

A Systematic Language Need Analysis of the Undergraduate Learners with Special Reference to the Syllabus of General English, Manipur University, India

First Author-

Dr Aman Shahni

Assistant Professor

GLA University, Mathura

aman.shahni@gmail.com/aman.shahni@gla.ac.in

Second Author-

Dr. Jaya Sharma

Assistant Professor(English)

GLA University, Mathura

jaya.sharma@gla.ac.in

Abstract

The requirement to conduct a Language Needs Analysis before framing a syllabus or curriculum is universally accepted in the field of education. Although this practice is suggested and researched widely, most of the time it is not practically applied before or during the process of framing a syllabus. In many cases, learners' language needs may be relatively easy to determine, particularly if the learners need language for specific purposes. But, in other cases, the learners' needs may not be immediate. However, even though the students may not have any immediate perception of needs, curriculum planners will generally have consulted the related stakeholders to find out what level of knowledge of English they expect college graduates to achieve. Needs analysis include the study of perceived and present needs as well as potential and unrecognized needs. This paper will systematically outline the process of conducting a language need analysis of the undergraduate learners of Manipur University (MU) and discuss the findings of the analysis. This paper investigates the present General English (GE) syllabus that claims to be a communicative syllabus of MU which is offered to the first and second-semester students who study in the colleges affiliated to MU. It will be followed up by conducting the needs analysis of the learners to check if the content of the syllabus matches the needs and requirements of the learners of MU. The findings of the needs analysis will show if the language needs of the learners are at par with the syllabus that is being offered to them. 17 colleges affiliated to MU were selected to conduct the study; both from rural and urban areas of Manipur. In all these colleges, GE is taught to the undergraduates.

Key words: Needs analysis, curriculum, syllabus, General English syllabus, English language teaching, English language education.

1.0 Introduction

The present study is conducted in Manipur where both Manipuri and English are the official languages of the state. Manipur is a multi-lingual and multicultural state with more than 23 spoken languages. English is taught in almost all the schools and colleges of Manipur. It is used as a medium of instruction by the teachers in the schools and colleges. Therefore, it is important to investigate the status of English education in Manipur and observe if English is taught successfully to the learners.

There are different aspects of teaching and learning English. One of the aspects being explored in this study is the syllabus that is used and implemented for teaching and learning English in the colleges affiliated to Manipur University. The syllabus is an expression of the opinion on the nature of language and learning. A syllabus can be understood as “a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students’ learning” (Breen, 1984:33) while its function is “to specify what is to be taught and in what order” (Prabhu, 1984:47). Syllabus acts as a guideline for both teachers and learners to explore and comprehend the course of study thoroughly. It also acts as a guide for both the teachers and learners to achieve their respective aims and goals. For teachers, the aims or goals of teaching the particular syllabus might be to transfer information and provide knowledge to the students with the syllabus acting as a guideline; for learners, the syllabus will act as a guide to what the teacher is teaching along with what the syllabus aims to teach.

1.1 An Overview of the Undergraduate English Syllabus of Manipur University

The latest syllabus of the English course of undergraduate students under Manipur University (MU) was revised in the year 2010 and the semester-system of the curriculum was introduced in the University. The General English (GE) course is offered to the undergraduate students for the first two semesters and, in the next four semesters, they are given an option to choose other subjects. Different streams of study like Arts, Commerce, and Science are offered at Manipur University. MU offers more than twenty undergraduate courses, for example, BA in History and Geography, B.Sc. in Chemistry and Physics, and B.Com. in computer and Economics etc. and each of these courses has English as a compulsory subjects for the first two semesters. English is also the medium of instruction and the language in which all the subjects are taught.

The present syllabus of the undergraduate English course comprises of grammar, prose, poetry, drama, and writing. In each semester, the course is divided into two or three units. The syllabus of Semester I is divided into three units where grammar, essay, précis, report, paragraph writing, and comprehension are taught. The syllabus also includes Indian literature particularly short stories written by North-eastern Indian writers. The syllabus of the second Semester is divided into two units where the learners are taught plays and poems written by Western writers.

