English Needs of Indigenous Students at Public Universities

ShahrierPawanchik

School of Distance Education, UniversitiSains Malaysia
11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia
(shahrier@usm.my)

FatanHamamahYahaya

School of Distance Education, UniversitiSains Malaysia
11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia
(hamamah@usm.my)

Anton AbdulbasahKamil

School of Distance Education, UniversitiSains Malaysia
11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia
(anton@usm.my)

Abstract

This paper will focus on English language needs of indigenous students who are studying at Malaysia's public universities. These students (who are known in Malaysia as Orang Asli/OA) live in the peripheral and to them English is their third language. With the introduction of The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in 2002 for students in the upper secondary schools and matriculation programmes, it is necessary for the indigenous students at public universities to be proficient in the language too. Findings show that the OA students rate their abilities and knowledge of reading (score 95) and listening (score 97) as English language skills that they are capable of acquiring with ease. They feel that they have the abilities and knowledge to operate in these skills. However, the students are not receptive of language tests being conducted to gauge their writing, reading, speaking and listening skills. The students' lack of confidence leads to their anxiety of sitting for language tests. 95.7% of the students are not keen to find out their writing competency in English and 89.1% do not agree with oral test as a method of determining their progress of spoken English. Unless and until they change their attitude, English language acquisition will not improve. When asked about language skills in order of perceived importance that the OA students need for their other subjects, they identify firstly reading (56.1 %), speaking (52.5%), writing (30%) and lastly listening (27.5%).This research has provided insights for the lecturers who are teaching English at language centres in public universities and curriculum developers at the Ministry of Education to overcome the language difficulties faced by OA students.

Key words: needs, abilities, progress, skills

Introduction

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia introduced Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in 2002 with the objectives of consolidating and enhancing the English language proficiency of pre-university students so that at the tertiary level these students will be able to operate with ease in the language.

With the implementation of MUET, the Ministry foresees that graduating students will have a better edge in the job markets and also better prepared to meet the challenges of globalization. However, after eleven years of MUET, what we have is a situation where there is urgency on the need to improve students' proficiency in the language especially for indigenous (who are known as Orang Asli/OA) students at public universities. Unless and until these students are proficient in English, they will face difficulties in their studies because most text and reference books are all in English and the medium use in the internet is English.

Taking the cue from here, the researchers will investigate on English language needs of indigenous students at public universities. Findings of this research will provide insights for lecturers who are teaching English at language centres and curriculum developers at the Ministry of Education whether to revamp their present courses or design new courses that can meet the academic and social needs of these students.

This research starts with the premise that the decision to implement MUET, raises the issues of students' proficiency in English. This leads the researchers to investigate the following research questions:

i.   How do the students rate their English language abilities and knowledge?
ii.   How do the students like to find out their progress in English?
iii.   What are the English language skills in order of perceived importance that the students need?

Need analysis has been defined as the identification of difficulties and standard situations by observation of participants functioning in a target situation in conjunction with interviews and questionnaire (Basturkmen, 1998). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point that curriculum developers are interested in the question of what the learner lacks rather than needs that determine improving proficiency in English. It shows the gap in language proficiency will provide a better understanding of what are the learner's weaknesses that need to be addressed in order to improve proficiency.

Sysoyev(1999) uses the term students' analysis to reflect learners' possession or proficiency that is their current L2 level and secondly looks at what the learners want to achieve, their needs. The students' proficiency in L2 will improve with proper techniques in language teaching.

Vygotsky (1978) concept of Zone of Proximal Development covers two stages of proficiency level; in the first stage what the learner can do and in the second stage, what he can achieve with the help of another, more competent person. The gap between the stages is called Zone of Proximal Development.

Robinson (1991) provides insights into the pedagogic aspects of developing a curriculum tailored towards learners' needs. It should be a goal directed which means that language learning is not due to the interest on the language culture but for specific purposes. Thus the learning process must be based on needs analysis which specifies as close as possible to what exactly the learner needs.

According to Brindley (1989) needs can be divided into objective and subjective needs. The objective needs are derived from factual information about the learner and his usage of the language in real life situations. The learner's current language proficiency and difficulties are taken into consideration. However, the subjective needs refer to the learner's

wants and expectations. These are taken into consideration along with the language learning styles and strategies.

Nunan (1985) justifies needs analysis as 'Pedagogically, the most powerful argument in favour of a needs-based course is a motivational one…. One way of improving motivation is to orientate content towards those areas that interest learners most, and which are perceived by them as being more relevant.'

