics for Occupational Needs

	N	Min	Max	Sum	M(SD)
Occupational opportunities	100	0	1	40	0.40(0.49)
Occupational promotions	100	0	1	9	0.09(0.28)
Needs-workplace	100	0	1	22	0.22(0.41)
Occupational Needs Total	100	0	3	71	0.71(0.80)

As shown in Table 4, the need to use English for occupational purposes as stated by students had a mean of 0.71. They noted three purposes for which they would need English for. The need for having a good mastery of English was felt in finding good employment and these were coded as ‘Occupational opportunities’. The highest mean was for that while the need for using English at the work place had the second highest mean. Not many students felt that English was necessary for their promotions.

Many of the participants cited future prospects in the job market as one of the benefits of competence in English. Overall, the responses indicated a connection between competence in English and the access to meaningful employment.

*“Now a days English is a best qualification for a job  
And also after we complete our science course we go to the  
job market. Then again we need good English to get a good  
job”*

Participants also noted the fact that English would be of importance in gaining entry in to the job market by being able to perform successfully in examinations and interviews.

*“In the present world most of the job interviews are  
conducting in English. We have to face for interviews and  
examinations and in these they measure our English fluency”*

It was also noted that fluency in English would also ensure a remuneration that was adequate and was commensurate with the skills demanded.

*“People are paid fairly when they have English knowledge.”*

The above statements show that these learners expect the English course to provide support in fulfilling their career aspirations as well. Hence, it is clear that these needs have to be taken into consideration when teaching English to these undergraduates. This would necessarily have implications for the content of courses in English language in academic settings.

It was also interesting to note that many participants were of the view that a degree in the field of science would be most marketable if it was in the English medium.

*“Schools, universities, leading companies all over the world looking for the people who have accuracy in English in the relevant area.”*

*“Due to the high completion in the job market the people who have science knowledge with English only countable”.*

The above findings show that the students have a wide variety of needs and interests. Almost all the students perceive English as an essential skill in pursuing their higher studies. However, their expectations of the English course are not limited to academic purposes. In addition to the support for developing skills for academic success, they expect the EGAP course to provide them with general communication skills. Some students are of the view that a course in English will help them improve their self-confidence and increase their employability and career promotions as well. Even though the results show that some students have high expectations they seem to have no clear plans for achieving them.

### **Perceptions of the Faculty on Students’ English Language Needs**

Being one of the main stakeholders, the views of the faculty of students’ main academic discipline are important when designing an EAP course. The present study, therefore, attempted to explore the views of the Faculty of Natural Sciences on the English Language skills required by students in their academic work. More than 84% teachers were of the view that Reading in English is ‘essential’ for their students and 68% believed Writing in

English is 'essential'. The highest percentage for Listening was for 'moderately important' (47%) while Speaking was considered as 'somewhat important' by 37%.

Their views on the need for performing different tasks in Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking for academic study were also investigated through a questionnaire. Reading textbooks (78.9%), Reading assignments, examination papers and lab manuals (68.4%) were considered as the reading tasks the students engage in 'to a great extent' while Reading journal articles (5.2%), and Reading from other sources *i.e.* internet (26.3%) were not seen as academic asks students perform in English to a great extent. A majority of teachers (42.1%) believed writing a long essay (about ten pages) as a task their students perform 'to a little extent' while writing short essays was believed to be done 'to a great extent'. According to them, English is mostly used when writing answers to examination papers (68.4%) but not when writing for personal use (*i.e.* making notes) or for non-academic purposes. Listening to lectures (63.1%) and instructions (47.3%) in English were thought to be done by students to a great extent while watching videos, listening to audio cassettes were not considered as activities done in English to a great extent. In Speaking, most of the skills *i.e.* making presentations, asking and answering questions, engaging in discussions, giving directions and interacting with staff and peers were thought to be performed in English only to a little extent. Less than 15% of the teachers believed that these activities were performed in English by their students to a great extent.

The study also investigated the views of the faculty on the importance of the different aspects of English language skills when students perform their academic activities.

As shown in Table 5, critical reading, listening efficiently, use of appropriate vocabulary, ability to summarize/paraphrase, writing grammatically without plagiarizing were considered as essential skills while speaking fluently and accurately was also regarded as important in students' academic work. However, there was a fair percentage of teachers who did not give much importance to speaking fluently/accurately, pronunciation, writing grammatically and spelling and punctuation. Answering the open ended questions, some teachers expressed the view that students' reading and writing skills improve when they learn in the medium of English and more attention needs to be paid to speaking. Facing a viva/interview successfully, presentation skills and the ability to write project reports are pinpointed by some teachers as

important skills for final year undergraduate students.