2.0 Research Methodology

This study is descriptive and analytical, and it adopts both Qualitative as well as Quantitative analysis method. It aims to examine whether the current English syllabus of Manipur University caters to the English language needs of the learners of MU. The purpose of this study is also to

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investigate and identify the language needs of the learners and what their aims and objectives of studying the course are. The study will also identify the aims and objectives of teaching the GE course and whether it is clearly mentioned in the syllabus or curriculum of the university.

2.1 Assumptions

The existing General English syllabus of Manipur University is offered to the first-semester and second-semester undergraduate learners as an optional course. During their graduation, learners from Arts, Commerce or Science streams can either study the General English course or any MIL (Modern Indian Language) course. Because of the global demand of the English language, 98% of the learners choose to study the General English course. Hence, the study will investigate the reason behind studying the course and if the syllabus fulfils the expectations and needs of the learners to improve the learners' English language skills.

2.2 Objectives of the study

The reasons or aims behind analysing the Present General English syllabus are

- a. The researcher seeks to investigate what kind of syllabus Manipur University has recommended for teaching the undergraduate learners of the University
- b. The investigation is an attempt to understand if the General English syllabus helped the learner to improve their L2 (Second language) proficiency
- c. To check if the present General English syllabus caters to the English language needs of the learners

2.3 Research Questions

The present research study plans to discover answers to the accompanying inquiries:

- 1) What are the English language needs of the learners of General English syllabus of Manipur University?
- 2) Are the needs of the learners fulfilled by the General English syllabus?
- 3) What are the aims and objectives of the General English course?

3.0 Literature Review

Given below are some of the literatures reviewed for the purpose of this study.

3.1 Need Analysis

Over the years, the requirement and importance of knowing the learners' needs have been emphasized. Needs refers to what the students themselves would like to gain from a particular language course. This means that the learners may have personal aims and objectives in addition to what the course or syllabus aims to teach (Francis. P. Robinson, 1991). The reasons for choosing a particular course or subject stated by the learners is considered extremely important and necessary since the learners' learning and acquiring the language would depend on it. During the process of framing the curriculum or syllabus, the learner's purpose and the teacher's beliefs about the nature of language and learning can influence the course structure, design of the syllabus and curriculum. According to Nunan (1988:13), the learners' purpose will change according to their specific needs and the time they would utilize their language skills; this process of discovering the language needs of the learners is applied while designing a syllabus.

Needs analysis, according to Michael White (1988), is the process which was first used by Michael West (1926) in the field of language teaching in his survey report which was published in the year 1926. Nunan (1988) states that, in the 1970s, needs analysis was first used in language planning. This method is concerned with identifying general and specific language needs that can be considered in developing goals, objectives, and content in a language programme. It might focus either on the broad constraints of a language programme as well as shared expectations or specific needs. Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rogers (1986) have stated that conducting a needs analysis would be essential for a thesis to understand and implement the required factors influencing teaching and learning requirements of teachers and learners.

While conducting a needs analysis, researchers collect information regarding why learners learn a language, stakeholder expectations and constraints related to teaching/learning and what resources and facilities are available while implementing a particular programme.

3.2 Importance of Needs Analysis in Syllabus and Materials Design

Being aware of the needs of the learners influences not only the content of the language course but also what potential can be exploited through such a course. Needs analysis is a complex process which has to consider what Tom Hutchinson and Alan Waters (1987:54-63) define as “target needs”, what learners need to do in the target situation i.e., language use and “learning needs”, what learners need to do in order to learn i.e., language learning. In a more modern view, we should not consider target needs and “learning needs” i.e., objective needs, but also learners’ subjective needs, i.e., their effective needs, such as their interests, wishes, expectations, and preferences.

Furthermore, a needs analysis should not only be considered as a pre-stage for the design of language courses; in fact, it is an “on-going process” and, like evaluation, it can be used to design, improve and implement language programmes. The most comprehensive and widely known work on ‘Needs Analysis’ is John Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1978). He devised a highly detailed set of procedures for discovering target situation needs. The analysis of target situation needs is, in fact, a matter of asking questions about the target situation and the attitude towards that situation of the various participants in the learning process. There are, of course, several ways in which information can be gathered about needs. The most frequently used methods are questionnaires, interviews, observations, data collection and informal consultations with learners. However, the present study mainly makes use of questionnaires as a means of obtaining data with some informal consultations.

