Investigating Iranian MA Students' Perceptions of their Academic English Language Needs, Abilities and Problems

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Abstract

Present article reports on findings of a preliminary study on English language needs of graduate students in Iran. A mixed method design i.e. questionnaire and interviews were used in the study. An academic skills questionnaire was administered at Isfahan State University to 260 randomly selected MA students from six faculties of Isfahan University namely humanities, engineering, psychology, sport sciences, management and science in order to determine which of the four English language skills i.e. reading, writing, speaking, or listening were most essential to the academic needs of students. In addition, the study looked at what academic sub-skills students expected to need in order to successfully complete their studies and a self assessment of their ability in using English in academic setting. The results of questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews revealed that speaking skill has been rated as the most important skill. Furthermore,   graduate students indicated a greater need for writing abstracts and, giving presentations in seminars. Generally, the study indicated that the present practice of EAP in the curriculum is not consistent with the perceived needs of students. It is hoped that the findings of this study would shed light on syllabus design and curriculum development for EAP programs in Iran.

*Key words***:** English Language needs*,* MA students, EAP*,* English Language ability.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the language teaching focus has been shifted from teachers to learners. As a result, learners needs have been considered pivotal in curriculum development." Up to the 1950s English language teaching was supported by an approach to syllabus design which focused on materials graded for their vocabulary level and linguistic difficulty. In fact English was taught through its structure and vocabulary", (Richards, 2001, p. 23). In the post method era, though, the language teaching center of attention changed from syllabus design to curriculum development and from teachers to learners. Richards (2001) goes on to suggest that at present time emphasis should be on learners' needs as the initial step in curriculum development. Once learners' needs were recognized, learning goals could be specified. The concern to make language courses more pertinent to learners' needs led to the growth of ESP. The key concern of ESP has been with needs analysis in an effort to make learners ready to communicate efficiently in the tasks presented by their study or work circumstances. Considering that EAP has emerged from the larger field of ESP (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002), it is not unexpected that needs analysis is also indispensable to an EAP approach to course design (Hamp-Lyons, 2001, cited in Tajino *et al.,* 2005). Kormos *et al.* (2002) believe that needs analysis can be a supportive instrument in the planning of course length, course intensity, methodology, and overall as any language planning condition.

One pioneer study of needs analysis is connected with the work of Munby (1978), who proposed one of the earliest models of needs analysis in ESP course design. The model focuses on two aspects of needs analysis; the procedures of identifying the target level communicative competence of the students, and procedures to turn the information gathered into an ESP syllabus. As Munby (1987) suggests, the rational behind investigating the learner's needs is to have a legitimate foundation from which to carry on to the specification of the special skills, forms, and functions vital for a specific purpose. Setting up a curriculum in this case not only involves identifying students' language needs, but "to enable them to critically examine and become active in shaping their own roles in it" (Auerbach 1995, p.15).

Another important issue in the development of recent approaches to curriculum development was the communicative approach to language teaching. Communicative

language theories hold that learners' needs should be defined in linguistic terms and communicative functions. Moreover, the language learner and his specific purpose for learning the target language have been focused, since language use and the language user have a major role in communicative language teaching. However, Deutch (2003) maintains that the implementation of needs analyses in general purpose English (GPE) courses has been problematic because students' needs are extensive and sometimes non-recognized. In fact, learner needs have been very important in all learner-centered approaches and the study of these needs known as needs analysis or needs assessment is one of the main rudiments of curriculum design. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) recommend a learning-centered approach to ESP. They believe that while other approaches devote too much attention to language needs, their approach puts much emphasis on how learners learn. Therefore they hold that a learning needs approach is the best way to lead learners from the starting point to the target situation.

Learner needs are viewed from two angles: target needs and learning needs. Target needs are defined as what the learner needs to perform in the target situation. Learning needs, on the other hand, refers to various factors, such as learners' socio-cultural and learning background, age, gender, background knowledge of specialized contents and English, and attitudes towards the English language and culture.