Wilkins (1974) however, states 'the first principle of a sound approach to language teaching is to know what the objectives of teaching are.' He also mentions that it is necessary to predict what kind of language skills will be of greatest value to the learner. So it implies that a preliminary analysis of the learner needs and expectations will be a prerequisite in any course design whether for general or specific purposes.

Mackay and Palmer (1981) find that many well intentioned programs have foundered because either no consideration was given to the actual use the learner intended to make of the language or because the list of uses drawn up by the course designer was based on imagination rather than an objective assessment of the learner's situation, and prove to be inaccurate and in many cases entirely inappropriate to his/her real needs.

From the review of related literature, the researchers gain information on improving students' proficiency in English and designing a new curriculum to meet the needs of the indigenous (Orang Asli) students.

Methodology

The methodology underlying this research is guided by the protocol of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and refined by Basturkmen (1998) model of needs analysis. It is both qualitative (exploratory interviews, class observations) and quantitative through the implementation of structured questionnaire. The researchers believe that information gathered from the questionnaire and triangulated with structured interviews with key informants, will permit considerable insights into the language needs of the students in this research. Such insights will make possible recommendations for inclusion in a course design.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire meant for the students is adapted along the lines put forward by Basturkmen (1998). The questionnaire is divided into four sections:-

Section A - Background. This section consists of ten questions. It will yield findings that relate to the students' personal background.

Section B – English Language Ability and Knowledge. This section consists of thirteen questions. Findings from this section will yield insights into the language competencies of the students.

Section C – English Language in University. Findings yielded by this section will show the students' English language needs.

Section D – English Language Instruction. This section will yield students' opinion of their present course contents.

Subjects

At the outset, the researchers have identified indigenous (Orang Asli) students who are studying at public universities in Malaysia. These Orang Asli (OA) students comprise of different sub-ethnic groups such as Gemelai, Jakun, MahMeri, Semai, Semoq, Beri, Temiar and Temuan. 48 students responded to this research.

Results

Information gathered from the questionnaire is tabulated into tables.

Table I: English language experience before entering university

Experience before entering university	%
English as subject	70.2
English medium school	12.8
Tuition for English	12.8
Lived abroad	4.2

Table II: Usage of English language

	Frequency	%
Use English in one case (only for studying)	29	61.7
Use English in two cases (studying + socialization/home)	16	34.0
Use English in more than two cases (studying + socialization + home)	2	4.3

The researchers find that 70.2 % of the students acquire English when the subject was taught during their primary and secondary schooling. And only 12.8 % attended English-medium schools and the rest (87.2%) attended national type schools. These students who live in the peripherals choose the schools that are within walking distance from their homes and most of them are national type schools. This explains the students' low proficiency in English because the medium of instruction in these national type schools is Malay and usage of English is limited during English lessons.

61.7% of OA students use English for studying and only 4.3% use the language for studying, socialization and at home. It can be deduced that the students study English for the sake of fulfilling the university language curriculum and passing the examination. Beyond the classrooms, the subject is treated in isolation.

Research Question 1: How do the students rate their English language abilities and knowledge?

Table III: Evaluation of Students' English language abilities and knowledge

	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Total score	Rank
Reading	9	31	8	95	1
Writing	3	28	17	110	5
Speaking	5	27	16	107	4
Listening	9	29	10	97	2
Grammar	0	28	19	113	7
General Vocabulary	1	32	14	107	4
Technical Vocabulary	0	30	17	111	6
Oral presentation	6	26	15	103	3

1 – Good　　　　2 – Satisfactory　　　3 – Unsatisfactory

From the information in Table III, it can be seen that the students rate reading (score 95) and listening (score 97) as skills that they are at ease. They feel that they have the abilities

61

and knowledge to operate in these skills. However, for grammar (score 113) and technical vocabulary (score 111) the students perceived them as difficult language components.

Research Question 2: How do the students like to find out their progress in English?

Table IV: Writing test set by the teacher

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	0	2	4.2	4.3	4.3
	1	45	93.8	95.7	100.0
	Total	47	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.1		
Total		48	100.0		

Table V: Writing assignment

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	0	11	22.9	23.9	23.9
	1	35	72.9	76.1	100.0
	Total	46	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.2		
Total		48	100.0		

Table IV shows 95.7% of the students are not keen to find out their English language progress by sitting for a writing test. And in relation to this information, findings in Table V show that 76. 1% of the students are not receptive to the idea of doing a writing assignment. It can be deduced that the students find writing difficult and the two suggested activities to gauge the students' progress are not acceptable to them.