The process of curriculum framing or development involves more than just one stage. There are processes one needs to follow to get a systematic and coherent curriculum for the administration, teachers, and learners to follow. According to J.C. Richards (2001:41), the process of developing the framework of the curriculum involves the entire paradigm of planning and application of the development and renewal of curriculum. This entails an emphasis on needs analysis, situational analysis, planning teaching objectives, course objectives, selection and preparation of teaching materials, and providing effective teaching and evaluation.

Similarly, Douglas Brown (1995) suggests a framework for language curriculum design. Brown’s framework includes six stages:

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- Needs analysis
- Objectives
- Testing
- Materials
- Teaching

The needs of the learners: One of the most important criteria in framing a curriculum is the needs of the learners. The course taught should match the age and the educational needs of the learners. No repetition of concepts higher than the learners' level should be included in the curriculum.

4.0 Study

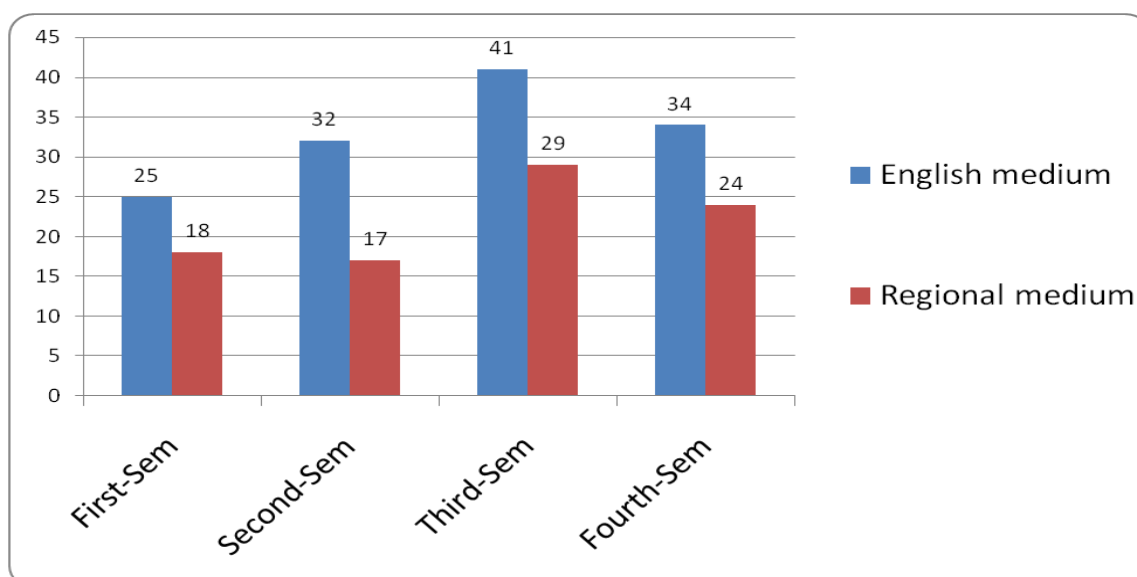
4.1 Learner's Profile

The sample group for the study are learners of General English course of Manipur University. The learners belong to first, second, third and fifth semester of the General English course. Ranging from 18 to 24 years, the learners belong to both urban and rural areas. More than 60% of the learners have completed their higher secondary education from English medium schools whereas the rest 40% of the learners have completed their higher secondary education from regional medium schools where the medium of instruction is in the regional language. Although 40% of the learners studied in regional medium schools, they had an English language course as a compulsory paper.

Table No. - 1

Learners Background	First-Semester	Second-Semester	Third-Semester	Fourth-Semester	Total
English medium	25	32	41	34	132
Regional medium	18	17	29	24	88
Total Sample	43	49	70	58	220

Chart No. - 1



4.2 Tools Used

The tools used for the study are:

- i. Questionnaire to identify the language needs of the learners (needs analysis).
- ii. Unstructured interviews with the learners.