Hutchinson & Waters (1987) also emphasize that needs analysis be checked continuously. They also stress the importance of triangulation in data collection in order to be able to cope with the complexity of learners' target needs. Analysis of needs in this approach is well-supported by specialists in the field (see for example Nation, 2000; West, 1994). Today, few disagree with Grant and Stanton (2000, cited in Oanh, 2007) that learning needs assessment has an undeniable position in education and training and that it has many functions from helping to plan curriculum and diagnosing individual problems to offering individual feedback and educational intervention. In addition, Nunan (1988) supports the idea that determining the needs of language learners is the first step in designing curriculum. Therefore needs analysis is an issue of main concern for English courses, both for English as a second Language (ESL) and as a foreign language (EFL).

English has a fundamental role in the educational system of Iran. Nowadays, achieving success in academic studies of students is tied with their proficiency in English language. As such, pursuing to study in university without a good command of English seems very difficult. Therefore, the importance of learning English for college students is out of question. Many attempts have been made for improving English language teaching and learning in Iran. However as Eslami (2010) maintains, in spite of the high level of investment in EAP programs in Iran, there are inadequate studies regarding the efficiency of these programs from learners' and instructors' perspectives. She goes on to suggest that existing EAP practice is mainly ad-hoc, lacking in course design, teacher education, enough teaching time, and appropriate assessment. The challenges will inevitably revolve around developing accurate specific-purpose curriculum based on learners' needs which would provide the appropriate framework for language programs. Furthermore, learners' and teachers' opinions on the success of these programs and problems faced have not been studied.

As far as researchers are informed, little research has been done in Iran on academic needs of college students. In addition, there is no research investigating the needs of MA students. Present study is an attempt to fill the gap in this area.

2. Background

The notion of needs analysis first emerged in 1920 by Michael West in India. Later with the growth of science and technology and the interest for developing ESP courses, it was introduced into language teaching. The concept was taken up enthusiastically in the 1970s by the council of Europe which was simultaneous with the spread of ESP (Munby's model, 1987). By the 1990s, in many countries needs analysis appeared in language teaching. Today, it is widely believed that needs analysis is a prerequisite to the specification of any language course objectives. However, as Richterich (1983) argues the concept of language needs has always been vague and needs to be elucidated. On the whole, different conceptions of needs analysis exist and each approaches the concept from a different point of view. Berwick (1989) suggests providing an operational definition of needs for each situation because its elements change in accordance with the ideals of the evaluator or prominent features of an educational system. Similarly, Dudley-

Evans and John (1998), too, hold that needs have been defined using a puzzling plethora of terms. For example objective and perceived needs have been introduced to describe needs as resulting by outsiders from facts while subjective and felt needs are derived from insiders and match with cognitive and affective factors. Likewise, product-oriented needs derive from the goal or target situation and process-oriented needs derive from the learning situation. Today's concept of needs analysis, however, includes aspects of all these approaches and a variety of actions can be done in conducting needs analysis to achieve information from the people about whom data will be gathered. Lytle (1988) considers the evaluation of learners from the individual learners' perspective to be a fundamental element of any educational program that can be useful for both teachers and learners.

Many studies have been conducted around the world regarding academic needs. An area of research explored frequently in investigations which are exemplified by attempts to determine which language skills were considered most essential to non native speakers' success in their academic fields. In a large scale study, Chan (2001) investigated the English language needs of students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University based on a questionnaire survey. The study aimed at identifying 701 tertiary learners' perceptions of their language needs and wants and also discovering self-assessment of students of their own competence in particular skills in the academic, professional, and social domains. This study revealed that students have explicit ideas about their abilities in the different language skills, and they are able to assess the importance of connected sub-skills to their academic study, future occupation, and social life.

