

Investigating EFL Students' EAP Needs on Productive Skills in Malaysian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Many international students are currently pursuing their post-secondary studies in Malaysia. At the beginning of each study programme in Malaysian universities, international students typically attend EAP courses for a better performance on campus. However, it is believed that these courses do not satisfactorily meet the EFL international students' needs, and this is probably because such courses do not take into consideration a comprehensive need analysis. This survey is one of the forerunning efforts to find out what tasks of English writing and speaking skills are actually needed by EFL international students in order to improve their ability of English as these two skills have been reported to be the most essential ones in academic settings. To this end, a *Need Analysis* questionnaire was employed to examine EFL international students' needs over productive skills. The questionnaire was sent to respondents via email and 60 post-secondary students responded and returned the questionnaire. The data analysis revealed that the majority of the participants considered speaking as the most important language skill that they needed to improve. Also, they reported that *Explaining Ideas*, *Giving a Presentation*, *Giving Reasons*, and *Discussing in Meetings* ranked on top of their speaking needs. In addition, the most needed writing tasks in EAP classes included *Taking Lecture Notes* and *Writing Journal Papers/Articles*. Moreover, gender was found to be significant in determining speaking tasks needed by EFL international students. Finally, PhD students reported to have different speaking needs compared to students studying Master and Bachelor programmes. Findings of this

study are majorly congruent with other studies on international students' needs in academic settings, which can be of worth for the current EAP/ESP courses offered in Malaysia for EFL international students.

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INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that the rapid growth in science, technology and economic activities in countries like Malaysia has given rise to an ever-increasing demand for the use of the English language. Nowadays, English is a common medium of instruction in most Malaysian universities and a means of communication throughout the country. Therefore, understanding the scientific and technical literature in English is difficult for people with insufficient knowledge of English (Nur Muhammad & Mohd Fauzi, 2009). Moreover, in the last few years, many international students from around the globe have flocked to Malaysia to further their post-secondary studies and obtain new knowledge.

As Berman and Cheng (2001) stated, at the universities where the medium of instruction is English, international students particularly the non-native speakers of English, have to overcome various challenges throughout their academic studies including English (learning), mostly at the beginning of their academic studies. To cope with academic demands, these students need to be competent in certain language areas and skills. In addition, the level of studies and the subject areas these international students study would determine the difficulties they face (Berman & Cheng, 2001). The increasing demand for English has resulted in changes in English language teaching requiring

new perspectives on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), simply because ESP deals with the student training in specialized language areas (Nur Muhammad & Mohd Fauzi, 2009). According to some reports, ESP courses have attracted the attentions of most universities and are required accordingly (Khairi Izwan Abdullah *et al.*, 1993).

Based on the literature, two main strands of ESP include English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). EOP deals with the preparation for occupations students may take up when they graduate (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 11), whereas EAP refers to any English teaching that relates to a study purpose (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

According to Kennedy and Bolitho (1990), EAP is commonly offered within the educational institutions to those students who need English for their academic courses. Hence, the disciplines and majors that the students take at post-secondary levels determine the language to be taught. It is reported by Nur Muhammad and Mohd Fauzi (2009) that the learners' specific needs determine the foundation of ESP (including EAP). In other words, the learners' reasons for learning mainly specify the decisions on the content and method of teaching. Therefore, need analysis is required to collect and analyze subjective information in order to define and validate the language requirement of the students. Such information will eventually lead to the construction of an English language course which can fulfil the specific needs

of the learners (Nur Muhammad & Mohd Fauzi, 2009).

The rationale of EAP programmes at the university level should be to offer academic and linguistic supports in order to help L2 students adjust to the academic expectations of English-speaking universities. Discovering the required strategies and skills for the international students to learn for successfully partaking in their academic classes has always been attempted by EAP research (Fox, Cheng, Berman, Song, & Myles, 2006). As a matter of fact, identifying related factors to academic success and detecting the effect of EAP programmes seem essential for the international education community, for individual institutions of higher learning, and for the students themselves (Fox *et al.*, 2006). Hence, it is obvious that language teaching programmes should not be designed without a systematic needs analysis (Long, 2005).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Nowadays, English is necessary for obtaining a job, getting a promotion and performing effectively in the world of work (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009). The demand for EAP courses is increasing globally due to the fact that such courses are necessary not only for educational purposes in countries where English is the mother tongue language, but also in other countries (like Malaysia) where English is the medium of instruction in universities (Eslami, 2010). The significance of English in higher learning institutions is being widely accentuated in Malaysia today.

Various universities in Malaysia offer ESP/EAP courses to expose their international students to a different kind of English language from the one they have already experienced during schools (Nor Aslah, Samsiah, Syazliyati, & Kamaruzaman, 2009), and to equip them in terms of specific needs of English language (Momtazur, 2009). Furthermore, ESP/EAP courses are offered to provide a variety of English learning programmes for EFL students who have come to Malaysia for their post-secondary studies in order to enhance their academic abilities. In most Malaysian Universities today, English language is the medium of instruction, and because of its importance, universities make English language courses compulsory to be taken by those students who do not hold any acceptable TOEFL or IELTS band score.