4.3 Intervention

The learners' questionnaire was administered over three months; the learners were divided into batches of twenty. Eleven different group learners were given the questionnaire to be filled in. The learners took approximately two hours to fill in the questionnaire. Two hundred and twenty learners contributed to the study. This section aims to discuss the result and findings of the questionnaire implemented to the learners of GE of Manipur University. Here, the language needs analysis has been partially conducted to find out the English language needs of the learner. The questionnaire also investigated the aims and objectives of the learners of studying the GE course and what they expected to receive after the completion of the course. The data gathered from this questionnaire is converted into a percentage.

For the purpose of this study, we will look at some of the important questions from the questionnaire to identify if the GE syllabus caters to the English language needs of the students. Given below are some of the questions given to the students to identify the language needs and requirements of the learners.

1. Which skills are used most often in the classroom?
2. Which skills are most important for the learners to develop in their academic and professional field?
3. Do the learners participate in the discussions in the classroom?
4. What problems do the learners face in understanding their teachers and classmates?
5. What problems do the learners face while speaking, reading, listening and writing?
6. How important is communication in English for the learners?
7. Where would the learners use English after their graduation?
8. What are their expectations from the General English course?

According to the data collected and analysed from the needs analysis questionnaire, the learners most often use listening and writing skills in the classroom. The learners are taught with the help of the lecture method during which the learners are expected to write notes. According to the responses given by the learners, they would require speaking and writing skills the most if they would want to develop themselves academically and professionally. The learners have indicated that they would like to participate in the classroom discussion, but often classroom discussion does not take place as the class strength crosses 80 students per class. Most often teachers also don't ask any questions as it is a lecture classroom. Most of the students have also stated that they don't understand their teachers and their peers when they speak in English. Learners have indicated that they face difficulty in speaking, reading, listening and writing in English because of limited vocabulary, not being able to construct proper sentences, difficulty in understanding the pronunciation and vocabulary of the teachers. They also face problems in reading because they don't understand the content and vocabulary.

Learners have indicated that they would like to communicate in English because they will need to speak and listen in English language with their peers, teachers, people they would be working with and

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others. Hence, developing communication skills is extremely important for them to excel in their personal and professional life. They have also indicated that they would use English language in their further studies like Masters or if they plan to pursue a career after graduating.

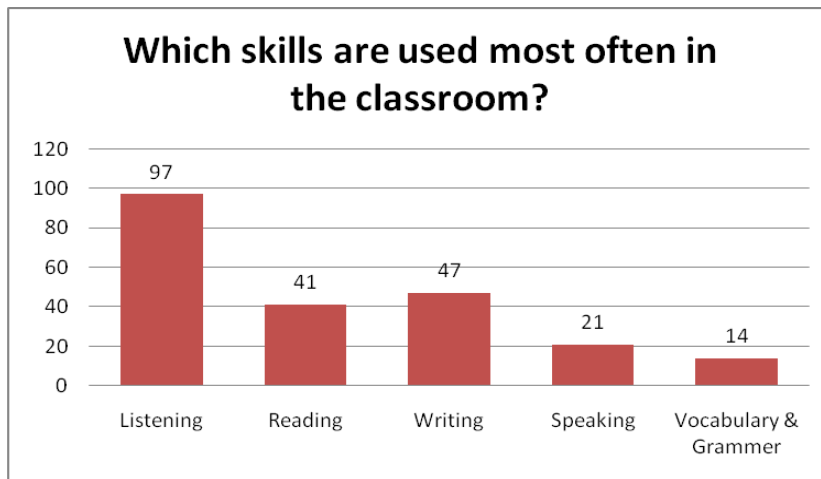
The data indicates that the learners would want to do activities and exercises to improve and develop their English language communication skills. They would want to speak, listen and write more comprehensively and confidently. Most of the learners have also mentioned that they lack confidence to speak because they fear making mistakes and being ridiculed by their classmates.

