

Analyzing the English Language Needs of Vocational Students: A Case Study of the University of Vocational Technology Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The constant changes taking place in society, and more particularly work places, impose a lot of stress on English language teaching at university level. The workplace constantly demands university graduates to possess the technical and language skills to function in workplaces. In order to cater to these changing workplace demands, two branches of English Language Teaching (ELT), namely English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have emerged. Although EGP is what is observed to be practiced in the ELT classrooms, over the years, ESP has created an immense interest among ELT practitioners desiring to make a change in academic and professional settings. At the University of Vocational Technology (Univotec) undergraduates are offered an English module titled “Communication Skills” to assist them in following subject related content which is offered in the English medium. However, as is the case in many higher educational institutions, this has not shown any favorable results. Students at the Univotec continue to drop out of their degree programs due to their inability to continue their studies in the English medium. This research is based on the premise that the current English language module offered at the Univotec fails to meet the academic language needs of its graduates as a large portion of its content consists of EGP. This research consists of a needs

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analysis (NA) that was carried out to critically explore the status of this course and find possible means of redesigning an English language program that aligns more closely with what the stakeholders of the program need. This paper focuses on the needs of the undergraduates of the Univotec and the sample is selected from the Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech) in Mechatronics as it is one of the most popular degree programs at Univotec. The aim of the research is to find out what the undergraduates perceive as important to pursue their academic goals. The recurring themes that emerged from the data suggested that a curriculum with a blend of ESP and EGP would better suit the needs of the undergraduates. There was a strong recommendation to revise the current curriculum to better suit the requirements of both the academic context as well as the target career. Some of the recommendations include the incorporation of basic grammar in the first year and then making the programme more advanced as the students progress academically, and the incorporation of sub skills of the four main language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Keywords: *English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Needs Analysis (NA), language skills, stakeholders, vocational studies*

Introduction

The demand for Vocational Education seems to be on the rise with the need to employ graduates who do not merely possess paper qualifications, but are also well-skilled and therefore equipped for the workplace. Vocational Education, which has not generally been under the spotlight of educational discourses, came into light in the 1970s with the increase of youth unemployment. The evolution of The National Vocational Qualification framework or the NVQ, has paved the path for youth of Sri Lanka to achieve international recognition for qualifications, skills and knowledge. The NVQ framework consists of seven levels of qualifications from Level 1 to Level 7. The final level, on which the current study is based, is NVQ Level 7, which is the Bachelor of Technology Degree, the duration of which is three years. This degree is awarded by the only vocational degree awarding body in Sri Lanka,

which is the University of Vocational Technology (Univotec). The fact that this research was carried out in this university is one of its main strengths.

The objective of establishing the Univotec in 2009 was to open an educational path for students from technical and vocational training contexts to have access to higher education. Diverting from the conventional university education system in which education is more focused on academic qualifications, Univotec produces graduates with specific knowledge and skills needed to perform a particular job role. As the entrants to Univotec have diverted from the traditional education system, there are many who have only completed their education up to Grade 8 or studied up to the GCE Ordinary Levels but have not sat for the exam. There is, however, a minority who has sat for the GCE Advanced Level examination but had not gained entry to a state university. Although these entry criteria diversify the student population and make vocational education more accessible, the divergent entry criteria have proved to be challenging with regard to English language teaching and the undergraduates' ability to pursue a degree in the English medium. This is the very reason Univotec continues to record large dropout rates. Due to the undergraduates' inability to follow English medium instruction, they leave the program prematurely. This very mismatch between the skills the students are taught in university and the actual skills the students need to possess to function on a day to day basis, prompted this needs analysis. This program was chosen specially as it attracts a large number of applicants each year and the number of applications that flow in exceed 500 in number. However, it is important to note that the high dropout rate is not unique to this program but is a common problem across all programs at the Univotec. The current study explores answers to the question: What language skills do vocational undergraduates perceive as more important for academic purposes?

“Communication Skills”: Should it be EGP or ESP?