Nevertheless, the issue now is whether the current EAP courses in Malaysia are appropriate as far as the students' needs are concerned. Moreover, it is important to consider the students' needs to ensure their success in the academic setting. Another issue is whether or not these courses adequately prepare the students to function according to their specializations (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, in the public universities of Malaysia, there are no ESP/EAP courses offered for graduate studies based on the language needs analysis (Momtazur, 2009). Accordingly, the textbooks selected for foreign students in Malaysian Universities (among them Iranian EFL students) and the courses do not meet the students' real academic needs

and demands. There has always been an issue that EAP programmes have been developed without conducting a systematic needs analysis both from the students' and instructors' perspectives (Eslami, 2010).

Since needs assessment plays an important role in all aspects of language education planning, and in EAP/ESP in particular (Benesch, 1996), development of a syllabus based on the learners' needs and analysis of the target situation is favoured by the communicative approach. Needs are considered to have diverse categories and are not observed as a unitary term anymore (Hoseini & Shahriari, 2010). Components of a language course are determined by a needs analysis that plays a pragmatic role in leading the language classes (Momtazur, 2009). Through needs analysis procedure, information about learners' needs is collected (Richards, 2001). The importance of a need analysis is stressed through ESP and EAP, as well as general language courses, task-based curricula, and performance-assessment (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009). EAP begins with the learner and the situation (Hamp-Lyons, 2001). Curriculum development of EAP is guided by learners' needs. That is why needs analysis is necessary for EAP curriculum development through collecting data on learners' background and goals, linguistic demands, and preferred learning strategies (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999). Yet, there are no ESP/EAP courses offered for graduate students based on the language needs analysis of the international students in Malaysian Universities (Momtazur, 2009). Accordingly, any effort to shed light

on the current situation will contribute not only to the Malaysian authorities inside the country, but also to the curriculum developers in other countries where English is a second language.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

After describing the academic context within Malaysia briefly, it is worth mentioning that many Iranian students (who are typical EFL learners) have recently chosen Malaysia as a country overseas for furthering their post-secondary studies by studying various disciplines in international Malaysian Universities. The Iranian community is rapidly growing and has turned into one of the largest communities all over Malaysia. Although the Malay Language or Bahasa Melayu (BM) is the national language within Malaysia, English language is used widely in university or business settings. Thus, international students (among them the Iranian typical EFL Learners) need to be proficient enough in the language to effectively perform their academic affairs. They should be also equipped with the necessary language skills and sub-skills by attending EAP courses so that they will be able to cope well with the complex language used in textbooks, research journals, technical reports, etc.

In the current academic setting of Malaysia, English language courses only expose the students to the four major skills generally. Students face difficulties in coping with these courses as the faculties also require them to have other relevant skills such as presentation or public speaking

skills, report writing, or product report skills that are applicable in their respective programmes (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, it is significant to identify which skills of English language need more focus and attention. A study at the University of Alberta in Canada revealed that 37.7% and 36.7% of international students found speaking and writing a big problem, respectively. A similar proportion found it difficult to understand their instructors, and that academic stress was high among over two thirds of the group (Chacon, 1998, as cited in Berman & Cheng, 2001). In this situation, the needs analysis may help us specify several language functions which occur frequently in certain contexts such Malaysia (Blue, 2006, as cited in Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, identifying the most required skill by the international students seems essential. Also, it is of worth to identify the students' needs in terms of speaking and writing skills.

Findings of a study in Malaysia by Nor Aslah and associates (2009) revealed that the students of art and design had problems in acquiring the English language skills. This confirms the weaknesses of English Language courses in helping the students to acquire the language skills needed by the faculty. Moreover, it was concluded that relevant actions should be taken to ensure that the students' needs are fulfilled and that they will effectively perform in the study programme. In addition, it is mentioned that the English language courses may have not given the students what they actually need to ensure their success in the academic context

or specialized field as the analyses of the students' English course results showed a high failure rate among the subjects of the mentioned research. This failure rate was reported to have contributed to the students' bad performance in specialized courses (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Drawing on the issues pinpointed earlier, it seems that running needs analysis in Malaysian universities to focus on English language skills needed by the international students may reveal significant results to help course developers and authorities to conduct EAP courses more effectively. This survey is actually an attempt to do so.

In line with this, it is essential to know whose needs are to be analyzed, and to know specific English requirements expected, and the kind of English language skills that are prioritized as more important than the others when preparing EAP syllabi (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, it is relevant to know the specific English language needs among the international students to make them aware of the required skills so as to function effectively in their studies. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) proposed an approach to ESP which focuses on learning needs by referring to various factors such as the learners' gender, age, socio-cultural background, background knowledge, attitudes, etc. Likewise, Grave (2000) highlights that gender can be an important construct to be examined while conducting need analysis. In this study, gender was regarded as an important construct to be examined to determine whether or not it affects the international students' needs in EAP courses.

In Iran, all schools and English institutes hold gender segregated classes, while in Malaysian English institutes and schools mostly hold co-ed classes. This fact might affect the Iranian students' needs in EAP classes in terms of their gender because of their cultural and educational backgrounds. Thus, running gender-based needs analysis can contribute to our understanding of the language skills needed by male and female international students, too.

