

Exploring English as a Second Language Requirements of Performing Arts Undergraduates in Sri Lanka: Implications for Syllabus Revision

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Abstract: Needs analysis is considered a prerequisite for the development of a sustainable curriculum. This study shares the findings of a student survey conducted as part of a needs assessment conducted prior to the development of an English course for the first-year dance and drama undergraduates of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. Despite research being conducted to identify the English language learning needs of students in higher education only a limited number of studies have taken place with regard to ESL learners following the subject streams of performing arts. The main findings suggest that the study participants expect to develop English proficiency not with the primary intention of engaging in academic pursuits such as writing reports and research papers but rather to become effective communicators in the second language (L2) who can promote themselves as professionals in national and international arenas. Given the unique characteristics of performing arts students whose learning styles differ as a result of the experiential nature of the subjects they follow, students require an activity-based curriculum that focuses on the communicative approach to teaching ESL.

Keywords: Curriculum Design, Needs Analysis, Performing Arts Undergraduates, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

This study divulges the findings of a student survey that was part of a needs assessment conducted prior to the development of an English course for the first-year dance and drama undergraduates of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. These undergraduates can be considered as low proficient learners of English as their placement test marks reveal that the majority of them belong to either A1 (Beginner) or A2 (Elementary) levels as per the language proficiency benchmarks stipulated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) 2001.

As one of the main stages of initializing a curriculum revision, a student survey was conducted in order to decipher the most suitable framework for the proposed beginners level English as a Second Language (ESL) course. According to Chnagpeung and Pattanapichet (2023), "Needs analysis is an integral part of any course which is employed for designing the syllabus, developing materials, and determining teaching methods" (p. 51). Although ample studies have been conducted to identify the English language learning needs of students in higher education, a limited number of studies have taken place with regard to low-proficiency ESL learners; notably those following the subject streams of performing arts. Thus, this observation served as the primary impetus for engaging in this study.

Being a case study, it was limited to a particular context and focused on identifying the needs and perceptions of drama and dance undergraduates following an English proficiency course offered by the Department of English Language Teaching at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA), Sri Lanka. Therefore, any generalizations of the findings should be made with caution even though they can provide useful insights to educators teaching ESL to students following practical-oriented subject streams for their degree programmes or to ones in higher education who are struggling to develop English language skills.

There is no denying the fact that there are many common reasons why students want to become competent in the English language. These may be instrumental requirements such as obtaining good grades in English or using the English certification to procure jobs that require proficiency in English. This is in addition to the recognition that the English language is the international language of communication, trade, and research.

Nevertheless, studies on effective methods of teaching English have largely tended to leave out the specific differences in undergraduate expectations and needs for acquiring the language based on their language

standard and their subject specializations. Although studies have shown that when learners follow theory-oriented studies and/or engage in their studies through the English medium, their requirements for learning English are mainly for academic writing and reading purposes. Nevertheless, the undergraduates of the UVPA have expressed their need to develop English not with the primary intention of engaging in academic pursuits such as writing reports and research papers but rather to become effective communicators in the second language (L2) who can promote themselves as professional performing artists in national and international arenas. Therefore, when designing new ESL courses at the UVPA, the focus of the curriculum designers should not only be to develop their L2 proficiency but also to cater to their primary objectives of becoming fluent speakers of English.

At the Faculty of Dance and Drama where the analysis took place, almost all the courses are conducted in Sinhala medium. Despite the fact that English has been made a compulsory subject for the first and second years, what seems to have propelled these students to the English classes is the 80% attendance criterion rather than a genuine interest to learn it. As such, the main objective of conducting the study is to identify the language learning requirements of these undergraduates and also their perceptions about the existing course so as to improve it further.

In order to motivate the performing arts students to learn the English language and make the course more beneficial to them, conventional ESL course structures have to be rethought and redesigned in order to suit their context and requirements. Hence, this study was conducted in order to identify the ESL learning requirements of the target population to envisage a more effective and functionally-oriented English syllabus for Performing Arts students.

Based on the objectives for initiating the study, the following research questions posed were:

RQ 1. What are the needs and expectations of these students with regard to language learning in English classes?

RQ 2. What are the perceptions of the students regarding the existing ESL program?