Kormos et *al.* (2002) investigated the language needs of English majors in Hungary. 279 students majoring in English language, literature, and TESOL were administered a questionnaire. The participants were mainly students in the last 2 years of their university studies. The same questionnaire was also completed by 80 students who graduated from one of the universities in Hungary in the past 5 years. The results revealed that students, during their university studies, apply English mainly for academic purposes. The most vital functions for English majors in their future profession appear to be expressing their views, reading texts on the Internet, talking with non-native speakers, writing e-mails,

giving explanations and instructions, and translating oral and written English in a range of situations. There were no significant differences between students at different universities and in different years of study.

In another study Evans & Green (2007) investigated the language problems of Cantonese-speaking students at Hong Kong's largest English-medium university. In a large scale survey, 5000 undergraduates from all 26 departments in the university were administered a questionnaire. The results suggest that a significant percentage of the subjects have difficulties when studying content subjects through the medium of English. In addition it was found that students' problems center on academic writing and academic speaking. The findings also indicate that students' receptive and productive vocabularies are not enough for them to be successful in academic studies. Academic listening, however, was found to present students with fewer difficulties than the other three skills.

Yet in another study Oanh (2007) examined two EAP programs at two universities in New Zealand and Vietnam to see if needs analysis has any place in these two programs. Findings suggest that student needs analysis was taken into account in both of the programs; however, the level of focus and practice was different between the two. In the New Zealand case, needs analysis was one of the main elements of the program and was conducted through a series of systematic data collection tools. In contrast, in the Vietnamese case, students' needs were subjectively decided by the course designers in informal exchanges with students or based on teachers' personal observation and experience.

Tahririan & Mazdayasna (2008) investigated the English language learning needs of Iranian undergraduate nursing and midwifery students. 681 undergraduate students and 168 subject-specific instructors participated in the survey. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data indicated that the majority of the students perceived that they required mastering the English language before they attended their ESP courses since they needed to use English material to study their subject. Some of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with the method of evaluation and also teaching methodology. Likewise instructors were not satisfied with students' English proficiency. The authors believed that EAP program is inadequate in preparing students for their studies due to lack of attention to learning needs.

More recently Chostelidou (2010) elaborated on a needs analysis project which was conducted in the Greek tertiary education. The project aimed to recognize the needs of a target group of learners and introduce needs-based course design. The need for a flexible approach to ESP syllabus design with an emphasis on both the receptive and productive skills is stressed. As a result, the needs-based syllabus design is anticipated to reflect the participant needs in terms of skills at both macro and micro levels.

Finally in a study in Iranian context, Eslami (2010) reported the perception that EAP students and instructors have of the problematic areas in EAP programs in Iran. A total of 693 EAP students majoring in different academic disciplines and 37 instructors participated in this study. The data incorporated respondents' perception of the importance of challenging areas in EAP programs. The results show discrepancy between the perceptions of EAP learners in different academic fields and between learners and instructors. The results of the study hold the view that the students need to improve their general proficiency in English. Students' low level of language proficiency was believed to be more problematic by students in humanities and engineering than medicine. Inadequate vocabulary knowledge, slow reading pace, poor listening, speaking, writing and reading comprehension, and boring classes were among problematic areas for students.

As it can be inferred from literature, researches on needs analysis mainly investigate needs of undergraduate students. As mentioned before, this is the first attempt which investigates Iranian MA students' English language needs and abilities.

Present Study

Research questions

The current survey project regarding academic needs and abilities of graduate students strives to answer the following questions

1. What are MA students' perceptions of their language needs in academic setting?

2. How do MA students rate their competence in terms of four language skills and sub-skills i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening?

3. Are there any significant differences between students' responses with regard to their academic discipline?

4. Is there any correspondence between students' perceived needs and present focus of EAP program in Iran?

3. Methodology

3. 1. Participants

Participants of the study were 260 MA students from six faculties of Isfahan university namely humanities, engineering, psychology, sport sciences, management and science. Their ages ranged between 22 and 35 .They had studied English for 8 years in formal context. They were 200 males and 60 females.