Table No. – 2

1	Which skills are used most often in the classroom?	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Vocabulary & Grammar
		97	41	47	21	14
2	Which skills are most important for the learners to develop in their academic and professional field?	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Vocabulary & Grammar
		37	32	95	44	12
3	Do the learners participate in the discussions in the classroom?	Always	Sometime	Often	Rarely	Never
		16	31	34	48	91
4	What problems do the learners face in understanding their teachers and classmates?	Limited Vocabulary	Difficulty in understanding teachers and peers	Unable to comprehend the target language	Unable to understand the accent of the teachers	Unable to understand the context and content
		58	41	39	48	34
5	What problems do the learners face while speaking, reading, listening and writing?	Limited Vocabulary	Difficulty in understanding teachers and peers	Unable to comprehend the target language	Unable to express their opinion in the target language	Unable to understand the context & content
		55	39	45	37	44
6	How important is communication in English for the learners?	Extremely important	Very important	Important	Average uses	Not so important
		83	59	52	14	12

7	Where would the learners use English after their graduation?	Speaking with their peers	Speaking with their teachers	With their colleagues	Utilizing their knowledge for further studies	Developing communication skills in their personnel & professional life
		12	14	36	64	94
8	What are their expectations from the General English course?	To improve communication skills	To speak, listen & write comprehensively	To speak confidently in English	To avoid making errors while writing & speaking	To avoid getting ridiculed by other
		43	34	55	67	21

Chart 2.1



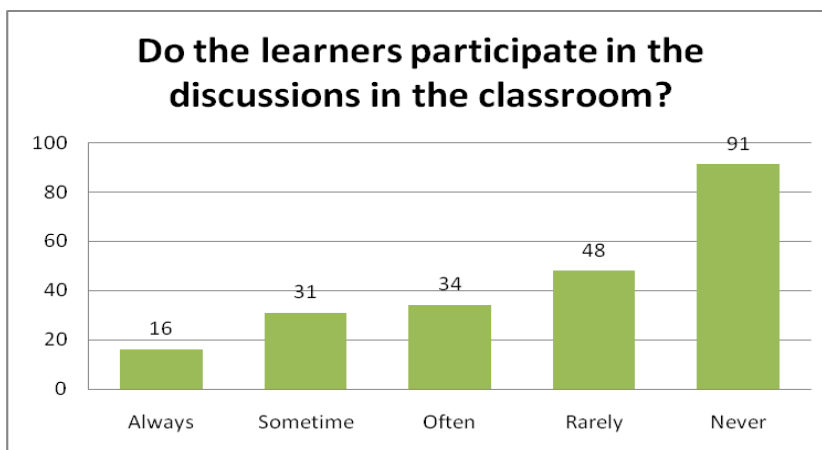
Percentage of listening skill is the highest in class according to most of the students. 44% of the students say that listening is used most often, while only 6% of the students say that vocabulary & grammar skills are used most often.

Chart 2.2



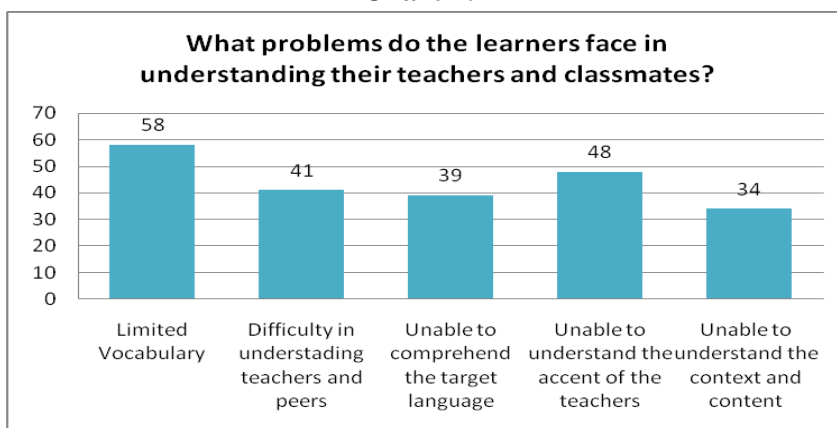
43% of the students say that most important skill for the learners to develop their academic and professional field is writing skill that means it is the most important contributor and it should have the weightage in syllabus, while only 5% are in favour of vocabulary & grammar.