A needs analysis aims to describe learners' perceptions and necessities prior to organizing a study programme. It is an indisputable fact that engaging in a needs analysis is one of the most fundamental requirements when establishing or revising a curriculum. Nation and Macalister (2010) stated that a comprehensive needs analysis exemplifies the students' already obtained knowledge and what should be taught. Consequently, this kind of analysis is a powerful tool that helps illuminate and validate the true needs of students. Moreover, it enables educators and practitioners to design a curriculum that bases the content of language courses on the needs, wants and interests of the learners (Lepetit & Cichocki, 2002). A needs analysis ties learning as thoroughly as possible to teaching (Grier, 2005), in addition, yet another advantage of conducting these types of studies is that they encourage educators and practitioners to provide better and more reachable sources for the students of the program concerned (Long, 2005).

A needs analysis can be carried out in a number of different ways which can be classified as either inductive (observations) or deductive (surveys) (Berwick, 1989). One of the most common methods of data collection for this type of analysis is to deploy a survey-type questionnaire that can provide quantitative data so as to draw a profile of the learners' needs, lacks, preferred learning styles and strategies. By conducting this type of study prior to syllabus design, it can provide a voice to the students who are key stakeholders in this whole process.

2. Materials and Methods

The study used the quantitative method for data gathering. A survey-type questionnaire was circulated among students some of whom voluntarily completed it. Since the perceptions of students who have already completed the year one English course were required if it was to be redesigned, the questionnaire was deployed among the second and third-year dance and drama undergraduates following an honours degree in performing arts at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA). Data were gathered through the use of the questionnaire regarding their attitudes, expectations, and, most of all, why and how they would like to learn the language. The sample collected was 215, out of which 24 were male students and 191 were female. Given that almost 82 percent of the student population is female, the notably larger number of women participants are to be expected.

Subsequently, percentages were calculated in order to tabulate the data. The purposive sampling method was used as the analysis was limited to data gathered from volunteer performing arts undergraduates at the Faculty of Dance and Drama of the UVPA. Whenever there were loopholes or ambiguities with regard to the responses obtained from the questionnaires, a few random interviews with students took place.

3. Results and Discussion

In order to discover how motivated the study sample was to learn the English language, a question was asked as to whether they would like to learn ESL. Significantly, although these students are taught using the medium of Sinhala and most of the reference books they have to use are also in their mother tongue, 97% still considered English as important quoting as the three main reasons for stating so to be: to get better employment opportunities, to communicate with speakers of other languages and to gain high social status, respectively.

With regard to the feedback obtained to find out what their perceptions are regarding the existing syllabus, certain questions were asked. Figure 1 presents the level of agreement expressed by the respondents regarding their perception of whether the existing English course was a success or not.

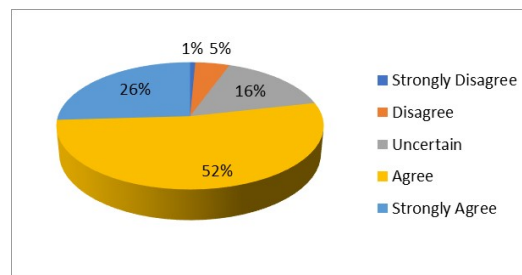


Figure 1: Respondents' perceptions of the existing year 1 English programme

We can note that the successfulness of the programme is agreed on by a majority of students although a quarter of them still feel that their expectations of following the course were not fulfilled. This implies that despite the satisfaction among students regarding the existing year 1 English programme, there is room for further improvement.

Since motivation for learning is a crucial prerequisite for second language acquisition, several statements were included in the survey so as to identify the sample population's levels of L2 motivation. According to the findings, 66% stated that they were highly motivated to develop their English skills, while 30% mentioned that they were motivated to do so. Only the remaining 4% indicated that they were somewhat motivated to learn the second language (L2). This is a highly significant finding as the success of any study programme depends heavily on the presence of student motivation. As Brown (2000:160) states: "It is easy in second language learning to claim that a learner will be successful with the proper motivation". The above argument is reinstated by Gardner (2006: 243) who claims that "If one is motivated, he/she has reasons for engaging in the relevant activities, expends effort, persists in the activities, attends to the tasks, shows the desire to achieve the goal, enjoys the activities, etc".

To understand what needs to be included in the proposed syllabus, respondents' preferences for learning various language skills were also evaluated. The fact that they have prioritized speech over the other macro language skills is mainly because the undergraduates of the Faculty of Dance and Drama largely end up as professional dancers and dramatists rather than individuals focused on engaging in further academic pursuits. This may be why the lowest preference was given to writing which scored only 11%. Therefore, communicating in English is seen as a key factor in obtaining and sustaining employment while societal requirements such as social prestige are also regarded as important for developing English. The finding is comparable to the study conducted by Haiyu (2022) whereby it was found that ESL learners prioritized the development of their speaking skills.