3.2. Settings and procedures

The study took place during fall semester of 2007 in Isfahan University. This University is located in Isfahan province. It is one of the biggest universities in Iran in terms of population. A large number of students study in this university. The population is from a variety of geographical places.

2.2.1. Questionnaire

Two instruments were used for collecting the data; Questionnaire and interview. The major instrument used to assess the language learning needs of MA students was a questionnaire. The major benefit of questionnaires is that information can be collected from a large quantity of samples in a convenient manner within a short period of time. However, questionnaire used must be both valid and reliable. As such, several methods were utilized in preparing the questionnaire in order to guarantee its reliability and validity. The likert-type questionnaire was adopted from that of Chan (2003). We tried to design the questionnaire in a simple style to avoid boredom on part of the respondents. As it was a preliminary study, we used general terms in the questionnaire. It was consisted of two main parts covering items regarding four skills and sub-skills. Students were required to answer on a four-point likert-scale. One part was allocated to items

regarding students' perceptions of four skills, sub skills and one part to students' self assessment of their abilities. The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Persian to prevent any misunderstanding on part of the respondents. These categories together with those found in the literature were incorporated in the questionnaire. After we compiled the first version of the questionnaire, it was subjected to measures of validity and reliability. In order to make sure that the respondents construe the questions in the same way as anticipated and that they fully understand the questions, think aloud technique was applied. Ten students from the population were asked to report what they understood i.e. think aloud while responding the questionnaire. Based on reports of students on their understanding of the items, some items were modified or reworded. For checking the reliability of the questionnaire, Chronbach Alpha reliability was applied. Then some of the items were either omitted or reworded.

The Cronbach coefficients for the questionnaire yielded the following results questions on reading comprehension, $\alpha=0.70$, Listening: $\alpha=0.82$, Speaking: $\alpha=0.74$, Writing: $\alpha=0.73$). The results of Cronbach coefficient in self assessment of the part three of the questionnaire yielded the following results, reading comprehension, $\alpha=0.87$, Listening: $\alpha=0.93$, Speaking: $\alpha=0.88$, Writing: $\alpha=0.93$.

The final version of the questionnaire yielded the overall reliability of $\alpha=0.94$ consisted of three main sections. The questionnaire was divided into three sections namely questions regarding.

1. Demographic information

2. Perceptions of language needs

3. Perceptions of language ability.

The questionnaires were distributed in students' dormitories in order to increase the rate of participation and return by respondents. Students were more relaxed in dormitories; therefore they filled the questionnaires with more attention.

3.2.2. Interviews

Some semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 of respondents in order to assess the depth of students' ideas and answers. Every interview lasted about one hour. The students were very interested in answering questions. Sometimes they raised some

topics related to English teaching. They were asked about their experience with EAP in their academic studies. In addition, there were questions regarding the needs of learners and the rationale behind their responses. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were analyzed with qualitative methods. In the next run, the common patterns among students' answers in interviews were identified and extracted

3.4. Analysis

The responses of participants to questionnaire items were coded and analyzed. Statistical software package SPSS for Windows (Version 13) was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics was applied to different items of the survey. Also One Way analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was run to see whether there were significant differences across different disciplines regarding students' self-perceptions and self rating of their ability.

4. Results

In this section the results of the data analysis are presented in relation to the research questions about students' needs and abilities.

Research question 1: What are graduate students perceptions of their language needs in an academic setting?
Students' perceptions of their needs

The results of the present study revealed that students have clear understanding of their needs and are able to rate their English language ability. Results of the students' perceptions of their needs are presented in table 1.