In addition to gender, the learners' background knowledge, English proficiency and the majors they are studying need to be taken into consideration (Grave, 2000; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In Malaysia, the current EAP syllabi in the universities are taught across all disciplines. Also, students in EAP classes pursue different programmes, namely, master and PhD. Meanwhile, students of different specializations take the same EAP course of the same 'generalized' syllabus. This may not always be advantageous in the context of students' academic development. Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) pointed out that EAP should focus on specific language that is appropriate to the target discipline. Thus, there is a danger that the current EAP courses may not be able to fully cater to students' specific language needs, especially when they come from different disciplines of studies and different educational levels.

The findings from this study can help practitioners who are deeply concerned with preparing EAP courses because needs analysis is a very fundamental first step prior to designing and developing a language

course, producing materials for teaching and learning, and developing language tests. Nonetheless, it is demonstrated that there are no ESP/EAP courses offered for graduate studies based on the language needs analysis in Malaysia (Momtazur, 2009). ESP/EAP courses are in fact as varied as the universities offering them since there is little or no research which has specifically investigated the kind of language support that has the greatest impact on supporting L2 students' transition to and engagement with undergraduate studies (Berman & Cheng, 2001), nor is there any sufficient information regarding individual student's factors that impedes or assists academic success (Fox *et al.*, 2006). This study is an effort to clarify such a context.

As far as the objectives and results of this study are concerned, a new perspective on needs analysis ought to be taken up by Malaysian universities. While it is essential to identify the skill-related needs of the international students, focusing on their gender, level of education, majors, and proficiency levels are also the factors which need to be taken into account. Having EAP courses based on the students' level of education, majors, and principles they are studying and finally their gender may be costly but efficient enough as the courses can be more specified and succinct.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study attempted to achieve the following objectives:

- To determine which productive skill has priority of being improved for EFL

students.

- To identify the tasks of writing skills needed by EFL post-secondary students for the betterment of their post-secondary studies in Malaysia.
- To identify the tasks of speaking skills needed by EFL post-secondary students for the betterment of their post-secondary studies in Malaysia.
- To determine whether gender is a determinant of EFL post-secondary students' English needs.
- To determine whether educational level determines English needs of EFL post-secondary students in Malaysia.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the established objectives, this research tried to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. Which productive skill has priority of being improved for the EFL students?
2. What tasks of writing skills do EFL post-secondary students need for the betterment of their post-secondary studies in Malaysia?
3. What tasks of speaking skills do EFL post-secondary students need for the betterment of their post-secondary studies in Malaysia?
4. Is gender a determinant of EFL post-secondary students' English needs?
5. Does educational level determine English needs of EFL post-secondary students in Malaysia?

NEEDS ANALYSIS

All ESP/EAP courses ought to be based on a perceived need (Hutchinson & Waters, 1994). Thus, needs analysis is regarded as critical to ESP (Robinson, 2001). According to the learner-centred approach of language learning, teaching/learning programmes ought to be responsive to the learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991). EAP begins with the learner and the situation (Hamp-Lyons, 2001). Moreover, EAP curriculum development is directed by the learners' needs leading to a research area known as 'needs analysis'. Michael West of India in the 1920s coined the term "needs analysis", which is the first step in developing a language curriculum (Brown, 1995). Students' needs assessment seems to be fundamental to EAP (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). One distinctive feature of EAP courses is defining the objectives and contents of each course consistent with the learners' needs in the target language and determining how they need to perform in conforming to the norms and conventions of their academic disciplines (Eslami, 2010). Needs analysis is an unending systematic process of information gathering about learners' needs, as well as interpreting the information to help make course decisions to meet their needs (Khamkaew, 2009). Accordingly, for producing and teaching an efficient course, teachers and planners are responsible to examine the learners to identify the language skills they mostly need and to determine whether the objectives of the programmes and the learners' requirements are being accomplished. It is

also used for planning the learners' and the programme's future directions and making informed decisions (Purpura & King, 2003; Santopietro & Peyton, 1991, as cited in Eslami, 2010).

Needs analysis is an imperative tool in distinguishing where the learners are and where they should be (Khamkaew, 2009). Therefore, the needs analysis must be initiated to guide EAP curriculum development by surveying the learners so as to collect data on their background and goals, linguistic and behavioural demands, and preferred learning/teaching strategies (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999).

Language Needs Analysis is a set of tools, techniques and procedures used in determining the language contents and learning processes. It entails a systematic means of gathering information about learners' language needs (Khamkaew, 2009). By employing appropriate teaching methods based on a curriculum and context, learners' needs will be met. In order to improve the learners' English language skills and to identify their needs, a need analysis is mainly conducted which is the chief stage in ESP (Momtazur, 2009) and it is the foundation of ESP that leads to a focused course (Brown 1995; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Needs analysis is claimed to be significant in ESP although it is absolutely not the only educational enterprise which makes use of it (Robinson, 1991).

Regarding the needs analysis, we must know how the notion of 'need' is to be conceptualized. Brindley (1989) maintains

that we need to make a distinction between the different concepts of need such as the distinction between *necessities* or *demands*, and learners' *wants* and the methods of bridging the gap between the two. For Berwick (1989), 'need' is a measurable discrepancy or a gap between the existing and the desired future conditions.

