

Female EFL Learners' Needs of an Advanced Communication Course in an Arab University

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Abstract

This needs analysis is conducted to examine the EFL communication skills needs of female EFL undergraduate students at a female Arab university located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia from their own perspectives. The significance of this study is to help the administrators and educators at this university to identify and accommodate the students' current needs and lacks which are required for the advanced course, i.e. English 102 (ENGL 102). The participants were 52 female undergraduate students from diverse majors enrolled in English 101 (ENGL 101) course. A questionnaire adapted from (Gravatt, Richards, & Lewis, 1997) was used to examine what the students believe they need and lack in an EFL communication skills. The questionnaire findings showed that some of the needs of EFL learners match with their weaknesses in listening and speaking skills. The results have also showed that in spite of the main focus of ENGL 102, which is to enhance the listening and speaking skills, students have expressed that they need more writing and reading skills practice implementations besides listening and speaking. This illustrates that the four-language skills reading, writing, speaking and listening are central and need to be integrated in the teachers' pedagogies. Nevertheless, when comparing the result of the questionnaire and the objectives of ENGL 102, it has been found that there is no discrepancy between them. Finally, the students prefer more practice, activities and vocabulary learning to improve their listening and speaking skills.

Keywords: needs analysis, listening, speaking, reading, writing

1. Introduction

Needs analysis is defined as actions conducted to collect information about the required knowledge which the learners will need to learn (Iwai et al. 1999; Richards, 2011) and is essential for curriculum designing (Li, 2014). Needs analysis is considered a basic step in curriculum design of a course which reflects how significant it is for such a procedure. Hajan & Adam (2015) clarify, “Needs analysis is thus part of syllabus development and it is normally needed before the development of teaching materials” (p.3868). In addition, Brown (2001) emphasises that needs analysis is considered the foundation of curriculum design as once the needs analysis is conducted and the needs are established, all the other processes such as choosing suitable materials, assessments measures and activities are conducted (as cited in Li, 2014). In other words, needs analysis is considered a crucial step for various reasons. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) explain that there are many factors have become central in the language programs development and one of which is the learner. They state, “Learners were seen to have different needs and interest, which would have an importance influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning” (p.8). Hence, considering the foreign language needs of learners contributes to the success of learners and language courses.

In fact, Richards (2011) have listed several significant aims for performing needs analysis. First, it is performed to determine the language skills which learners need in certain domains. Second, needs analysis shows the efficiency of certain language programs and helps the policy makers and teachers to revise them to meet the language needs. Third, it helps in detecting the EFL weaknesses of learners to enable the teachers to support the students’ learning. Fourth, needs analysis can differentiate between the learners’ present knowledge and weaknesses. Finally, needs analysis also contribute in discovering the current issues that learners may face in the foreign language learning. As mentioned, Richards (2011) has provided comprehensive views for needs analysis purposes. In EFL programs, needs analysis is considered substantial as the EFL needs of the learners are different.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) needs are divided in two main criteria; the first is target needs, while the other is learning needs. The target needs resemble the skills which learners want to acquire while the learning needs represent the required knowledge they need to acquire to attain their language needs (as cited in Richards, 2011). Both scholars categorized the learners’ needs into three areas which are “necessities (what the learner has to know to function effectively), lacks (what the learner knows and does not know already) and wants (what the learners think they need)” (as cited in Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.5). These distinctions of needs are beneficial for educators and teachers because they can always compare and refer to the needs for assessing the students’ attainments of their goals (Richards, 2011). As explained earlier, needs analysis has a vital role in curriculum design and development.

Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) explain that one of the issues and challenges faced in language teaching program is not performing needs analysis. “Many a times, the policy makers and the syllabus designers of Saudi Arabia fail to design a curriculum or syllabus after conducting a

needs analysis program. As a result, the outcome of teaching English fails to satisfy different bodies of ELT” (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013, p. 115). Hence, conducting needs analysis will validate the components of the curriculum of the language courses and help in evaluating their objectives when compared with the students EFL communication needs.

Since needs analysis is a key component of curriculum design and development, this research study aims at discovering the needs of undergraduate students who are currently enrolled in English 101 (ENGL 101) course at an Arab university in particular, in their listening and speaking. The rationale of this research will enable the course curriculum developers to address and accommodate the needs of students in English 101 before they proceed onto a more advanced course English 102 (ENGL 102).