Currently, Univotec offers an English module titled “Communication Skills” which is offered in the first year of each degree programme to support undergraduates to follow degree programmes in the English medium. Yet, this English language support seems to have little impact on the students’

academic success and many students struggle. The observations of the lecturers who teach “Communication Skills” is that this module consists of a large portion of English for General Purposes (EGP) and less of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Thus this study was carried out to explore the views of the undergraduates of Univotec in order to find out if the inclusion of elements of ESP to the module would be more beneficial for students’ academic performance. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state, English Language Teaching (ELT) could be broadly divided into two branches: ESP and EGP. While EGP is more focused on developing a strong language foundation in basic grammar and communication for learners, the focus of ESP is primarily on the language and instruction that emphasize specific communicative needs that engage in the development of communicative competence in specific disciplines such as Accounting, Information Technology and Business Management. Thus the knowledge gained from ESP would be beneficial for students in the application of what they have acquired in the field of study in which they are majoring. Islam (2014) in his study brings out the differences and similarities in the roles of ESP and EGP and he states that the key focus of EGP is on general English language abilities of students whereas the focus of ESP is on specific skills and needs of learners based on a detailed analysis of learners’ professional/academic needs. In drawing comparisons between EGP and ESP, Larouz and Kerouad (2016) highlight that the methodology in ESP bears a lot of similarities with the methodology in EGP. Although ESP is said to prepare students for authentic situations, both EGP and ESP incorporate the same concepts and approaches such as authenticity. Some scholars such as Zohrabi (2013) view EGP as a foundation course in any curriculum which paves the way for ESP. Mackay and Mountford (1978) state that the term “languages for special purposes” has been a key interest in relation to ELT. The purpose of “languages for special purposes” is defined with reference to occupational requirements and this definition applies to ESP as well. The aim of ESP is to develop learners’ communicative needs, especially for improvement. ESP students generally possess fundamental language skills and they follow ESP in preparation for their future careers. Thus for this particular reason, ESP concentrates less on

grammar and language but focuses more on language in context. That is one of the main reasons ESP, which developed as an independent discipline has gained much popularity throughout the world. It is largely associated with tertiary education as students specialize in different areas. For example, if an individual is to work as a customer care officer, knowing the language that they are expected to use will enable them to function confidently and efficiently in their workplace. Thus in their learning of the English language, the expectation will not be to learn complex grammar but the language that is required to perform their job effectively. Literature also highlights how ESP has been emphasized as a solution to address the gaps, particularly the language skills needed for the workplace, which are not fulfilled by General English. ESP is an independent discipline from EGP and it has gained acceptance in higher educational contexts around the world. ESP is more concerned with the career paths of the learners and it plays a vital role in the development of communicative needs of learners. These definitions of ESP and its unique characteristics provide a broader understanding of the two terms EGP and ESP and the contexts in which they are used.

Research Methodology

As stated previously the current study expects to answer the following research question,

What language skills do vocational undergraduates perceive as more important for academic purposes?

The core of the research is a Needs Analysis (NA) conducted in Univotec with the undergraduates from the Bachelor of Technology in Mechatronics. The reason for the incorporation of a NA is due to the fact that the long term goal of this research is to develop a curriculum that closely aligns with the needs of students. According to Ting (2010), a NA is the first stage in ESP curriculum design and precedes the design of the syllabus, course materials and teaching activities. Veena (2016), quoting Richards (2002) states that the first step in conducting a NA is to decide the exact purpose or purposes for carrying out a NA. Brown (2009) defines a NA as a systematic collection and

an analysis of all information that is necessary for defining a defensible curriculum. This study used the NA model introduced by Brown (2009) as it was viewed as the most relevant to the current study, particularly in its step by step guidance which made it easy to design and carry out the NA. The NA used in this study was carried out in three systematic steps which include making basic decisions about the needs analysis, gathering information, and using the information. These three principle steps consist of the following 10 steps:

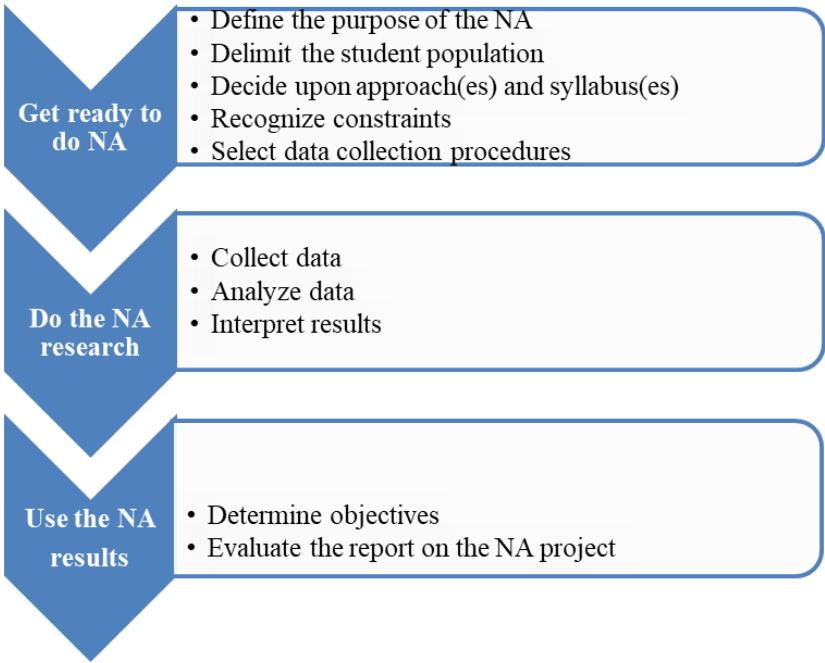


Figure 1: Needs Analysis process (adapted from Brown, 2009)

Research Design

While the primary data for the study was drawn from the NA, the study incorporated a research design that consisted of elements of both qualitative and quantitative research methods known as mixed method research design. As per Richards (2005), “qualitative and quantitative data do not inhabit different worlds. They are different ways of recording observations of the same world” (p. 36).

Setting of the Study

The setting of the study is the University of Vocational Technology (Univotec) and the respective setting was selected as the corresponding researcher is an ELT practitioner at the respective university.

The Study Sample

As the main concern of my study is exploring the English language needs of students to enhance their academic and professional performance, the sample size is limited to undergraduates following B.Tech in Mechatronics. Purposive sampling was adopted to choose the study sample. Purposive sampling is seen as a series of strategic choices about whom, where and how a researcher carries out a research (Palys, 2008). The sample included respondents from the second and third years and as the degree is a three-year degree there is no fourth year. Apart from this the first year students were excluded as they are still following the degree and lack the experience of teaching, and have not yet covered the whole module. The sample consisted of both male and female participants and they were Sinhala and Tamil first language (L1) speakers.

Table 1: Sample Size

Sample	Number of participants	
	Questionnaires	Semi-structured interviews
Undergraduates	40	10

Research Instruments

The research instruments incorporated in the current study are questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were incorporated to obtain more qualitative data and the reason for the use of both questionnaires and interviews were more for a triangulation of data.

Analysis of Data

In this section how the analysis of data took place is explained. The data from the interviews which were conducted in Sinhala were transcribed and translated into English while interviews conducted in English were directly transcribed. The data which was pre coded and coded was put under themes

to carry out comparisons effectively. While the qualitative data was analyzed, the quantitative data from the questionnaires, therefore, were descriptively analyzed. The reason for the use of both qualitative and quantitative data was more or less the triangulation of data.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The data obtained from the NA is analyzed under the theme ‘English language needs in academic life’. The undergraduates displayed a range of views about English, about the role of English for academic purposes.

Undergraduate 1: English is important as we do our main course modules in English. It is necessary to learn English.

The above statement was a recurring response expressed at most of the interviews. A majority of the undergraduates expressed the need for English to perform in both theory and practice based sessions in the academic context as English is the medium of instruction at Univotec. Apart from the fact that English was a need for academic performance, certain statements highlighted that majority of the core Mechatronics text books as well as journal articles, and handouts given by lecturers are in English and therefore knowledge of English was essential.

Undergraduate 3: Yes, English is important as all subjects are taught in English. So many technical terms and most words are not common words. So guidance is needed with technical terms.

As Undergraduate 3 highlights, Mechatronics consists of a large composition of technical terms and to understand these terms better, English is vital. It was this knowledge that helped them to do well at examinations. Although there was an academic requirement to be familiar with technical terms, “Communication Skills” did not cater to this need. Many students criticized having to learn General English than subject-specific English.