Robinson (1991) considered needs as linguistic deficiencies which are goal-oriented and can be regarded as objectives. Also, the 'need' must be considered in the educational context where the study occurs (Holmes & Celani, 2006, as cited in Eslami, 2010). Because students' needs vary in different contexts, needs analysis can be of help if the academic language needs are considered properly and specificity is sought within the specific target use, particularly in the universities (Deutch, 2003). For such reasons, the current survey attempted to analyze the needs of the EFL international students in terms of productive skills in Malaysia to provide informative data about their needs within the given context.

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)

Teachers' enthusiasm to meet learners' needs and wants resulted in ESP, which actually emerged as a discipline in the 20th century. ESP primarily focuses on furthering the students' linguistic development. Through this focus on the learners' demands, teachers will be able to identify the real needs of the learners in order for them to use English for specific purposes (Griva, 2009). Also, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998)

asserted that developments in the world economy in the 1950s and 1960s, science and technology growth, growing use of English as the international language of science, technology and business, as well as increased number of international students studying in UK, USA, and Australia have all given birth to the ESP movement. People across the globe who want to learn English language because it is the key language for the fields of science, technology and commerce reinforce the ESP context. ESP is an approach to language teaching, in which all decisions as to context and method are based on the learner's reason for learning, i.e. it is based on the learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Momtazur, 2009).

Because ESP has expanded as a new concern for the needs and feelings of the learners, needs analysis seems to be advantageous for ESP practitioners in programme design and planning of any

language course since the aim in ESP is to meet the needs of particular learners (Robinson, 1991). ESP courses can be purposeful only if they are based on a strong analysis of the learners' needs. Therefore, any ESP course varies from another in terms of skill selection, topics, situations, functions, as well as the language (Robinson, 1991).

ESP is an 'enterprise' involving "education, training and practice", and drawing upon three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy, and students' specialist areas of interest" (Robinson, 1991). Robinson categorizes ESP situations into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). This division can be displayed in a tree diagram as in Fig.1 (Robinson, 1991; Robinson, 2001a, Robinson, 2001b; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

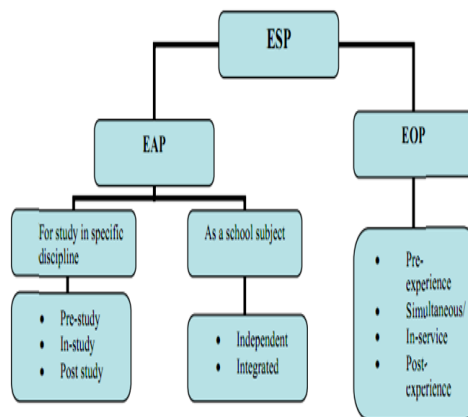


Fig.1: The ESP Tree Diagram

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES (EAP)

EAP, a branch of ESP which emerged in the 1970s, refers to the specific English language teaching related to academic purposes (Momtazur, 2009). EAP refers to any English teaching that relates to a study purpose (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). In fact, the students' academic needs in the discipline-specific course direct the EAP component and EAP is taught within educational institutions to students requiring English for their academic courses (Fox, *et al.*, 2006). EAP tries to help international students overcome linguistic and cultural difficulties involved in studying through the medium of English. Teaching and learning of EAP presents its own challenges, problems, opportunities, failings, and successes (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). The reason why EAP teaching differs from general-purpose ESL instruction is that EAP instruction aims at increasing the capabilities of L2 students to manage academic work more successfully by focusing on the development of academic skills and strategies; it also supports the acquisition of specific academic subject matter (Fox *et al.*, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study is descriptive non-experimental and it employs the Needs Analysis technique. To conduct a survey among the Iranian post-secondary students (typical EFL Learners) studying and residing in Malaysia, a questionnaire was used since

the questionnaire can reveal noteworthy information on rating the importance of language skills in ESP/EAP courses (Fox *et al.*, 2006). Also, a questionnaire, with a quick and easy coverage, is proper in needs analysis surveys (Long, 2005). The data collected from the questionnaires [the Likert scale data that ranged from 1 (not necessary) to 5 (very necessary)] were given numerical values used for testing the research questions.

Research Instrument

Particularly for the field of ESP/EAP, surveys and questionnaires are able to provide significant information on rating the importance of language skills and the generic difficulties faced by L2 students (Fox *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, questionnaires are valuable for ascertaining the pervasiveness of existing views (Long, 2005). In addition to the quick and easy coverage, using questionnaires can be as an appropriate approach to needs analysis especially when they are employed in an unfamiliar domain or alone (Long, 2005). Hence, a questionnaire in 2 parts was adopted from Prapawuttikul's research (2003) and adapted to suite the objectives of this study. It seemed that productive skills were needed more than the other skills since the students in an ESL context, where the medium of instruction is English, are required to communicate and be involved in encoding and decoding processes more frequently (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Fox *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, the questionnaire only focused on speaking and writing needs

analysis (Productive Skills). Subsequently, the adapted questionnaire was sent to two PhD candidates for validity. After applying their suggestions, the final validated questionnaire was prepared for the purpose of data collection.