In this study, the aims for conducting this needs analysis from the students’ perspectives are entailed in identifying the EFL communication weaknesses and needs of the foundation students in listening and speaking skills. In addition, it is performed to investigate if ENGL 102 course is meeting the required EFL students’ needs for their studies and careers. Recognizing the needs of students will help the teachers and administrators in accommodating and supporting the students’ learning needs in ENGL 102. The course is relatively new, in that case needs analysis will help policy makers in determining the adequacy of the advanced course for ENGL 101 students.

1.1 Background of the Courses

The Arab university is in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; It offers a variety of programs for undergraduate and postgraduate for female students. It also provides English language courses for undergraduate students to improve their English language proficiency and to ensure that they will be able to cope with the language skills demanded in their courses at their major. These courses are entitled English 101 (ENGL 101) and English 102 (ENGL 102). Both courses are newly developed courses offered to the students for the academic year 2016/2017. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the objectives of ENGL 101 and ENGL 102. The main objective of ENGL 101 is to enhance students’ academic writing to support their learning in their respective academic majors. The course emphasizes academic integrity; therefore, APA style citation and referencing are integrated with the course. Students’ listening and speaking are also given attention to this course as students practice and complete listening assignment and give oral presentations.

Furthermore, ENGL 102 emphasizes the four language skills. Although the main objective of the course is to teach the students the core of public speaking and the skills required to give successful speeches, reading and writing skills are also given attention as the topics of speeches should be built on extensive research and students are required to write outlines. Moreover, the students’ listening skills are stressed; they watch online videos as well as their peers’ speeches and are taught how to evaluate them constructively. As seen, both ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 aim at enhancing the students’ receptive and productive skills through emphasizing the four language skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. Nevertheless, both courses focus on all language skills; some tend to emphasize a primary skill and other skills are integrated to support the acquisition of the primary.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Speaking Skills*

According to Derakhshan, Khalili and Beheshti (2016), “speaking is a part of daily life that everyone should develop in subtle and detailed language” (p. 177). Therefore, when learning a foreign language, it is essential to acquire proper speaking skills to enable learners to communicate effectively and efficiently. Nowadays, oral communication is emphasised and considered significant in the academic field (Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem & Taqi, 2015). Gower, Philips, and Walter (1995) define speaking as “the production skill that is included in two main categories: accuracy and fluency. Accuracy consists of using vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation through some activities; fluency takes into account “the ability to keep going when speaking spontaneously” (as cited in Derakhshan, Khalili & Beheshti, 2016, p.178). Hence, teachers are encouraged at integrating activities that enhance both fluency and accuracy in EFL classrooms.

Public speaking is one the skills that is essential and necessary for EFL learners. Lindsay and Knight (2006) point out that language learners are considered successful in speaking skills when they have the ability to give coherent speeches, interact, and participate in discussions about different topics (as cited in Afshar & Asakereh, 2016, p. 113). Certainly, some learners may face difficulties in oral communication and according to Afshar & Asakereh (2016) many professionals have expressed that difficulties in speaking skills could emerge from different factors. Some of these difficulties are issues of pronunciation, inability to participate in discussions, lack of oral presentation skills and limited vocabulary repertoire. Firstly, Derwing and Rossiter (2002) assert “EFL learners were not satisfied with their own pronunciation and that they reported communication breakdowns due to their mispronunciation and inaccuracy of suprasegmental features” (as cited in Afshar & Asakereh, 2016, p. 113).

Secondly, Aleksandrak (2011) affirms that many of EFL learners are unable to participate in discussions because there are no chances to discuss issues or topics that relate to their lives (as cited in Afshar & Asakereh, 2016). Thirdly, giving oral presentations is another challenging aspect in speaking skills to learners of a foreign language as they lack the appropriate skills which will enable them to present confidently (Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem & Taqi, 2015). Finally, some learners may lack the fluency such as having inadequate vocabulary. Nation and Macalister (2010) say about learners, “Their language knowledge of vocabulary and sentence patterns may be substantial, the result of several year’s learning, but their ability to access and use this knowledge fluently is extremely low.” (p. 54).