**Table 5.** Perceptions of the academics in the main disciplines on aspects of English language skills

	<b>Essential %</b>	<b>Important %</b>	<b>Somewhat important %</b>	<b>Not important %</b>
Writing grammatically	42.1	26.3	26.3	5.2
Spelling and punctuation	36.8	36.8	21.0	5.2
Use of appropriate vocabulary	47.3	42.1	5.2	5.2
Avoiding plagiarism	57.8	26.3	5.2	5.2
Reading critically	73.6	15.7	5.2	5.2
Summarizing/paraphrasing	47.3	42.1	5.2	5.2
Listening efficiently	57.8	36.8	5.2	0
Speaking fluently	10.5	52.6	31.5	5.2
Speaking accurately	21.0	47.3	26.3	5.2
Pronunciation	15.7	42.1	36.8	5.2

The results, thus, show that the expectations of teachers in academic departments about their students' English language skills are fairly high and these are mainly for academic work. Students, however, have expressed their need to use English not only for academic purposes but also for social and occupational purposes. Addressing these diverse needs is a challenge faced by Departments of English that offer English language support to thousands of students in a year.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The results indicate that students have a wide range of needs, which includes academic, occupational and social needs, which they hope to fulfil by following the EGAP course. This diversity of needs has implications for the future development and delivery of the EGAP course.

One initial question that needs to be addressed is to what extent the EGAP approach is appropriate to the present context. Given that students have such a wide spectrum of needs which includes

subject specific English language skills that meet their short term needs as well as their long term career prospects, it is important to further examine the theoretical foundations that underpin an EGAP course. The adequacy of the present approach to course design, which Hyland (2012) characterizes as “broad literacy domains “ or “non-specific ESP ”, needs to be examined in the relation to the findings of student needs. It is important, therefore, that course developers continue to align the goals of this course with the needs of students who are involved in learning a variety of disciplines. This would ensure that the course in fact addresses the needs of the target audience.

Fundamental to the success of the EGAP course is the competencies of the teachers who are responsible for the content of the programme. Thus the English language teacher would be primarily responsible for training students in adapting macro linguistic skills to their specific purposes. As Chien and Hsu (2010) note, “ESP is well known for its learner-centered and content-based approach. Thus the ideal ESP teacher must not only be skilful in the English language, but also acquire the knowledge of a specific profession in order to provide an effective ESP course for the learners”. Practically such a teacher is seldom to be found in a regular university setting” (p.1885). As has been noted in other ESL settings, it has proved extremely difficult to recruit and retain teachers with such a broad range of competencies. It is essential, therefore, that those teachers be given further opportunities to enhance their skills to successfully deal with the challenges of teaching in the EGAP classroom. It is also important for teachers to be made aware of the wide range of needs of their students.

One major pragmatic challenge that has been noted in previous studies, (Evans and Green, 2000) which is pertinent to the present research as well, is that of responding to a range of needs given the limited contact hours allocated for English language teaching in the context of a large institution like the Open University. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that adult students who have competing demands on their time as they are balancing studies, jobs and family lives, are also not in a position to spend much time on face to face contact sessions. Given the multiplicity of needs that are posited by students and staff, and the limitations faced by students, it is essential that needs be prioritized in deciding which particular needs would be addressed by the proposed EGAP programme in the limited time span that is

allocated. It is also important to revise materials further in a manner that fosters independent learning to a great extent.

Coping with these challenges would require academic staff in English language teaching department to re-examine the resources and opportunities that are currently available. Flexibility in learning through online virtual language courses would be an ideal solution for meeting the wide variety of needs of EAP students learning in the Distance Mode. A blended mode of delivery which comprises both the traditional forms such as printed course material along with online elements could be initially adopted as a possible solution. However, limited/no access to internet in rural areas, high costs in broadband connection, and non-familiarity with ICT (especially the older students) may affect student participation in such courses. Time constraints and lack of resource personnel with e-confidence for course design are major challenges in achieving this goal. Most of the students lack transversal competencies i.e. goal setting, self-monitoring, reflection and other learning to learn skills and strategies which make them unprepared to cope with the challenges in using their L2 for higher education, especially in a Distance Education environment. Hence, future courses in EAP need to focus on these issues as well which may support the acculturation process of students in the new environment.