The questionnaire contained two main parts: Part A elaborated on demographic data seeking information on gender, education level, years of living in Malaysia, years of studying English, etc. Part B was a 5-point Likert Scale (in two sub-scales) focusing on writing and speaking needs analysis. The criteria used to analyze Likert scale data ranged from 1 (not necessary) to 5 (very necessary).

In part B of the questionnaire, two subsections examined the respondents' needs. The first part elicited students' responses on Writing Skill Needs, which included writing a thesis, writing a proposal, writing a progress reports, writing technical reports, writing journal papers/articles, writing business letters, writing email, taking lecture notes, and writing minutes of a meeting.

The Speaking Skill Needs included Giving reasons, Explaining ideas, Describing technical functions, Negotiation, Telephone Conversations, Discussing in meetings, Reporting in meeting sessions, Asking for opinion, Giving a presentation, and Giving lectures.

To examine the reliability, Chronbach's alpha was obtained for all the items in the questionnaire. Table 1 demonstrates that the standardized alpha for the 19-item scale was 0.84, indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

TABLE 1
Reliability Statistics for the Questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items
.83	.84	19

Sampling Design: Participants

As highlighted by Long (2005), a *random sample* is preferable because each member of the population will have an equal chance of being selected. However, this method is costly in terms of time and money, if the population is large (Long, 2005). Other random methods are also avoided because randomness of the selection could result in unequal numbers of undergraduate and graduate courses offered by the faculty, and the target reading tasks for which are often different (Long, 2005). As the population of this study was rather large, a *purposive sample* was chosen to avoid the abovementioned issues. In this method, the group chosen by the analyst is supposedly typical and it is only as good as the criteria for judging typicality which is unknown (Long, 2005).

Using purposive sampling, the researchers chose 110 Iranian students living and studying in different Malaysian main universities to ensure better representativeness. These students were at different post-secondary educational levels. It crucial to note that all the selected students had passed their universities' Compulsory English Course (EAP) which is meant to improve and enhance their academic English proficiency to better cope with their academic work. This sample was selected to

help shed light on real productive needs of the Iranian students. As mentioned earlier, most universities in Malaysia offer ESP/EAP courses. However, no needs analysis has been conducted prior to designing such courses (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009; Momtazur, 2009). Hence, carrying out needs analysis for appropriately determining the international students' real needs on productive skills is necessary. This research is an effort to do so.

According to Long (2005), if the questionnaires are mailed, they can obtain considerable amounts of focused, standardized, and organized data, potentially from a large sample of respondents, and they do so quickly and cheaply. They can accomplish all these, and with the option of anonymity (Long, 2005). Thus, copies of the prepared questionnaire determining the writing and speaking needs were emailed to all 110 students. However, only 64 copies were returned, making a response rate of 54.54%. The 4 answered questionnaires were incomplete, so they were discarded. The rest constituted 60 valid ones. Table 2 displays the respondents' profiles.

TABLE 2
Respondents' Profiles

Gender	Male	63.3%
	Female	36.6%
Education Level	Undergraduate	5%
	Master	23%
	PhD	57%

Data Analysis

The responses from the questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 17.0. The statistical procedures used to suite the objectives of this study included:

- a. The data concerning the gender, years of study, years of staying in Malaysia, preferred productive skill to be improved, etc., were presented in *Percentage*.
- b. A five-point Lickert scale was employed to determine the Iranian EFL learners' needs on speaking and writing skills. This scale was used in the questionnaire to determine the level of necessity on the criteria of Lickert Scale (Table 3):
- c. To interpret the necessity of writing and speaking needs, *Mean (x)* was used. A higher mean score (*x*) of each item indicated higher needs in English writing and speaking of the Iranian EFL students. On the other hand, a lower mean score (*x*) indicated lower needs in the same productive skills.
- d. Independent sample t-test, ANOVA, and Post-hoc tests, such as Tukey and Tamhane tests, were conducted to determine the difference in writing and speaking needs of Iranian EFL learners in terms of their gender, and three levels of education. The results are presented in subsequent sections.

Table 3
Criteria of Likert Scale

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Needs</i>	<i>Mean Range</i>
5	<i>Very Necessary</i>	4.50-5.00
4	<i>Necessary</i>	3.50-4.49
3	<i>average</i>	2.50-3.49
2	<i>less necessary</i>	1.50-2.49
1	<i>not necessary</i>	1.00-1.49

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to obtain clear results, each research question of this study was independently examined. The findings are as follows:

Research Question 1

Which productive skill has priority of being improved for the Iranian students?

The collected data were analyzed through a descriptive analysis to find out the percentages in respect to the first question. In fact, the most significant finding of this research was that 80% of the respondents chose speaking skill as the number one skill which needed to be improved. Only 20% of the respondents chose writing as the premier productive skill which has priority to be improved.

This is consistent with various studies on the perceptions of students as they rank-order the importance of language, academic and social skills (Fox *et al.*, 2006). Also, the findings of this survey, particularly ones answering this question, are consistent with Berman and Cheng's (2001) survey. They reported that the most difficult language skills for L2 students as a whole were academic oral communication (e.g., giving presentations, participating in class discussions) and writing (e.g., examinations, essays, reports) after conducting a needs assessment of L2 undergraduate and graduate students, as well as native English speaking students in Canada.