2.2 *Listening Skills*

To begin with, it is necessary to define listening skills as Underwood (1989) defines listening skills as “the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear” (as cited in Gilakjani, Ahmadi, 2011, p.978). Another detailed definition was provided by O’Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) “listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual

information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement” (as cited in Gilakjani, Ahmadi, 2011, p.978). Nunan (1998) explained that when learners listen, they try to comprehend meanings from messages by observing not only the “verbal” but also the “non-verbal” clues (as cited in Gilakjani, Ahmadi, 2011). If O’Malley, Chamot, and Kupper definition was examined, it best describes what EFL learners are applying when listening to a foreign language as they try to make sense of the message through matching it with their previous knowledge and applying some strategies to assist them to comprehend the message fully and completely.

It is necessary to clarify that listening skills are considered a primary source of learning a foreign language as Nunan (1998) explains, “It has been claimed that over 50 percent of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening” (as cited in Nation & Newton, 2009, p.37). However, there are a few problems that may obstruct the development of listening skills as learners may face difficulties in understanding the spoken message. Some of these difficulties may be attributed to the speed of a speaker as Underwood (1989) asserts, “Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks” (as cited in Gilakjani, Ahmadi, 2011, p.981). Furthermore, Buck (2001) has also elaborated on some difficulties facing EFL learners in the listening skills such as the speakers “fast speech rate and unfamiliar accents” (as cited in Hamouda, 2013).

2.3 Four Strands in the Foreign Language Teaching

As Richard (2008) asserts that speaking and listening skills are considered essential in the foreign language pedagogy in all language teaching programs (as cited in Almutairi & Shukri, 2016). Moreover, Almutairi and Shukri (2016) explain, “when we learn a language we will first hear, then speak and later on we learn how to write or read” (p. 134). At the same time, integrating reading and writing are essential as well in the listening and speaking skills teaching. “Balancing the four-strands is a very important part of curriculum design, the neglect or over-emphasises of a strand is a major failing in many language courses” (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.52).

Nation and Newton (2009) explained the four strands of teaching a foreign language which are the meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development. They also argue that all strands should be given equal attention in the language classroom. The meaning-focused input is “learning through listening and reading—using language receptively” (Nation & Newton, 2009, p.4). However, the meaning-focused output as “involves learning through speaking and writing—using language productively” (Nation & Newton, 2009, p.4). As for Language-focused strand, “It involves the deliberate learning of language features such as pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse (Nation & Newton, 2009, p.7). Finally, the fluency development strand is to help learners to use and improve the existing knowledge of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills (Nation & Newton, 2009, p.9). Therefore, this principle of integrating all the four strands in developing the listening and speaking skills is noteworthy.

In 2014, a similar study was conducted by Al-Thiyabi to identify the listening skills needs of

the English Language Institute program (ELI) students at King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) in comparison to the objective of the listening course. It has been found that there was a gap in what was taught and the learners' needs in the listening skills. Those students' needs were underlined in understanding other accents, improving their pronunciation, learning vocabulary and understating the subject matter. The researcher proposed that the reason of this mismatch may be attributed to the teacher and the used material. Conversely, the results in this study showed that the objectives of the ENGL 102 course and the students' needs were similar to a great extent. The ENGL 102 course provides practices which involve listening, speaking reading and writing. Yet, the learners have recommended to have additional practice and activities to improve their listening and speaking fluency.

At Al Qassim University, Alqunayeer and Zamir (2016) have also conducted a need analysis to investigate the learning needs of undergraduate female students studying in the English language and translation department through analyzing their needs into necessities, wants and learning needs in the four skills reading, writing, listening and speaking. The results show the students face difficulties in listening and speaking skills more than reading and writing. They want to develop their communication skills as in listening and speaking for their professional field, while reading and writing regarded as less important to them. Unlike the results of this needs analysis, the students suggested more practice in reading and writing and perceive these two skills as important to improve their listening and speaking skills. Similarly, students from both studies expressed that they want more fun activities to help them in improving their communication skills. After all, students' needs are different and this signifies the importance of needs analysis procedure in language course to confirm the adequacy of the course to the learners.