Undergraduate 5: The English module that is taught to us will be more effective if it consisted more of Mechatronics terminology.

Many respondents stated that the English module taught to them consisted more general vocabulary but what they needed was a sound knowledge of mechatronics-related vocabulary. They also stated that the English module focused on and gave priority to writing essays without developing the skills the students needed to write an academic essay. Many expressed the strong need for English when it comes to examinations. As per the undergraduates, it was very important to possess good English language skills, particularly reading and writing skills to do well at exams.

Undergraduate 6: මෙම Skills විභාග සඳහා ප්‍රයෝජනවත් වේ.

memma Skills vibhaga sanda ha: prajasa:dzanavatha vae:
(These skills are useful for the exams)

When the students were asked about the marks they scored, a majority of the students stated that they scored well in practical components while many failed to do so at written exams. Their frustration at the inability to articulate their ideas and knowledge in English is expressed as follows:

Undergraduate 4: අපිට ideas තියෙනවා

apaita ideas thajjænava : (we have ideas)

ඒත් ලියන්න බැහැ

e:tha lajanna bæhlaæ (But cannot write)

The above statement was made in a tone of sadness and an earnest need to improve. As this study is a part of a larger study that was carried out to explore views on “Communication Skills”, the study went on to find out the importance placed by the difference stakeholders on the different skills. Table 2 provides an overview of the acronyms used in the figures.

Table 2: Acronyms

Acronyms
ACE: Academic Staff English
ACM: Academic Staff Mechatronics
GR: Graduates
UG: Undergraduates
IE: Industrial Personnel

Ratings used in the tables are as follows:

Very important: 4

Important: 3

Not very Important: 2

Not Important: 1

This paper first reviews the views of the various stakeholders on the importance of writing for academic purposes. Figure 2 provides an overview of the responses provided by all the stakeholders.

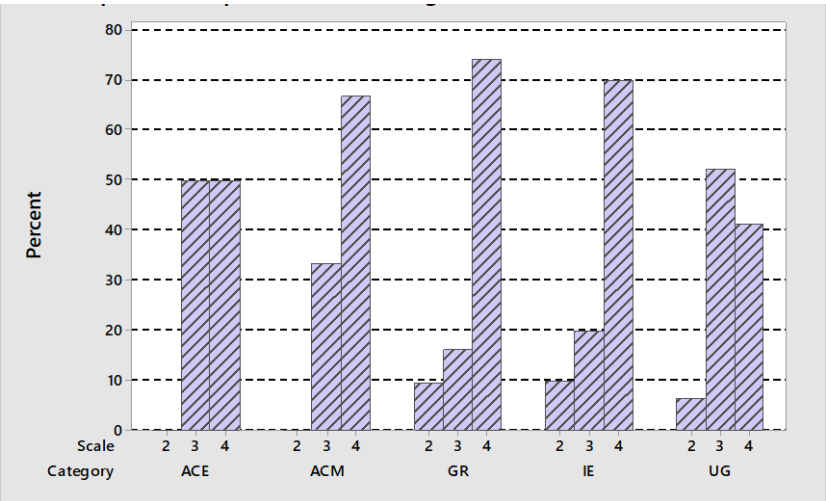


Figure 2: Importance of Writing for Academic Purposes

The undergraduates, who were the primary focus of this study, stated that writing was important to them. More specifically, around 40% stated it to be *Important* while 50% stated it was *Quite Important*. Thus a majority of the undergraduates acknowledged writing to be of utmost importance, especially for examination purposes. They emphasized the importance of writing to succeed academically. However, what emerged from the interviews was that writing was practiced in class regularly, but there was no focus on writing accurately for exams. Further, a majority of the undergraduates stated that they lacked sufficient vocabulary and that it was a hindrance in expressing their ideas accurately. Some students stated that although new vocabulary is introduced in the current module it lends very little to improving their academic writing. This concern ties back to what they stated about the lack of emphasis on academic terminology and a greater concentration of General English that has little bearing on their academic work. This was further explained through the following statement,

Undergraduate 5: yes, we need to learn basic vocabulary but in addition to that it would be helpful if we are exposed to technical jargon which we will be able to use even after the completion of the degree.