Sub-skills	Very Important %	Important %	Some how Important %	Un Important %	Mean	. Standard deviation
Reading						
1.Internet texts	66.2	10.8	17.4	5.0	3.7730	52602
2. Books	62.7	26.1	9.9	1.2	3.4965	.78033
3. Journals	54.0	29.2	15.5	1.2	3.3333	.87560
4. Newspapers	20.5	25.5	42.9	11.2	2.3333	1.07349
5. Advertisements	13.0	19.9	47.2	19.9	1.9220	1.01468
Listening						
1. Movie	42.0	36.0	18.6	2.5	3.0993	1.01633
2. Discussions	46.6	29.8	20.5	3.1	3.0851	1.13067
3. Educational CD	36.6	39.1	23.0	1.9	3.0638	.86365
4. Seminars	38.5	36.0	22.4	3.1	2.9787	1.01043
5. TV programs	29.8	39.8	25.5	5.0	2.7943	1.03176
6. Radio	21.7	28.6	36.6	13.0	2.3121	1.14726
Speaking						
1. Presentation in seminars	68.3	22.4	8.1	1.2	3.5106	.85871 .
2.Talking with specialists	55.9	29.2	13.7	1.2	3.3830	85071
Writing						
1. Abstract	61.5	29.2	8.1	1.2	3.4610	.72228
2. E-mails	55.3	26.7	15.5	2.5	3.2837	.85629
3. Exercises	34.2	48.4	12.4	5.0	3.0284	.90193
4. Letters	41.0	30.4	23	5.6	2.9291	.99028
5. Report	32.9	39.8	24.8	2.5	2.9149	1.03847
6. Exams	30.4	46.6	18.0	5.0	2.8440	.92801
7. Fax	31.1	26.1	35.5	9.3	2.7447	2.88197
8. Chat	31.7	23.6	33.5	11.2	2.4965	1.18094
9. CV	36.0	24.8	32.3	6.8	2.4184	1.44002

Table 1: MA students' perceptions of their English language needs in an academic setting

The overall frequencies in response to items which asked students about perceptions of their needs indicate that 77 % of the respondents felt reading texts on the internet is very important or important for their academic career (M= 3.77). Reading textbooks (M=3.49), journal articles (M=3. 3.33), newspapers (M= 2.33), and advertisements (M=1.92) follow internet texts respectively. Respondents believed that advertisements have the least importance in their academic studies.

In listening comprehension part, 78% of respondents perceived that listening to movies is important or very important in educational life. After movies, class discussions (M= 3.08), educational CDs (M=3.06), and seminars (M= 2.97) reported by the students as the most important subskills respectively. Listening to radio was considered by the respondents as the least important subskill in listening comprehension (M= 2.31).

In speaking part, 90% of respondents believed that presentation in seminars in English is important or very important in academic education. After that respondents believed that talking with specialist is very important (M= 3.38).

In writing part, 90% of respondents believed that writing abstracts is important or very important for their career. After writing abstracts, e mail (M=3.28), writing exercises (M= 3.02), letter (M= 2.92) report (M=2.91), exam (M= 2.84), fax (M= 2.74), chat (2.49), and CV (M= 2.41) were considered important by respondents respectively.

Research question 2: How do graduate students rate their competence in terms of four language skills i.e. Reading, writing, speaking and listening?

Students' self rating of their abilities

The results of students' self ratings of their abilities are presented in table 2. After internet texts, students perceived that textbooks (M=2.31), journal articles (M= 2.09), newspapers (M=1.79), and advertisement (M= 1.75) are in the next rank of ability.