This needs analysis has investigated the EFL listening and speaking skills needs of foundation students from diverse majors. It has illustrated the importance of listening and speaking skills for their study and careers from their own perspective. In addition, it has investigated the students' weaknesses and lacks in the EFL communication skills. It has given the students the platform to suggest what they want to do in order to improve their listening and speaking skills. Furthermore, the results of this needs analysis have shown the significance of integrating the four strands to improve the listening and speaking skills. Finally, the results of this study have demonstrated the importance of understanding the needs of learners in general and showed that all four-skills need to be given attention in the EFL pedagogy as they support the students' academic and career enterprise.

3. Research Questions

3.1 How much do students believe in the importance of communication skills (speaking and listening) for their studies?

3.2 How significant are communication skills (speaking and listening) for students' career, from their own perspectives?

3.3 What are the communication skills that the students of ENGL 101 lack?

3.4 What are the communication skills that the students in the current ENGL 101 need?

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample

52 female students from an Arab university currently enrolled in ENGL 101 course participated in this questionnaire. The samples of this research were selected based on purposive sampling because ENGL 101 students are expected to take the advanced course ENGL 102. The students accepted to voluntarily participate in answering the questionnaire. The majority of the students are freshman and their ages are ranging from 18 to 24. These students are studying different majors which are Business, Law, Design, and Health Sciences.

4.2 Data Collection Method

This study adapted the listening and speaking skills parts from (Gravatt, Richards, & Lewis, 1997) questionnaire and it was modified to suit the purpose of this study. This questionnaire was validated by three ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 teachers. It was piloted by ENGL 101 students to ensure its clarity and validity for the students. The questionnaire was created through Survey Monkey and the link of the questionnaire was sent to students. The questionnaire included 11 close ended questions and 1 open ended question. The questionnaire aimed at identifying what students' lack and need as Nation and Macalister (2010) state, "The learners themselves are also a very useful source of information about lacks" (p.29). Furthermore, the purpose of using a questionnaire is to easily identify what the students' needs are "a well-designed questionnaire can be a very useful source of information which can be reused for later courses" (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.29)

4.3 Data Analysis

The students' questionnaire responses were received and analyzed via Survey Monkey. Thematic analysis was performed manually on the open-ended question number 11. The repeated keywords received from the respondents were categorized into themes.

4.4 Results and Discussion

Question 1: How much do students believe in the importance of communication skills (speaking and listening) for their studies?

In a five-scale response varying from 'very often' to 'never' as shown in Figure 1, the students' responses to question 4 indicated that 46.15% very often use speaking skills in their studies. For the listening skills, the students' responses showed that 42.31% very often use these skills in their studies. The results also showed that students also use reading and writing skills in their studies. 32.69% very often use writing while 42.31% often use reading.

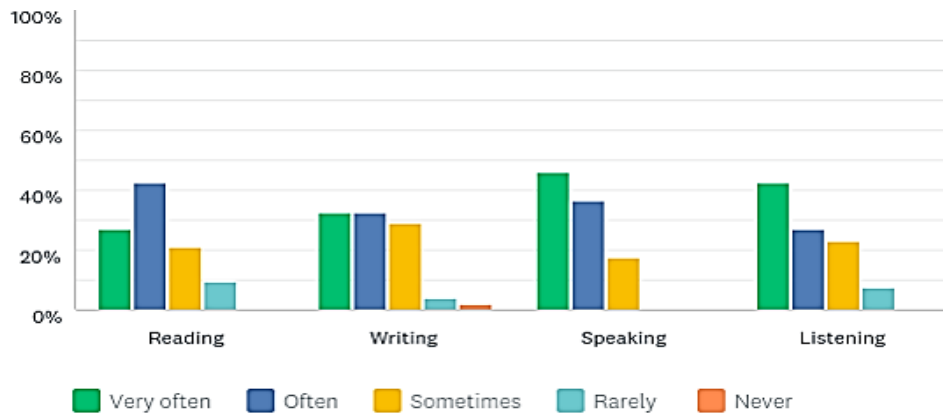


Figure 1

According to the respondents as shown in Figure 2, 57.69% believed that speaking is the most important skill to succeed in their studies followed by listening with 55.77%, while writing and reading slightly lagged behind with 53.85% and 51.92%, respectively. The students view speaking skill as important for their academic life which correlates with Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem & Taqi (2015). The findings signify the importance of other skills as well, as indicated in the data below; it is worth mentioning that those varying results may suggest integrating some pedagogy of other skills in ENGL 102. However, the main focus should remain on developing the speaking and listening skills.