Sun (1987) conducted a study at a Canadian university asserting that writing and oral communications were important to both Chinese graduate students and

visiting scholars. Skills which support social interaction and communication were also emphasized by the students in that particular research. In another study involving the rating of language skills, once again, more difficulties were reported by L2 graduate students with regards to speaking and writing than any other skills (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004).

Theoretically, speaking and oral communication seem to be essential in EAP courses as the students need to survive on campus and perform acceptably in their studies in Malaysia, according to the findings of the current survey. This is also asserted by Berman and Cheng (2001), who stated that the international students need to be competent in certain language areas and skills to cope with their academic demands.

Research Question 2

What tasks of writing skills do EFL post-secondary students actually need for the betterment of their post-secondary studies in Malaysia?

To examine this question, means (x) were obtained for 9 writing items rated by the students so as to specify the tasks considered to be the most required (*Necessary*) (see Table 4). As for the writing skill needs analysis, the respondents decided that this skill was not as important as speaking for them. However, all of them chose *Taking Lecture Notes* as necessary, with a mean of 3.80 and standard deviation of 0.91. Similarly, *Writing Journal Papers/Articles* comes next as the necessary writing task for EFL graduate and postgraduate students in Malaysian international universities, with

the mean score of 3.67 and the standard deviation of 1.23.

The rest of the tasks were selected to be of average necessity for these students. *Writing a Thesis* and *a Proposal* had a mean of 3.47, followed by *Writing Emails* with a mean of 3.40, and *Writing Progress Reports* obtained 3.37. The mean for *Writing Business Letters*, *Writing Minutes of a Meeting*, and *Writing Technical Reports* had lower importance, with the mean scores of 3.20, 3.03, and 2.90, respectively.

Although Malaysian universities do not thoroughly follow a needs analysis to design the EAP/ESP courses (Momtazur, 2009), it seems that education authorities need to consider the findings of this study for EAP course designs in Malaysia. Therefore, the needs analysis may help us to specify language functions which occur frequently in certain contexts (Blue, 2006, as cited in Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009), and it will assist us in identifying the specific English language needs among international students. As mentioned before, international students indicated writing and speaking as big challenges for them in the academic settings

(Chacon, 1998, as cited in Berman & Cheng, 2001). Hence, it is relevant to pay attention to the real needs of these students and plan a course that could help them succeed in their studies. Although in Malaysia, most university EAP courses only expose the students to the four major skills in general, the courses do not fully cater to students' specific language needs and they consequently face difficulties in coping with these courses as the faculties also require them to have other relevant skills such as report writing or reporting skills that are applicable in their respective programmes (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, appropriating the syllabuses in accordance with the students' needs will definitely enhance their academic performances.

Having conducted extensive research in the writing practices of graduate students, both native English and L2 speakers alike, Prior (1995; 1998; 2001) argues that learning in academia is a complex process and that communication, especially in writing, must always be understood as a situated literate activity.

TABLE 4
Needed Writing Tasks

Writing Needs Analysis		Mean	Standard Deviation
1	<i>Taking Lecture Notes</i>	Necessary	3.80
2	<i>Writing Journal Papers/Articles</i>	Necessary	3.67
3	<i>Writing A Thesis</i>	Average	3.47
4	<i>Writing A Proposal</i>	Average	3.47
5	<i>Writing Emails</i>	Average	3.40
6	<i>Writing Progress Reports</i>	Average	3.37
7	<i>Writing Business Letters</i>	Average	3.20
8	<i>Writing Minutes Of A Meeting</i>	Average	3.03
9	<i>Writing Technical Reports</i>	Average	2.90

**Valid N (listwise): 60

Writing “does not stand alone as the discrete act of a writer, but emerges as a confluence of many streams of activity: reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling as well as transcribing words on paper” (1998). Morita (2000), Imber and Parker (1999) and Thornton (1999) specifically investigated the oral discourse needs of L2 international students. Morita (2000) spent 8 months observing both L2 and native English speaking students enrolled in an oral academic presentations class, as parts of their TESL graduate programme. She found that students became apprenticed into academic discourse by moment-by-moment negotiating of expertise with instructors and peers, as they prepared their materials, observed others, and presented their own work. She also observed that both L2 and native English speakers felt insecure and anxious about their knowledge, skills and performances. In spite of their language difficulties, many L2 students were as successful as their native English-speaking peers in participating in discussions and giving presentations. With careful preparation, effective uses of visual aids, practice rehearsals, handouts and note-cards as prompts, L2 students were able to present their topics with confidence and clarity. Consistent with some researchers (Casanave, 2000, 1992a, & 1992b; Spack, 1997; Prior, 2001; Belcher, 1994; all cited in Fox *et al.*, 2006), Morita (2000) argues that “academic discourse socialization is not a predictable, entirely oppressive, unidirectional process of knowledge transmission from expert to

novice, but a complex, locally situated process that involves dynamic negotiations of expertise and identity” (p. 304).

Research Question 3

What tasks of speaking skills do EFL post-secondary students need for the betterment of their post-secondary studies in Malaysia?