Chart 2.3



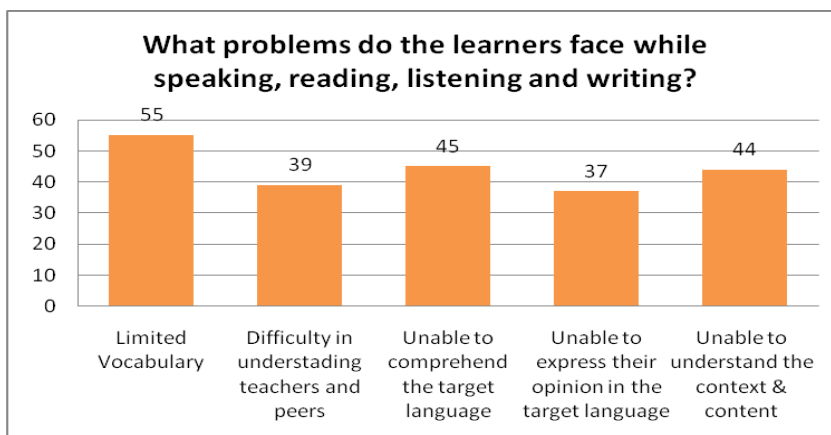
Student participation is also one of the most important aspect of learning and it depends on the syllabus design whether it allows student centric education or not. 41% of the students say that they have never participated in the discussion and only 7% of students always interact in the class.

Chart 2.4



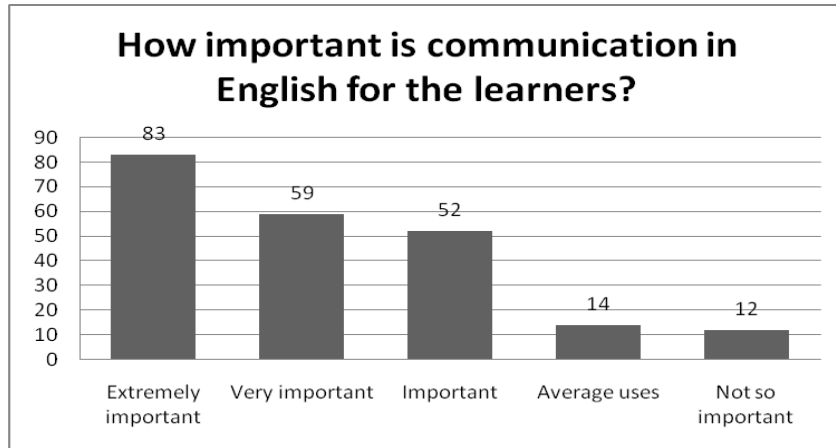
Almost equal weightage is given to all the problems when it comes to understanding their teachers and classmates. Most of the students are not able to understand because they don't know many words of target language. 26% percent of the students come under this category. Second most important difficulty that 21% of the students face is that they don't understand the accent of the teacher. 17% students are unable to understand the target language.

Chart 2.5



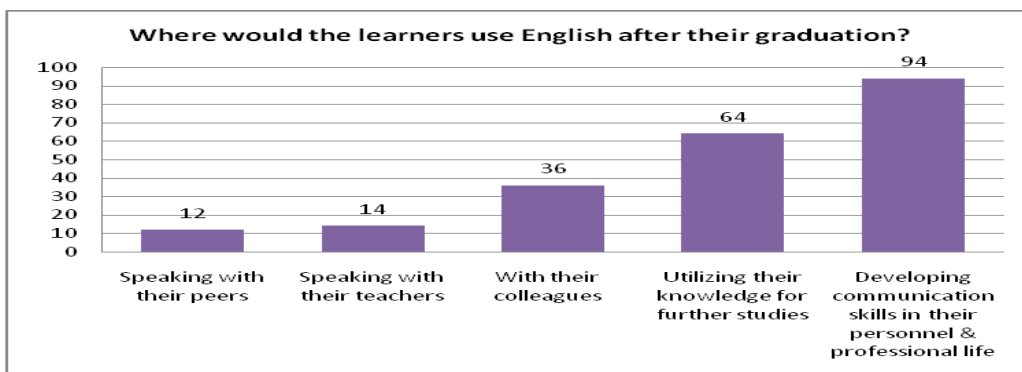
Again the main problem with the students that they are not able to communicate well in the second language is that they don't know many words in that language and find it difficult to speak, listen, read and write. 25% of the students fall under this category. 20% of the student consider that they are unable to comprehend context and content.