O7: How important are the following abilities for your success in your chosen career?

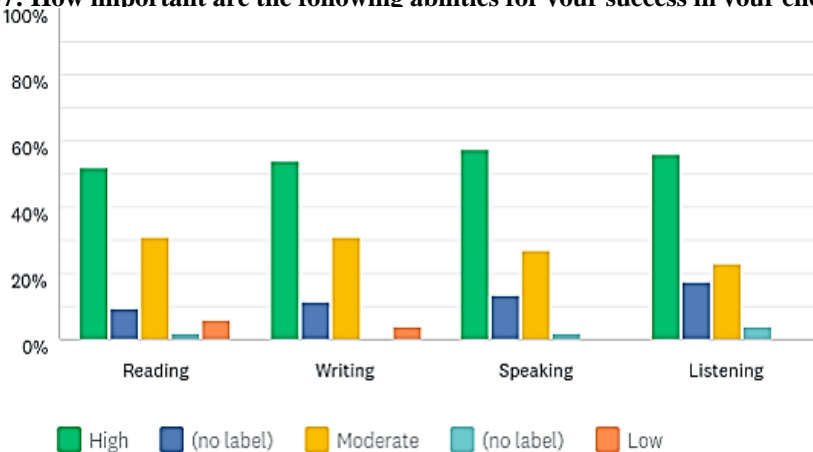


Figure 2

Question2: How significant are communication skills (speaking and listening) for students' career, from their own perspectives?

The majority of the students 73.08% reported that speaking is highly significant for their

careers followed by listening with 65.38%. writing with 57.69%, and lastly reading with 55.77%. This indicates that speaking skills are tremendously important for the students' careers. The results indicate that when all skills are integrated, they can contribute to students' success in their future careers. Figure 3 below illustrates the students' perceptions.

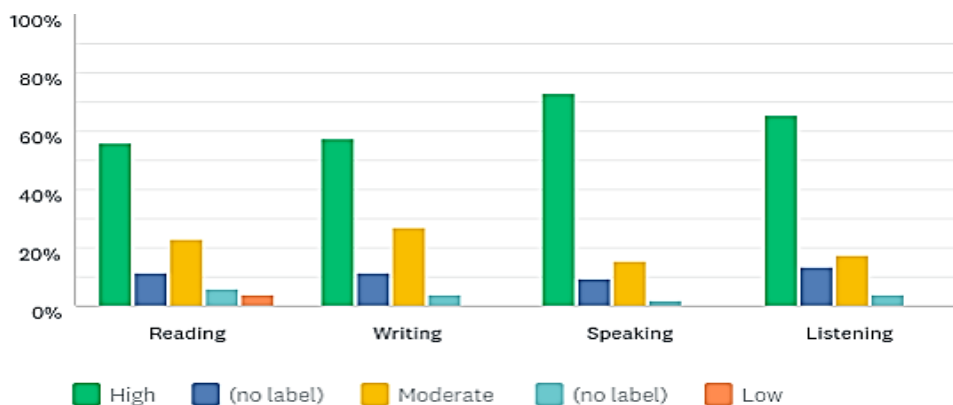


Figure 3

Question 3: What are the communication skills that the students of ENGL 101 lack?

In the survey, questions number 8, 9 and 10 were addressing what students lack in listening and speaking skills. In question 8, as referring to Figure 4, the students were asked to rate the frequency of certain statements. Most of the students with 46.15% stated that they sometimes have difficulty giving oral presentations, while 13.46% responded that they never face problems in this area. The findings correlate with Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem & Taqi (2015) as many students lack oral presentation skills. 48.08% reported that they sometimes have trouble wording what they want to say quickly, while 11.54% stated they never had such a problem. Half of the responses stated that they sometimes have trouble finding appropriate vocabulary to express ideas; however, 13.46% stated they never experienced a problem.

As earlier discussed in the literature review, the results affirmed the claim by Nation and Macalister (2010) that fluency problems such limited vocabulary and expressing ideas quickly are among the challenges faced by EFL learners in speaking skills. 40.38% of the students believed that they sometimes have difficulty with pronunciation of words whereas the same percentage chose 'never'. Only 3.85% stated that they always find troubles with pronunciation. The findings were consistent with Derwing and Rossiter (2002) that some learners might have challenges with their pronunciation of words which sometimes obstruct their development in speaking skills. Finally, 44.23% of the respondents sometimes find it difficult to participate in a discussion, while 9.62% stated that they always find it difficult. The results also supported what Lindsay and Knight (2006) noted about participating and interacting in a discussion as considered important in speaking skills.