Sub-skills	Very Good %	Good %	Average %	Poor %	Mean	Standard Deviation
Reading						
1.Internet texts	26.7	35.4	32.3	5.6	2.6809	.98792
2. Books	14.9	36.0	35.4	13.7	2.3191	.96599
3. Journals	13.0	29.8	36.6	20.5	2.0922	1.02051
4. Newspapers	8.1	21.7	44.1	26.1	1.7943	.96745
5. Advertisements	6.8	22.4	39.1	31.7	1.7518	.98674
Listening						
1.Movie	16.1	25.5	26.7	31.7	2.0000	1.07676
2. Educational CD	12.4	24.2	34.2	29.2	1.9496	1.01670
3.Discussions	14.3	25.5	29.8	30.4	1.9424	1.05480
4.TV programs	12.4	24.8	30.4	32.3	1.8633	1.00867
5.Seminar	11.2	18.6	32.9	37.3	1.5971	1.00520
6.Radio	12.4	18.6	31.7	37.3	1.5683	1.07035
Speaking						
1. Talking with specialists	16.1	12.4	39.8	31.7	1.3885	1.16414
2. Presentation in seminars	12.4	9.9	39.8	31.7	1.3453	1.07483
Writing						
1. Exercises	20.5	30.4	35.4	13.7	2.2950	1.09976
2. Mails	20.5	23.0	36.0	20.5	2.1223	1.13865
3. Exams	15.5	31.1	34.2	19.3	2.1151	1.09067
4. Chat	13.7	23.6	42.2	20.5	1.8921	1.07468
5. Abstracts	13.0	24.8	35.4	26.7	1.8705	1.06209
6. Letters	13.7	18.6	41.6	26.1	1.7410	1.07230
7. Reports	11.2	18.6	41.0	29.2	1.6906	.98429
8. Faxes	10.6	13.7	47.8	28.0	1.4820	1.00255
9. CV	10.6	14.9	46.0	28.6	1.4460	1.09791

Table 2: MA students' self ratings of their English language ability in an academic setting

As for listening comprehension, respondents self rating of their listening comprehension revealed that they rated themselves mostly proficient in listening to movies (M=2.00), educational CDs (M=1.94) class discussions (M=1.94), TV programs (M=1.86), and seminars (M= 1.59) respectively. Listening to radio was considered to be the most difficult sub skill for respondents (M=1.56).

The results of speaking ability part revealed that 77% of respondents believed that they were average or poor in talking with specialists in seminars and 70% believed that they were average or poor in presentation in seminars.

As For the writing sub-skills, the results showed that 50% of respondents believed that they were good or very good in writing exercises (M= 2.29), After writing exercises, students rated themselves competent in writing e mails (M= 2.29), exam (M= 2.11), chat(1.89) , abstracts(M=1.87), letter(m=1.74), report(M=1.69), , fax(1.48), , and resume (M= 1.44) were considered respectively.

Research question 3. Is there any significant difference between students' responses with regard to their academic discipline?

As it can be seen from the table 3, there aren't any significant differences between students of different disciplines in terms of their responses to different parts of the questionnaire (p > 0.05) i.e. academic discipline doesn't affect the students' responses to questionnaire. Therefore, it can be concluded that students had similar needs to a high degree and no matter what their discipline is, they have close perceptions regarding different needs and abilities.

ANOVA		Sum of squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Reading importance	Between groups	118.686	2	59.343		
	Within groups	3239.1156	158	20.51	2.895	.058
	Total	3357.801	160			
Listening Importance	Between groups	75.800	2	37.900		
	Within groups	6168.548	158	39.041	.971	.381
	Total	6244.348	160			
Speaking Importance	Between groups	12.448	2	6.224		
	Within groups	513.726	158	3.251	1.914	.151
	Total	526.174	160			
Writing Importance	Between groups	537.452	2	268.726		
	Within groups	15186.238	158	96.115	2.796	.064
	Total	15723.689	160			
Reading Ability	Between groups	12.151	2	6.075		
	Within groups	3164.893	158	20.031	.303	.739
	Total	3177.043	160			
Listening Ability	Between groups	42.696	2	21.348		
	Within groups	4968.147	156	31.847	.670	.513
	Total	5010.843	158			
Speaking Ability	Between groups	10.971	2	5.486		
	Within groups	620.588	156	3.987	1.379	.255
	Total	631.560	158			
Writing Ability	Between groups	98.111	2	49.055		
	Within groups	11977.663	156	76.780	.639	.529
	Total	12075.774	158			

Table 3: ANOVA on students' perceptions regarding their needs and abilities taking their disciplines into account

Research question 4. Is there any correspondence between students' perceived needs and present EAP program in Iran?

