

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

The mastery of the instructional language opens greater chances for the students in higher learning institutions to perform satisfactorily in achieving both communicative and academic competencies. In the higher education system in Malaysia, English language is the major medium of instruction as it is used widely to conduct most of the academic programmes except for certain courses which have to be taught in other languages. Being aware of the importance and the increasing need for English, all universities and colleges provide various types of English language supports to help their students to master the language.

At the tertiary level, there are three types of English language courses which are commonly offered to the students – general English proficiency courses, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Both EOP and EAP are the two branches of the larger field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In the discussion of curriculum development for EAP, which is also the focus of the present study, “needs analysis” or assessing students’ language needs is always considered a crucial component and is fundamental to an EAP approach to course design (Tajino, James & Kyoichi, 2005; Jordan, 1997). Nonetheless, many institutions lack of awareness or have overlooked this important component in course design (Cowling, 2007) and due to this reason, Jordan (2002) criticises that the language support that is provided to university students tended to be on an ad hoc basis. Hamp-Lyons (2001, cited in Tajino et

al., 2005) articulates that “EAP begins with learner and the situation, whereas General English begins with the language” (p.27). It is understood that the nature of EAP courses is different from other types of English language courses as the institutions or course developers should consider the users’ voices (both lecturers and learners) when deciding on the course content.

Realizing the importance of needs analysis in curriculum design, this study focuses on assessing the academic English language needs of the foundation students in Universiti Industri Selangor (UNISEL). In order to provide a clearer picture and understanding of the study, the background of UNISEL and the descriptions of the English language courses offered are presented. This is followed by the presentation of the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions and significance of the study.

1.1 Background of Universiti Industri Selangor (UNISEL)

Universiti Industri Selangor, the first state university in Malaysia, was established in September 1999. Currently, the university offers 81 programmes under 11 faculties. The programmes offered range from foundation, diploma, bachelor’s degree to postgraduate level. The medium of instruction is mainly English except for courses which are conducted in other languages such as Islamic studies and pre-school studies.

1.2 The English Language Courses at UNISEL

In UNISEL, all the English language courses are offered and conducted by the Servicing English Department in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies. At

present, the department offers five courses to all students as university compulsory subjects where a pass in those courses is considered as partial requirement to graduate. The duration of each course is 14 weeks and the weekly learning period is 3 hours. The English language courses are designed to tailor to the needs of students at different levels. This is shown in the table below.

Level	Name of Courses	Status	Semester offered
Foundation & Diploma	Preparatory English	Compulsory for students who failed to obtain a credit in SPM English	1
	Proficiency English 1	Compulsory for all students	1
	Proficiency English 2	Compulsory for all students	2
Bachelor's Degree	Technical English 1	Compulsory for all students	1
	Technical English 2	Compulsory for all students	Subject to respective faculty's arrangement

1.3 Description of Proficiency English 1 and Proficiency English 2

1.3.1 Proficiency English 1

This is the first part of the two-semester courses which is designed for students who have enrolled in the foundation and diploma programmes with the aims to prepare them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level. Its main objective is to remedy students' weaknesses in the use of English language and raise their proficiency level by revising major aspects of grammar as well as providing remedial exercises and practice on vocabulary, grammar, and the four communicative skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Therefore, by the end of the course, students are expected to achieve basic grammatical accuracy and also acquire the necessary language skills to communicate effectively (refer to Appendix 1 for the syllabus).

1.3.2 Proficiency English 2

This is the second part of the two-semester course which seeks to consolidate and enhance the English Language ability of the students to enable them to perform well in their study. It provides language practice with the integration of the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing which are related to tertiary academic experience. In addition, students will be prepared to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) (refer to Appendix 2 for the syllabus).

1.4 The Problem

Moving from secondary level to the tertiary level of study is a big challenge to many students because of the massive change in the language used. The students have to develop the necessary language and study skills for effective learning through the medium of English. Problems arise when the students have to perform various academic tasks e.g. listening to lectures, taking lecture notes, giving oral presentations and writing reports completely in English. Although some of the students have developed good language skills at school, university study makes particular demands on students' language and study skills. Therefore, the students need to be equipped with the relevant knowledge in order to gain the linguistic competence in meeting the requirements of academic study.

Realising the problems faced by the students, UNISEL prepares a series of English language courses namely Proficiency English 1 (PE1) and Proficiency English 2 (PE2), which are offered as university compulsory subjects in the first and second semesters of all foundation programmes in the university. There is no specific English language course

designed to address the needs of students from different academic disciplines. In other words, students from different programmes are taking the same courses. Apart from that, most of the content of these courses are just helping the students to recapitulate what have been learned previously in schools and preparing them to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). PE1 and PE2 are general English language courses which vary in terms of level of difficulty: lower-intermediate to intermediate level for PE1 and upper-intermediate to advance level for PE2.

There was no needs analysis being conducted to find out what specific English language components and skills which are required to help the students in completing their programmes successfully. Due to the urgent needs of language course, the input for the content of the syllabi was based on what the course designers (the pioneer lecturers) perceived as important and relevant for all the students regardless of the programmes they are taking. In addition, there was no input also from students in planning and reviewing the syllabi, so what the students can do and cannot do with the target language and what language skills are most essential to the students are unknown. Consequently, the lecturers are uncertain to what extent the courses are really helpful in assisting the students to learn in a tertiary setting. Apart from that, in a preliminary discussion with the lecturers from different faculties, they commented that many students are still very weak in the usage of the English language after signing up for PE1 and PE2. This is based on their experience in teaching and evaluating the students at the degree level.