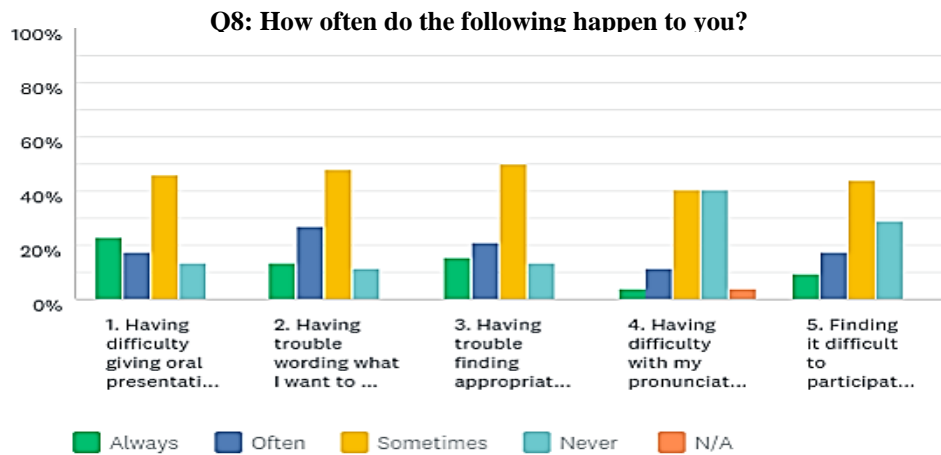


Figure 4

In question 9 in the questionnaire, students also were asked to determine how often certain situations happen to them. 48.08% of the students responded that they sometimes that have trouble understanding the lecture but none of them always finds this difficulty. The responses showed that 40.38% of the students never have trouble taking effective notes, whereas 36.54% of them did sometimes. 44.23% of the students stated that they never had any trouble understanding lengthy speeches in English; however, 38.46% have answered ‘sometimes’. 57.69% of the students reported that they never face trouble in understanding spoken instructions, while 30.77% did sometimes. 42.31% of the responses stated that students never find difficulty in providing feedback on speeches or presentations while 38.46% of them sometimes find it difficult, as illustrated in Figure 5.

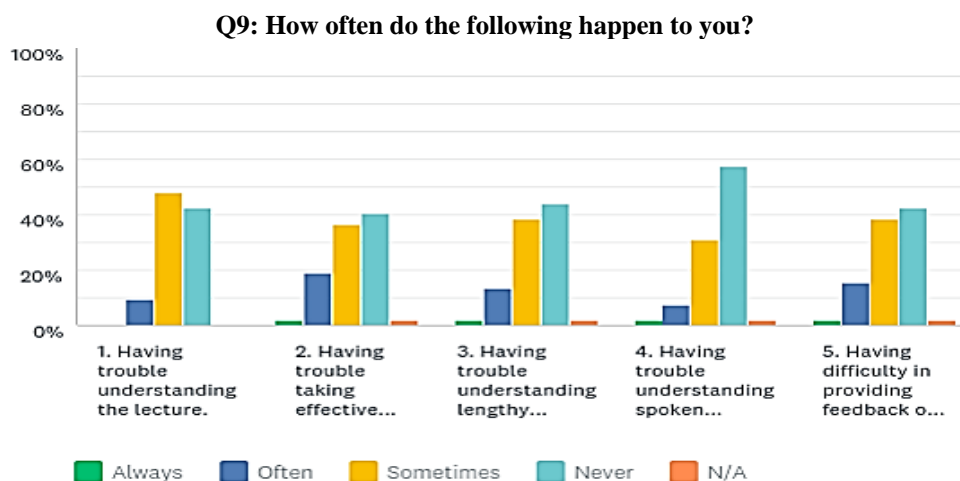


Figure 5

Moreover, question 10 discovers a problem with students understanding of lecturers or other students as shown in Figure 6. 55.77% of the students stated that they have sometimes

problems when the lecturers or students speak fast, while 36.54% did not have such problems. 57.69% of the responses reported that students sometimes face problems with accents that were different from the ones they were used to; however, 28.85% responded that they never have problems with different accents. Half of the responses say sometimes they face problems in understanding when more than one person is speaking and 26.92% answered ‘never’. The results of questions 9 and 10 support Buck’s (2001) and Underwood’s (1989) views on the challenges that are faced by EFL learners entailed in speedy speeches and different accents that might cause problems in understanding lectures or spoken instructions.