Considering the results of the study, students perceived that speaking: M=3.44, reading comprehension, M=2.97, Listening, M=2.88, Writing: M =1.85). The research results confirmed that the present practice of EAP in the curriculum is not consistent with the perceived needs of students since students tend to use English mainly for communication purposes i.e. speaking skill whereas in Iran EAP program, the primary focus is on reading comprehension. In addition, students' interviews confirm this inference.

Interviews

The results of interviews with twenty students who majored in different disciplines (e.g. Chemistry, Law, management and etc.) showed some interesting findings regarding EAP programs and students' expectations regarding their studies. We tried to obtain some information regarding students' problems in academic setting. Most of the interviewees maintained that they had difficulty in speaking English and this made them very disappointed. They maintained that learning a language is associated with communication but they are not able to speak English and communicate with foreigners. One of the interviewees maintained.

> *In a conference on chemistry, I participated. There was a presenter from England. He was an expert in the area which I was working for my thesis. I had a lot of questions to ask him. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to make him understand me. This made me very disappointed.(one of the interviews).*
>
> (Reza)

Almost all students were very interested in speaking English. They even asked the researchers how to improve their English. They mentioned that they were highly motivated to learn English though they didn't know where to start. One of them asked one of the researchers.

> *How can I learn to speak English? Is there any special program? Are there*
> *useful textbooks and CDs in this regard*? (Maryam)

Most interviewees believed that their problems in speaking and writing English were due to inefficiency of secondary and high school programs. They associated this problem to limited time of English teaching. They believed that the time of English teaching should be increased in the curriculum in order to help students improve their English.

> *I didn't like English from high school because our teacher just made some*
> *points about grammar and he didn't speak even a word in English.*

It was very surprising to me that a large number of respondents had selected listening to movies as the most important sub skill in listening. As such, I asked why did they selected movies? The answer was very interesting. They believed that watching movies helps them improve their listening comprehension and consequently speak English.

> *I like movies very much. They help me understand spoken English. When I*
> *understand a part of movie in English, it makes me excited and gives me*
> *confidence. Watching movies make me feel, I'm learning English.*
> *(Mohsen)*

The experience of students with English had many points. The respondents were not satisfied with the curriculum and believed that this type of instruction can not help them a lot. Whereas they maintained that they were not proficient in speaking, they believed that they could read texts related to their disciplines easily.

> *Last summer, my abstract was accepted to be included in a program of an*
> *international conference in Turkey. Unfortunately, I couldn't present there*
> *because the language of the conference of English .(Parya)*

Two of the interviewees maintained that they couldn't publish their articles due to deficiency in writing. They maintained that they had a very novel article but they couldn't translate them into English.

> *I sometimes write some articles which seem to be interesting for an international audience. However, due to drawbacks in my English proficiency, I publish them in local journals.(Bardia).*

Most of the interviewees believed that present EAP program needs substantial revision in the process and materials. They considered that a special attention must be paid to students' productive skills i.e. speaking and writing.

> *I have problems when sending e-mails to scholars of our field; I don't know how to start and end my e-mail message. Sometimes they can't make out my intention. (Javad).*

Also most of the interviews hold that the time allotted to English teaching is not enough for students to develop their proficiency. Also they maintained that for pursuing their higher education, they need English.

> *Having a good command of English is a prerequisite for entering PhD programs. Although, I'm proficient in my field o study, I couldn't pass this exam due to problems in English language proficiency.* (Saman).

To sum up, students considered English important and had problems in communicational skills especially speaking.

5. Discussion

This study investigated MA students' perceptions of their academic English language needs. It also explored students' self rating of their abilities in terms of four skills i.e., writing, reading, speaking and listening. Several important issues and specific

pedagogical suggestions for EAP course planning and material development have emerged from the current study. These suggestions will help EAP material developers for designing curriculum.