Many responses revealed that the students had to make too much of an effort to learn English. This process of learning English hindered the process of acquiring subject related knowledge. As stated in the introduction, the students of Univotec come from a wide range of educational contexts that include those who have dropped out of school as early as Grade 8 and possess very little English language skills or at times no formal instruction in English. It was visible that many who discussed the challenges of writing and facing examinations came from such backgrounds. They had not had structured language instruction during school and in general had very little exposure to the English language in other social contexts. This resulted in them getting poor results or failing exams which at times led to quitting the program. It was not only at the examinations that the students found writing to be difficult but also during lectures, they found it hard to listen to lectures and take notes.

Their poor writing skills, coupled with their weak listening skills, resulted in their inability to comprehend and take notes during lectures.

The responses given at the interviews highlight that lack of good writing skills and a sound vocabulary hindered undergraduates' ability to express their ideas not only at the exams but also in writing assignments and project reports based on their industrial experiences. Although project writing is taught during the first year of their degree programme, the students are not required to write project reports during the first year. However, during the second and the third years when they are required to write project reports, they are not offered "Communication Skills" and many students had forgotten what they had learnt during the first year. It is only when the students go for industrial training in the third year that they need more rigorous training in technical writing. That is when the students actually get hands-on experience in writing at the workplace and realize its importance to function well professionally. While some remarked that reading and writing skills were essential, the minority was of the view that knowing the practical aspects of Mechatronics was sufficient and this somehow helped them to answer questions at examinations. The statement below supports this point further:

Undergraduate 6: මම Practical පුළුවන, ඒ නිසා මම, ඒ knowledge එක use කරලා exam pass වුණා

mata Practical **paúlavān e: nāisa** : **mama e:** knowledge **eka** use **karala** : pass **vaṇa** :

(I'm good with practical sessions so with that knowledge I passed the exam.)

Reading was also perceived as important at exams, especially when reading and comprehending the questions. While writing in English was highlighted as somewhat challenging, reading and understanding the questions were also considered tedious. Figure 3 displays the importance it had for the undergraduates.

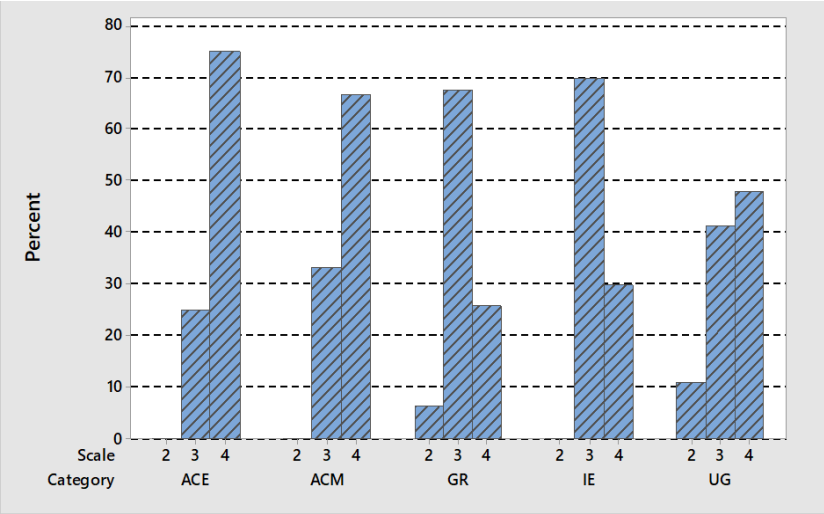


Figure 3: Importance of Reading Skill for Academic Purpose

Although listening was not favored by a large majority many have expressed it to be as challenging as the other skills in trying to comprehend the lectures. Except for one or two lecturers who were said to be bilingual, all the other lecturers used English as the medium of instruction. As the staff consisted of two foreign lecturers, the students had no choice but to listen to the lecture no matter how difficult it was. While many students stated that it was difficult to follow and comprehend the lectures of the two foreign lecturers, they also stated that it was a valuable experience. They were able to ask for clarifications and questions in Sinhala without an effort from the local lecturers, but with the two foreign lecturers, they were forced to make an effort to listen and understand. The study also revealed the perceptions of the undergraduates towards the importance of speaking in an academic context. Figure 4 displays their views. Among the four language skills, speaking was the most favored and was also acknowledged as one of the most needed skills in an academic context.