Reading and listening skills were placed as the second and third most preferred skills. It can be noted that the least preference was given to grammar and vocabulary development. Most importantly, when considering the tabulated data, almost all the students felt that the macro language skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar,

were either very important or important although the extent of the level of importance varied slightly with the exception of the marked preference attributed for speaking.

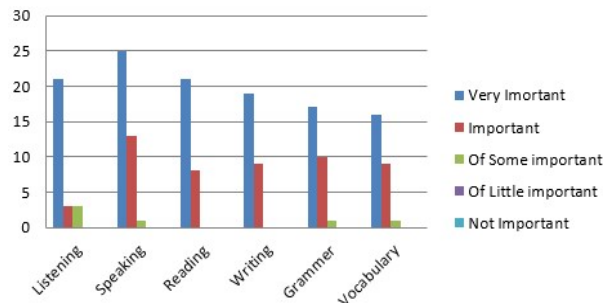


Figure 2: Respondents' preference for learning language skills, vocabulary and grammar

As can be observed from Figure 2, apart from speaking skills, the near equal distribution of students' language learning preferences clearly indicates that even though the main inclination is for developing English speech, the acquisition of other language skills is also considered essential. Therefore, as far as the pedagogical implications of the study are concerned, the communicative approach to syllabus design is possibly the most suitable for this particular course as it is grounded on the notion that learning language occurs through including activities that encourage students to communicate in authentic contexts. In this approach, fluency is favored over accuracy as the key requirement is to convey ideas meaningfully in real-life situations that require the use of the L2.

Yet another significant area that needs to be considered when designing an ESL course is to consider students' preferred education styles for optimal learning to take place. Based on the findings, these performing arts undergraduates ranked doing presentations as the most effective way of learning English. The fact that they preferred to do presentations also correlates with the fact that they wish to prioritize the development of their spoken communicative competencies. In addition, the students also identified the importance of doing individual exercises apart from acknowledging the potential of using group activities for learning ESL. Since performing arts subjects are based on physical movements involving happenings, doings, sensing, and becoming, this could be one main reason why the respondents prefer doing presentations more than the other methods for reinforcing learning.

Interestingly, a large number of students also believed that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can also play a crucial role in supporting them to develop English. Due to the rapid infiltration of information communication technologies into the education system within the past few years, it is no surprise that these digital natives are willing and attracted to the use of information communication technologies for language learning purposes. This is a noteworthy finding that signifies learners' need to be empowered through the sense of autonomy granted to them by the use of computer technologies which promotes ubiquitous learning not limited to the confines of a typical classroom context.

5. Conclusion

The overarching objective of this research was to conduct a needs analysis before conceptualizing a suitable framework for developing a new English course for level-one students following the dance and drama subject streams at the UVPA in Sri Lanka.

Given the unique characteristics of performing arts students whose unique learning styles differ as a result of the experiential nature of the subjects they follow, students require an activity-based curriculum that focuses on the communicative approach to teaching ESL. The macro language skills ought to be integrated into each module and not presented as isolated chunks of learning content that are covered without any interrelations. Proposed ESL activities and exercises should include more role-plays, improvisations, projects, group and individual presentations, drama-based activities, and gamified learning practices. This would align well with the study populations' creative, active, dynamic and expressive personalities.

When designing lesson material, students need to be exposed to day-to-day language use as well as contextually relevant material. Using such authentic material from their general and academic contexts can

connect with their artistically inclined educational propensities which in turn would enhance learner engagement. Themes related to music, theatre and dance can be included in lesson development. Moreover, activities such as interviews with artists, script writing, song composition, monologues, and promotional campaigns can be used as in-class tasks or even assessments. Such innovative techniques would invariably contribute to promoting learners' aspirations of gaining access to the global art community.

To sum up, it can be noted that when it comes to teaching performing arts students the English language, it is evident that more activity-based and communicative approaches to teaching the L2 are required. Moreover, the fact that they are receptive to technology-enhanced learning implies that autonomous learning practices can be encouraged so as to teach them the myriad benefits of online L2 learning including the advantages of ubiquitous learning, unlimited learning resources, and multimedia-enriched language input.

Finally, as ESL educators, what should be recognized is the fact that course development should be regarded as an ongoing, organic, and non-linear process that has to recognize the needs and interests of the learners as a top priority. After all, without generating a real necessity for learning an L2 among the students, an English programme is bound to fail. Since no notable research has been conducted with regard to the English language learning needs of students following practically-oriented degree programmes, future research can further expand on this study and contribute to the developing knowledge base.

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