In line with previous research (e.g. Tahririan & Mazdayasna, 2008; Eslami, 2010), this study confirmed that the present practice of EAP in the curriculum is not consistent with the perceived needs of students since students tend to use English mainly for communication purposes i.e. speaking skill whereas in EAP program of Iran, the primary focus is on reading comprehension. Although speaking skill was rated very important by respondents, more than 70% of the students rated themselves poor or average in this skill. This may be due to EFL in Iran in that students do not have exposure to native speakers in order to improve their speaking skill. Moreover, there is no practice of speaking i.e. there is no part allocated to this skill within the curriculum of Universities. This makes it necessary that speaking skill has to be taught

In the area of speaking, the importance of presentation in seminars and talking with specialists has been confirmed. The results showed that a special attention must be devoted to these sub-skills. Similarly, for the curriculum designers, this means that it is essential to plan classes with the aim of improving students' communication skills like speaking. This can be done in the regular classes of students from secondary level up to higher levels or extracurricular activities be planned for teaching speaking.

Another skill which needs special attention is writing skill. As most of the students mentioned in the interviews, they have many problems when writing articles in English. It would be very helpful to include some special writing courses in the curriculum of MA students in order to compensate for their lacks in this skill. Regarding writing sub-skills, more than 90% of respondents believed that writing abstracts was important or very important for their academic studies. However, more than 62% of respondents rated themselves poor or average in writing abstracts. All of the students are required to write an English abstract for their thesis. In addition, writing English abstracts is mandatory even for submitting to Persian journals. As some of the students maintained that they have problems while they are going to write an article in English in order to be submitted to English journals, especial attention must be devoted to this part. This can be done in

EAP/ESP classes. Of course, present time for EAP classes is very limited and it is not practical to do

With regard to students' self rating of their ability, reading skill was considered as a skill that students felt more proficient at. This can be due to the fact that in educational system of Iran the focus of English teaching is on reading comprehension from secondary levels up to Ph. D. levels. This focus on reading might have developed the proficiency of students to be superior to other skills i.e. listening, speaking and writing. Also students rated themselves mostly poor in speaking skill. This can be largely due to lack of special attention to this skill in the curriculum.

Respondents reported that listening was considered by most of the respondents to be important. This is obviously needed when the students listen to movies and lectures in seminars. In addition, it is useful for those who wish to pursue postgraduate studies at foreign universities,

Regarding the third question investigating the role of students' discipline in their perceptions, there are not any significant differences between different disciplines in terms of their responses to different parts of the questionnaire i.e. academic discipline does not affect the students' responses to questionnaire.

All in all, this preliminary study implies that EAP program in Iran should be revised in order to be consistent with the perceptions of students. Furthermore, the time allocated to English language classes must be extended in order to provide more opportunities for students to learn and practice English language in their studies.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that learners' needs should be taken into account in the EAP curriculum in Iran. Students' perceived that speaking is the most important skill in their academic studies. They rated themselves mostly proficient in reading. In addition, there were not significant differences between students' perceptions taking their disciplines into account. Curriculum developers should pay a special attention to conversational and communicational needs of the learners as they are going to publish or present in international journals and conferences. As for short-term programs, some workshops which focus on sub-skills like writing abstracts or e-mails or conversational

skills can be very effective in that they can meet some needs of the learners in a short period of time. As long-term programs, some changes should be made in the general orientation of EAP and ESP programs based on real needs of learners.

It must be noted that as it was not practical for researchers to administer the questionnaire to professors; It would be promising to take the professors' opinions into account and compare the ideas. Moreover, since this study took place in University of Isfahan, care must be exercised in generalizing the findings to other situations. It would be promising to administer the study on a larger sample in other universities in order to shed more light on needs of learners in EAP program.

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