Chart 2.6



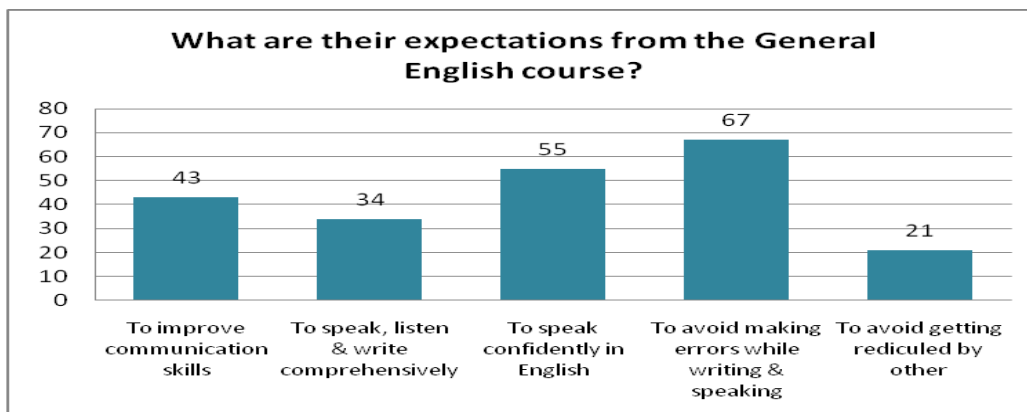
Students are fully aware of the importance of communication in English as only 5% of the students are of the view that it is not as important while others think it is important only 6% say it is of average use.

Chart 2.7



Students also have clear vision about its use as 43% of students say that it will be useful in developing their communication skills in personal and professional life that is the most important aspect. 29% of the students think that it will be useful in their higher education.

Chart 2.8



For the most important question the answers indicate that the students want the syllabus to be all comprehensive. While 30% of the students want that the syllabus should enable them to write and speak flawlessly without errors. 25% wants that the syllabus should make them able to speak confidently without hesitation.

4.4 Findings

Listed below are some of the primary findings of the study:

1. The University does not provide a curriculum for the course since there is no curriculum manual, the aims and objectives of the syllabus are not mentioned in any University document and no instructions related to the teaching and learning of the syllabus is mentioned.
2. The aims and objectives of teaching the General English syllabus are not provided or mentioned in the syllabus or the textbooks. Hence, the students are unaware of the purpose of studying the course or syllabus.
3. The language need of the learners is to improve the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), vocabulary and grammar which are not being developed by the syllabus or the teachers.
4. Learners want to speak and write in English fluently as they would like to pursue higher studies, get a job and would like to speak and write well.
5. The syllabus does not include activities, exercises, tasks or content to improve their communications skills.
6. The teaching methodology does not encourage communication/interaction in the classrooms. The teachers have to manage a classroom of 80-100 learners in a single. Therefore, it becomes extremely difficult for the teachers to pay attention to the individual learners and make them do tasks or activities.

5.0 Significance of study :

6.0 Conclusions

The central aim of this study was to identify the English language needs of the learners and to find out if the syllabus caters to the needs and requirements of the learners. The findings of the syllabus indicate that the needs of the learners are not fulfilled by the syllabus and they are not made aware of the aims and objectives of the syllabus. The learners would prefer doing tasks and activities to improve their communication skills but the syllabus does not have the aims and objectives listed in any of the documents provided. Hence, we can finally conclude that the current syllabus should conduct a needs analysis of the learners and frame a communicative syllabus to help the learners develop their English language skills and excel both academically and professionally.

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