A comprehensive needs analysis, therefore, is a necessary precursor to course design where it provides a strong foundation to the stake-holders pertaining to the whole idea of conducting a particular language course and the same time also serves as a means of

evaluating the course to ensure that it continues to be relevant to students' needs. Nonetheless, in most of the previously conducted needs analysis, the researchers focussed mainly on the students' language-related 'target needs' and not much of emphasis was given to students' "learning needs". Additionally, there are very few studies looking at foundation students or pre-university students' language needs as most of the researchers are interested in investigating the language needs of students in a particular course of study.

The results of this needs analysis is helpful particularly in providing practical or pedagogical suggestions in terms of syllabus rationalization and the renewal of the English curriculum. It will facilitate the lecturers to revise the current English courses syllabi, instructional materials and learning activities based on the feedback of the study. The feedback is considered reliable as it is obtained from both students and lecturers. The results of this needs analysis will eventually helpful to serve as a basis to design or improve on the present English courses.

1.5 The Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the academic English language needs of foundation students in UNISEL. The discussion into the students' English language needs is addressed from the key concepts of 'target needs' and 'learning needs' highlighted by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The result of the findings of the present study can be used to design or revise the present English courses for foundation students. The required sources of data are obtained from different perspectives. First, the difficulties encountered by the students in using English language in their learning tasks with regard to listening skills, reading skills, speaking skills and writing skills are identified. This data is enhanced by means of the

lecturers' perceptions towards the students' language difficulties in those language aspects. Following this, the views on the degree of importance of the various language skills in helping the students to learn are drawn from both the students and lecturers. The data obtained is used to determine the extent to which the students' opinions match with those of their lecturers. As Kavaliauskiene and Užpaliene (2003) stress that learning styles and strategies are important aspects of needs analysis and the current trend in teaching is to take into account learners "wants", thus the data on the ways in which the students prefer to learn are also obtained in this study. For this, information on the students' preferred learning environment which includes classroom activities and learning materials are collected. This is an important aspect in material selection and adaptation for lecturers to decide on the teaching aids. Besides that, students are required to provide opinions on the current English courses (PE1 and PE2) as to how effective the two courses are in helping them to learn. With all this, students' expectations of the English language course content can be ascertained.

1.6 Research Questions

The following research questions address the key issues of Hutchinson & Waters's (1987) target needs and learning needs.

Research Question 1: English Language Ability and Difficulty

What are the specific language difficulties encountered by the students in learning at the university perceived by themselves, ESL lecturers and the subject lecturers?

(Data to answer RQ1 are obtained from part II of the students, ESL lecturers and the subject lecturers' questionnaires)

Research Question 2: English Language Needs

What perceptions do the students, ESL lecturers and subject lecturers have regarding the importance of the various listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks?

(Data to answer RQ2 are obtained from part III of the students, ESL lecturers and the subject lecturers' questionnaires)

Research Question 3: Learning Needs

What are the students and ESL lecturers' perceptions towards the design and the use of instructional materials for PE1 and PE2?

(Data to answer RQ3 are obtained from part IV of the students and ESL lecturers' questionnaires)

Research Question 4: Course Evaluation

What are the students' opinions regarding the current English courses (PE1 & PE2)?

(Data to answer RQ4 are obtained from part V of the students' questionnaires)

1.7 Conceptual Framework

In order to investigate the students' target needs and learning needs, a conceptual framework which comprises different approaches to needs analysis such as TSA (Target Situation Analysis), PSA (Present Situation Analysis) and LSA (Learning Situation Analysis) (refer to page 36-40) was incorporated in designing the present study. The incorporation of this framework allows the various types of language learning needs to be examined.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The present study is an attempt to investigate the academic English language needs of the students in UNISEL. This is done by identifying the language needs based on the perceptions of the students and lecturers. The study addresses the concern of English language skills and sub-skills necessary for the students to cope with the tertiary level study. This is predominantly helpful to the students as English is the main medium of instruction in UNISEL and different demand of the language is required in their learning. Apart from that, the students' difficulty in the usage of English is also diagnosed in the study. Thus, the institution and particularly the English language lecturers are able to take accurate step to remedy the students' weaknesses.

Besides that, the findings of the needs analysis also help to develop an understanding of the students' learning preferences and provide implications in the process of course development, classroom preparation, curriculum planning and review, material writing and implementation of teaching methods. The English language lecturers are able to modify the present syllabi if the needs analysis results reveal that the course content do not fulfil the academic language needs of the students. This study is then very constructive to recognise the weaknesses of the current English language courses.

In comparing with many of the previous needs analysis, the present study incorporates a wider scope when investigating the students' language needs. Besides looking at the students' 'necessities' and 'lacks' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), this study also looks at their 'wants' or preferences in learning, which is missing in many of those previous studies. The students' responses towards their 'wants' are not restricted as they are

asked to provide recommendations to enhance the whole language course. Besides the inclusion of different perspectives of language needs, the huge number of respondents involved in the present study also increases the credibility of the findings and its implications. This study is then, to a certain extent, fills the gap of previous studies.

1.9 Conclusion

English language, being the official language in Malaysia, is the medium for teaching and learning at tertiary level. In colleges and universities, a diverse range of English language courses are offered to cater to the different needs of the students such as proficiency English, English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes. This study is conducted to investigate the academic English language needs of foundation students at UNISEL with the emphasis on their ‘target needs’ and ‘learning needs’. Based on the outcomes of the analysis, the academic tasks that the students will encounter in learning and the skills required to perform the tasks can be identified.