## References

- Alexander, O., Argent, S. & Spencer, J. (2008). *EAP Essentials: A teacher's guide to principles and practice*. Reading: Garnet.
- Belcher, D. (2006). English for specific purposes: Teaching to perceived needs and imagined futures in worlds of work, study, and everyday life. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 133–156.
- Benesch, S. (1996). Needs Analysis and Curriculum Development in EAP: An Example of a Critical Approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 723–738. doi: 10.2307/3587931
- Benesch, S. (2001) *Critical English for Academic Purposes: Theory, Politics and Practice*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

- Benesch, S. (2009). Theorizing and practicing critical English for academic purposes. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 8, 81-85.
- Bruce, I. (2005). Syllabus design for general EAP writing courses: A cognitive approach. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 4(3), 239-256.
- Canagarajah, S. (2002). *Critical academic writing and multilingual students*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.
- Chien, C. & Hsu, M. (2010) A case study of incorporating ESP instruction into the university English course. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 9, 1885-1888.
- Chostelidou, D. (2010). A needs analysis approach to ESP syllabus design in Greek tertiary education: a descriptive account of student needs. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2, (2), 4507-4512
- Chowdhury, T. A. & Haider, M. Z. (2012). A need-based evaluation of the EAP courses for the pharmacy students in the University of Asia Pacific (UAP), Bangladesh. *Asian Social Science* 8 (15). doi:10.5539/ass.v8n15p93
- Dooley, T. (2010). Facilitating writing from sources: A focus on both process and product. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 1-16.
- Dudley-Evans, T. & St. John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, V. & Ran, A. (2006). Meeting the needs of Chinese students in British higher education. Reading, UK: University of Reading.
- Evans, S. & Green, C. (2007). Why EAP is necessary: A survey of Hong Kong Tertiary students. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 3-17.

- Fox, J. D. (2009). Moderating top-down policy impact and supporting EAP curricular renewal: Exploring the potential of diagnostic assessment. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 8, 26-42.
- Fox, J., Cheng, L., Berman, R., Song, X., & Myles, J. (2006). Costs and benefits: English for academic purposes instruction in Canadian universities. *Carleton papers in Applied Linguistics*.
- Freedman, A. (1999). Beyond the text: towards understanding the teaching and learning of genres. *Teaching issues. TESOL Quarterly*, 4, 764-767.
- Hansen, J. (2000). Interactional conflicts among audience, purpose, and content knowledge in the acquisition of academic literacy in an EAP course. *Written Communication*, 7, 27-52.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2002) Specificity Revisited: How far should we go now? *English for Specific Purposes*, 21, 385–395.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: social interactions in academic writing*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Mazdaysana, G. & Tahririan, M. H. (2008). Developing a profile of the ESP needs of Iranian students: the case of students of nursing and midwifery. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7, 277-289.
- Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (1997). Vulgar pragmatism, critical pragmatism, and EAP. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16, 253–269.
- Pennycook, A. (1998). Borrowing others' words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. In V. Zamel and R. Spack (Eds.), *Negotiating academic literacies* (pp. 265-292). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Perera, K. (2006). Laying the Foundations: Language Planning in the ELTU. In H. Ratwatte & S. Herath (Eds.) *English in the Multilingual Environment, Selected papers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> SLELTA international Conference*, Colombo: SLELTA
- Philipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Ratwatte, H. & Herath, S. (Eds.) *English in the Multilingual Environment, Selected papers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> SLELTA international Conference*, SLELTA: Colombo.
- Ranasinghe, S. & Ranasinghe, S.B. (2006). Perceptions of university students on the role of English language proficiency in career choice and Mobility. In H. Ratwatte (Ed.) *VISTAS. Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. The Open University of Sri Lanka: Nawala.
- Raheem, R., Medawattegedera, V., & Miththapala, G. (2007). International language assessment and local performance: the case of the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine. *OUSL Journal*, 4, 3-16.
- Raheem, R., & Wijetunge, L. D. L. (2009). *Investigating undergraduate English language proficiency in the Sri Lankan university system*. Paper presented at the Annual Academic Sessions of the Open University of Sri Lanka, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nawala.
- Samuda, V. (2001). Guiding relationships between form and meaning during task performance: the role of the teaching. In M. Bygate, P. Skehan, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing* (pp. 119e140). Essex, UK: Longman.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Vidanapathirana, U. (2009). *Impact of language barriers on the progress of learners following the BA degree programme - A study on access, equity and diversity*. Nawala: The Open University of Sri Lanka.

White, C. (2003). *Language learning in distance education*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Widdowson, H. G. (1983). *Learning purpose and language use*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.