Means (\bar{x}) were obtained over 10 speaking items rated by the students to determine the tasks were considered to be the most required (*Necessary*) (see Table 5). The respondents of this study had chosen speaking as the most important skill, which needed attention and improvement. Meanwhile, the number one task needed was *Explaining Ideas* within an academic setting, with a mean of 4.27 and a standard deviation of 0.93. The next necessary tasks chosen were *Giving a Presentation* on campus with a mean of 4.07 and a standard deviation of 1.19, *Giving Reasons* with a mean of 4.03 and standard deviation of 0.55, and *Discussing in Meetings* which had a mean of 4.03 and a standard deviation of 0.66. The rest of the tasks; namely, *Negotiation*, *Telephone Conversations*, *Giving Lectures*, *Describing Technical Functions*, *Asking for Opinion*, and finally *Reporting in Meeting Sessions* were respectively selected to be needed on an average rate for these students. Detailed information is displayed in Table 5.

As for speaking, the results of a study reported by Fox and colleagues (2006) showed that international students generally thought daily conversation as manageable; nevertheless, academic speaking such as in presentation was indicated as a problem.

Similarly, the findings of the current study prove that *Giving a Presentation* is a high need while *Telephone Conversation* was average. It is worth noting that in Malaysia, universities ought to design courses which emphasize more on academic speaking tasks (as ranked by these EFL learners) to help the students succeed in their academic work. In another study, Schneider and Fujishima (1995) concluded that the reasons for course failure of a Chinese graduate student in the US could be the lack of communication between the ESL instructors in the language support programme and the faculty in the academic departments from which this particular student was taking courses. Such high stake issues need careful consideration since EAP course authorities are responsible not only for the course design but also for the relationships and socio-affective factors as well. Whatever the situation might be, we should consider this fact that the students in EAP classes tried to employ various strategies to learn and improve. Studies have shown that L2 students practise, rehearse and memorize materials for oral presentations when asked to categorize

some of the learning strategies they utilize to help them manage their coursework and activities (Fox *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, EAP courses need to centre more on better contents, needed tasks, and appropriate materials for reinforcing the students' abilities of productive skills.

Research Question 4

Is gender a determinant of EFL post-secondary students' English needs?

L2 literature is replete with studies which tried to determine whether gender plays an important role in distinguishing different activities. Our assumption is that gender is not significant in needs assessment. As displayed in Table 2, 63.3% of the respondents are male and 36.6% are females. According to the data presented in Table 6, the means for the male and female groups are 3.32 and 3.43, respectively. In order to identify whether male and female EFL students differ in terms of their writing needs in Malaysia, an independent sample t-test was conducted. Based on the data given in Table 7, no significant difference was obtained for the writing needs of the

TABLE 5
Needed Speaking Tasks

Speaking Needs Analysis		Mean	Standard Deviation
1	<i>Explaining Ideas</i>	<i>Necessary</i> 4.27	0.93
2	<i>Giving A Presentation</i>	<i>Necessary</i> 4.07	1.19
3	<i>Giving Reasons</i>	<i>Necessary</i> 4.03	0.55
4	<i>Discussing In Meetings</i>	<i>Necessary</i> 4.03	0.66
5	<i>Negotiation</i>	<i>Average</i> 3.93	0.89
6	<i>Telephone Conversations</i>	<i>Average</i> 3.87	0.99
7	<i>Giving Lectures</i>	<i>Average</i> 3.69	1.40
8	<i>Describing Technical Functions</i>	<i>Average</i> 3.63	1.11
9	<i>Asking For Opinion</i>	<i>Average</i> 3.57	0.76
10	<i>Reporting In Meeting Sessions</i>	<i>Average</i> 3.50	1.15

**Valid N (listwise): 60

male and female EFL students in Malaysia since the probability of error is $>.05$ (t -value = $-.54$, $p = .59$).

Furthermore, the means obtained for the speaking needs of the male and female EFL international students were 4.11 and 3.41, respectively, as displayed in Table 8. Hence, to find out whether these means are statistically different, another t -test was conducted to determine the difference between male and female EFL students in terms of their speaking needs. As opposed to the writing needs, Table 9 displays that the male and female EFL students differ significantly over their speaking needs as the p -value is smaller than 0.05 (t -value = 4.66, $p = .00$). Having dissimilar aims and objectives in accomplishing different majors, and coming from different educational backgrounds might justify the differences reported by these international EFL students, all participated in a common class. Discipline-specific EAP courses might yield other results than those of this research in terms of gender difference. Hence, a more detailed survey is needed to understand in the aspects of speaking tasks these EFL students may differ in.

TABLE 6
Group Statistics for the Male and Female Scores on Writing Needs

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
male	38	3.32	.51	.08
female	22	3.43	1.02	.21

TABLE 7
T-Values for the Difference between Male and Female Scores on Writing

	d.f.	t-value	Significance
writing needs	58	-.54	.59

TABLE 8
Group Statistics for the Male and Female Scores on Speaking Needs

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
male	38	4.11	.50	.08
female	22	3.41	.64	.13

TABLE 9
T-Values for the Difference between the Male and Female Scores on Speaking Needs

	d.f.	t-value	Significance
speaking needs	58	4.66	.000

Research Question 5

Does educational level determine productive skills needs of EFL post-secondary students in Malaysia?