Q10: I have problems understanding lecturers or other students because:

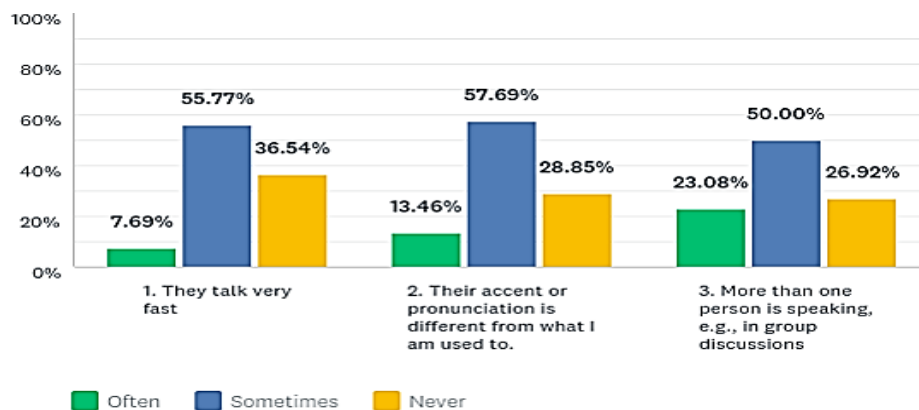


Figure 6

Question 4: What are the communication skills that the students in the current ENGL 101 need?

The questionnaire included an open ended question which stated “I would like to improve my listening and speaking skills, I would like more of..”. The answers were open to the students to write and express what they believe is needed to improve their listening and speaking skills. According to the students’ responses, thematic analysis was done to categorize their needs. The keywords detected from their answers were categorized into such items as vocabulary, practice, activities and others. As Almutairi and Shukri (2016) confirm, “One of the best ways to create a stress-free environment is by incorporating fun activities” (p.137). The first category was “practice” which included suggestions from students to improve their speaking and listening skills through practicing speaking and listening assignments, discussion and interaction with peers, oral presentations, workshops on speaking and listening, and free speaking practice with EFL teachers.

The second item that students believe it would help them improve their listening and speaking skills was acquiring more vocabulary. The third category was applying more fun activities which allow them to enhance their listening and speaking skills such as using flash

cards, watching movies and listening to music. Finally, the last category included other and miscellaneous needs such as support from teachers and peers and advice from teachers on how to improve both skills. Additionally, some of the students have suggested having literature class, improving their reading, and writing skills.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, conducting needs analysis is a fundamental step in curriculum design and development. Discovering the needs of learners can provide teachers with the scopes of their course. As Richards (2011) asserted the identified needs can serve as the objectives of the course and students' achievements can be assessed based on them. After conducting this needs analysis, it is recommended to educators and teachers to accommodate the students' needs in the next course ENGL 102. Those needs were entailed in more practice in listening and speaking through discussions and interaction with the teachers and peers and oral presentations entailed in meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output strands. Furthermore, they expressed their needs for more vocabulary learning and fun activities. In order to help student to learn more vocabulary, teachers can implement more language-focused learning practices in ENGL 102. Nation and Newton (2009) have provided a few suggestions such as implementing intensive reading and giving feedback on the students' writing. Additionally, students can be encouraged do some extensive reading on their own in order to acquire the language features and learn vocabulary.

As for the reading and writing skills, some of the respondents need more emphasis on reading and writing skills. Therefore, ENGL 102 could include more reading and writing practices integrated with listening and speaking. For instance, students might be asked to watch a video, write a summary on it, conduct research on the topic proposed via video and finally give an oral presentation. This is one of many examples which teachers might adopt in their courses which could help students use their existing knowledge of the language skills to improve their fluency. As noticed, the results show that integrating other skills in the listening and speaking pedagogy is required as argued by both researchers Nation and Newton. Therefore, balancing between the four strands is beneficial for the students' learning process in ENGL 102.

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