Table VI: Speaking test set by the teacher

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	0	5	10.4	10.9	10.9
	1	41	85.4	89.1	100.0
	Total	46	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.2		
Total		48	100.0		

Table VII: Practising spoken English in real-life situations

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	0	2	4.2	4.3	4.3
	1	44	91.7	95.7	100.0
	Total	46	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.2		

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	0	2	4.2	4.3	4.3
	1	44	91.7	95.7	100.0
	Total	46	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.2		
Total		48	100.0		

From the findings shown in Table VI, the researchers are able to elucidate 89.1% of OA students are not in favour of a speaking test set by the teacher as a method of finding out the students' progress in English. This information correlates with Table VII which shows that 95.7% do not agree with practicing spoken English in real-life situations. The researchers deduce that the students are either too shy to speak English in public or they are unable to operate with ease in the language which is their third language. They have not acquired the language although they received thirteen years of formal education before coming to the universities. Although both the 'intrinsic and extrinsic motivations' had been given and yet the motivations had been unsuccessful in reaching the greater majority. (The Star Newspaper. Mac 6, 1998).

Table VIII: Checking progress by taping, listening to own voice

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	0	18	37.5	39.1	39.1
	1	28	58.3	60.9	100.0
	Total	46	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.2		
Total		48	100.0		

0 – Yes   1 – No

Table VIII shows a slight confidence, 39.1% of the students are quite receptive to the idea of checking their progress by taping and listening to their voices. However, the majority 60.9% are passive and not willing to check their own proficiency. Although this activity is self-conducted, the students are either shy to record and tape their own voices or lack confidence in the target language. Thus Tables IV – VIII show that the indigenous students are not keen to find out their progress, how much improvement in English have they achieved.

Research Question 3: What are the English language skills in order of perceived importance that the students need?

Table IX: Important Language Skills for the Students' Other Subjects

	Frequency	%	Valid %
Reading	23	47.9	56.1
Listening	11	22.9	27.5
Speaking	21	43.8	52.5
Writing	12	25.0	30.0

The researchers are able to make comparison on the most important skill in order of perceived importance that the OA students need for their other subjects. Table IX shows that the indigenous students perceived firstly reading (56.1 %), followed by speaking (52.5%),

writing (30%) and lastly listening (27.5%). It can be deduced that the students' first choice is reading because competency in this skill will help them comprehend better especially when reference books, articles and journals are in English and also the medium use in the internet is English.

Speaking is perceived as the next important skill because the ability to speak well will help them when asking questions during lecture, answering oral questions ask by lecturers, making oral presentations and also when attending interviews conducted by the private sector.

Thirdly is writing, it can be deduced that the students find writing less important for their other subjects because they are allowed to write their assignments and answer questions during examinations in the national language which is Malay. Again not much writing in English is required for technical reports. For the final examination, students are given the freedom to choose whether to answer the questions in English or Malay. Thus writing in English becomes less important.

Lastly, listening falls into the backstage because lectures are conducted in Malay and English receives its importance when expatriate lecturers use English in teaching. Thus the OA students do not feel the need to be competent in this skill and that is the reason why listening in English is treated as least important.

Thus findings of this research has provided insights for lecturers who are teaching English and curriculum developers on OA students' proficiency, and the need to revamp the present courses or design new English courses.

References

Basturkmen, H. (1998). Refining Procedures.The Internet TESL Journal. Vol. 36 No.4, Oct.-Dec. 1998.

Brindley, G. (1989).Needs Analysis and Objectives Setting in the Adult Migrant Education Program. Sydney, George Allen &Unwin Ltd.

Hutchinson, T. And Waters, A. (1987).English For Specific Purposes.A Learning – Centred Approach. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Mackay, R. and Palmer, J.D.(Eds.)(1981). Language for Specific Purposes: Programs Design and Evaluation, Rowley, Mass. Newbury House Publication.

Nunan, D. (1985).   Syllabus Design. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Nunan, D. (1992).   Research Methods in Language Learning. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Robinson, P.C. (1991). ESP Today.A Practitioner's Guide. London. Prentice Hall.

Sysoyev, P. V. (2000). Developing an English for Specific Purposes Course using a Learner Centered Approach: A Russian Experience. The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VI, No. 3, March 2000.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Mind and Society. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The Star Newspaper. Mac 6, 1998

Wilkins, D.A. (1974). Notional Syllabuses. London. Oxford University Press.