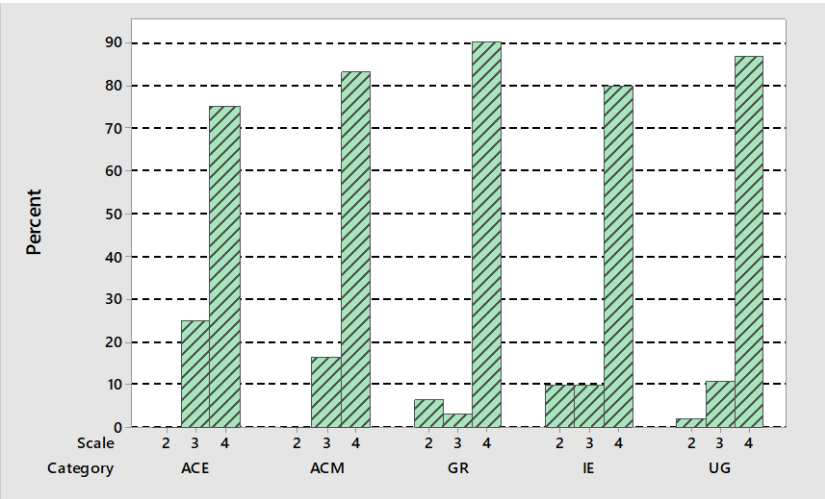


Figure 4: Importance of Speaking for Academic Purposes

For many, presentation skills or speaking in English was highlighted as an important yet challenging skill as majority of the students found it difficult to express their opinions during presentations. Although the current “Communication Skills” module does concentrate on presentation skills during the first year, the undergraduates take their first year of study lightly and are not focused and therefore miss out on useful hints given on presentation skills. The responses of the undergraduates also stated that the time allocated for them for presentations was insufficient to develop the skills to make effective presentations. In addition, as the presentations for the English module are based on more general topics such as “poverty”, the students did not see how such topics were relevant to the industry and the nature of presentations they were expected to make in a work context. They did not want to invest in general topics as they felt that such topics could not provide them the skills they thought they needed for the workplace. Thus the need for more subject related topics in presentations was strongly emphasized.

Undergraduate 6: *We always have to present about globalization but in the industry we get to speak on Mechatronics related matters, not on these common topics.*

As per the above statement, the need for improving speaking is further emphasized. One of the undergraduates currently in the final year stated,

Undergraduate 12: *We need to improve Presentation Skills because throughout the semesters we need to present subject related matters. We mostly present subject related matters.*

The reason for the above emphasis was due to the fact that the undergraduates are expected to face a viva voce after the industrial training, and therefore, a training in speaking on subject related topics was considered very useful. The fear of doing presentations was highlighted as follows:

Undergraduate2: *I always get nervous in front of a crowd and forget what I have to say and I think too much about grammar errors I would make.*

Many expressions highlighted the fear of speaking and this was not only during presentations but also during lectures, as students emphasized that they were reluctant to ask questions as they were afraid of making mistakes.

Undergraduate 14: *It is a very passive environment during the lectures. Only the lecturer speaks and we are scared to ask questions thinking that we may make mistakes.*

However, it was highlighted that with some of the lecturers they were at ease as they used Sinhala to conduct lectures and thus questions for clarification or further explanations were posed by the students in Sinhala. Another undergraduate further highlighted that the need for skills such as asking questions was not incorporated in the current “Communication Skills” module and this was emphasized by many as essential in order to proceed with the subject related modules. These experiences highlight that though there was a need for speaking in the academic context there were insufficient activities to encourage an active English speaking environment in the current module. The sentiments expressed by a majority of the undergraduates highlighted that possessing comprehensive English language skills would contribute to reducing student dropout rates at Univotec. The views of the undergraduates reiterated that the need for English was strongly felt, especially during the

second year with the exposure they got during the industrial training as they were expected to move with undergraduates of other universities and interact with the hierarchical structure of the company in English. Thus it was stated that it was at this point of university life that undergraduates realized how far behind they were, in terms of their English language, compared to undergraduates from other universities during their industry training. The undergraduates' views also revealed that poor English language proficiency affected the grades of the undergraduates as many were compelled to miss a batch or drop out of the programme entirely. This was clearly seen in 2012 where out of 58 students who registered for both the full time and part time degree programmes, only 7 graduated. The responses also revealed that in order to move from the first year to the following year, a good command of English was needed as the content of the core Mechatronics modules was advanced. This was also highlighted to be essential due to the link between the theory and practical modules. Another noted factor was that the marks of the students were at an alarmingly low level and the following statement expresses the reason for such unsatisfactory attendance.

Undergraduate 12: මම අවශ්‍ය *Communication Skills* pass එකක් *Degree* එක ගන්න

mata avazajaja Communication Skills pass ekak Degree eka ganna

(I only need to get a pass in "Communication Skills" just to get the degree.)

Conclusion

The above findings were a result of a research that was carried out to find out empirically informed ways of designing a new English programme for the undergraduates of Univotec. The study explored undergraduates' perceptions of English language skills in relation to their academic context. The results of the current study contribute to the improvement of the current "Communication Skills" module or the development of a new English language module. It was evident from the views of the undergraduates that "Communication Skills" consists primarily of EGP related content. The module which is introduced to support undergraduates to enhance their

English language proficiency has not accomplished its goals nor met the requirements of the undergraduates.

A need to incorporate more activities related to the four skills which was found to be lacking in the current syllabus was emphasized. The content of the writing component was criticized as it only contained areas such as essay writing and letter writing, which did not complement the requirements of the industry. Thus it was suggested that more task-oriented writing activities should be incorporated, including report writing based on industrial needs, writing official and unofficial emails, filling forms and logs, memos, procurement documents and lab reports. With regard to reading, there were suggestions to include more reading material that would better prepare students for examinations and also material such as manuals, e-mails, letters and procurement related documents at industry level. The lack of focus on technical terms in “Communication Skills” is a noted drawback in the current curriculum. Technical vocabulary is required both in the academic context as well as in the industry. A strong recommendation to incorporate technical terms was hence highlighted from the study. There was a strong recommendation for more activity based learning that includes role play, individual and group presentations, and public speaking to be included in order to enhance students’ speaking skills so they can communicate confidently in real life contexts that require them to communicate in English.

In addressing the views of the undergraduates, the findings suggested the use of authentic material that is specific to Mechatronics to teach all language skills. This requires handouts to be based on Mechatronics related content which is expected to enhance the performance of the main stakeholders, both undergraduates and graduates, in the academic context as well as in the target career. As the core of the study explored whether the stakeholders needed a more ESP or EGP curriculum, a larger part of the perceptions of the undergraduates dwelt on finding if they preferred the content to be more ESP or EGP. The findings revealed that the existing curriculum did little to help undergraduates perform effectively academically, especially with Mechatronics related subjects. Students’ responses favored a more ESP

curriculum to suit the needs of the undergraduates to aid them academically. However, further responses revealed that as students' language proficiencies vary from unsatisfactory level to satisfactory level, as they come from diverse educational backgrounds, an ESP curriculum alone would not be beneficial. Thus the findings revealed that the students of Univotec required an English module with a blend of EGP and ESP. As Zohrabi (2015) highlights, since EGP is a foundation course in any curriculum which is intended to pave the way for ESP, this study is an inspiration to use both EGP and ESP to effectively carry out an English language module for the undergraduates of Univotec. The findings also suggested that there is a need for the incorporation of technical terms, which is lacking in the current curriculum, in order to support the students to meet the requirements of both the industry and the academic context.

In conclusion, this study attempted to answer the research question - what language skills do vocational undergraduates perceive as more important for academic purposes? It could be highlighted that there is a need for an ESP component to be included in the "Communication Skills" curriculum and it was moreover pointed out that an EGP curriculum cannot stand alone as the students require ESP in order to perform effectively at the work place. Thus the study highlights the need for ESP for students of the vocational sector along with basic grammar to meet the requirements of the workplace.

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