The participants of this study came from three different educational backgrounds. In particular, 57% were PhD students, 23% were master students and only 5% were undergraduate EFL students. Our assumption was that between different educational levels, there might be a difference in the *writing* and *speaking* needs because of the different programs the students follow. Primarily, an ANOVA test was conducted to find out whether there is a significant difference in the writing needs of the EFL students studying at three different education levels; namely, bachelor, master, and PhD. Table 10 displays the results of the test of homogeneity of variances confirming that the variances are equal at three levels since the p -value is larger than 0.05 and the homogeneity of variance assumption is supported.

TABLE 10
Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Writing Needs At Three Education Levels

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
2.07	2	57	0.13

Results obtained from the ANOVA test (Table 11) confirmed no significant differences exist between the writing needs of EFL students at three education levels since the p-value is larger than .05 (p=.073). To confirm this, a Tukey test was also run to show that there was no statistical difference. As there is no difference between the students of different levels in term of their writing skill, it is probably because of its insignificance as the participants of this research believe so.

TABLE 11
ANOVA Results for Difference between Means of Three Education Levels in their Writing Needs

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.79	2	1.39	2.74	.07
Within Groups	29.06	57	.51		
Total	31.85	59			

In contrast, the results of the ANOVA test for speaking needs of EFL students studying three education levels confirmed that there was significant difference between the speaking needs of EFL learners pursuing their PhD, Master, and Bachelor programmes since the p-value is smaller than .05 (p=.034). The results of the test of homogeneity of variances confirm that variances are unequal at three levels, since the p-value is smaller than 0.05 and the homogeneity of variance assumption is not supported (Tables 12 & 13).

TABLE 12
Test of Homogeneity of Variances for the Speaking Needs of Students at Three Education Levels

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
11.937	2	57	.000

TABLE 13
ANOVA Results for the Difference between the Means of Students at Three Education Levels in

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.80	2	1.40	3.59	.03
Within Groups	22.22	57	.39		
Total	25.03	59			

A probability value $p < 0.05$ indicates that a significant difference exists among EFL students at three education levels but it does not indicate which means are significantly different and which are chance differences. In order to determine this, post-hoc tests need to be carried out so as to determine the pair(s) among the groups under the study to have expression means that are statistically different. Therefore, Tamhane test was used to test the differences between the means of the three groups and to determine the pairs that differ in terms of their speaking needs. This test is suitable for pairwise contrasts when unequal variances are assumed, which is the case in the present study (Table 14). The findings from the Tamhane test indicated that there is statistically significant difference between the means of students at PhD levels compared to the students at Master and Bachelor levels in terms of their speaking needs (sig=.04). Nonetheless, there are no statistically significant differences between Master and bachelor levels. It is apparent that students at PhD level need to use different approaches and activities in terms of speaking and this difference implies that EAP course providers primarily need to offer different classes for undergraduate, master, and PhD programmes instead of

offering the same classes as their needs and demands are statistically different in terms of their study programmes.

TABLE 14
Results of Tamhane Test Determining the Difference between Pairs

Education Level	Education Level	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Bachelor	Master	-.23	.27	.77
	PhD	-.53	.28	.03*
Master	Bachelor	.23	.27	.77
	PhD	-.29*	.11	.04*
PhD	Bachelor	.53	.28	.03*
	Master	.29*	.11	.04*

Tamhane Test: $\alpha = 0.05$;

CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions can be drawn based on the results of the current study. Below is a summary of the conclusions based on the analysis of the data gathered.

- In this study, 80% of the EFL students rank-ordered speaking skill as number one skill which needed to be improved more in the academic settings of Malaysian universities. This confirms the findings of various reported studies (see Fox *et al.*, 2006; Sun, 1987; Berman & Cheng, 2001; Cheng, Myles & Curtis, 2004). In addition, this finding also supports the claims of Fox and colleagues (2006) who stated that international students generally think academic speaking (e.g. presentations) as a problem.
- Of various academic speaking tasks mentioned in the questionnaire of this survey, EFL students reported that explaining ideas, giving a presentation, giving reasons, and discussing in

meetings within an academic setting as are more necessary than the other academic speaking tasks.

- As for the writing tasks, EFL international students needed to take lecture notes and write journal papers/articles more than the other tasks.
- Although male and female students showed no difference in their writing needs, gender has been proven to be significant in terms of the speaking tasks needed academically.
- Similarly, level of education revealed no difference on writing tasks; however, EFL students reported different needs on speaking tasks according to their education levels. The difference is also significant between the needs of bachelor and master with PhD students stating that the communicative needs of the Doctoral candidates are different from the other two levels.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS SURVEY

- Since English is the medium of instruction in almost all Malaysian universities, the findings of this study are particularly helpful for the International EFL students studying in Malaysia because they are likely to encounter difficulties in understanding lectures or participating in seminars which are closely content-related (Nor Aslah *et al.*, 2009). Identifying productive skills needs of these students at three education levels (namely, bachelor, masters, and PhD) is a step towards

- guaranteeing that their academic needs are being met.
- b. The ability to speak fluently in an academic setting plays a vital role in EFL students' success as it is the number one skill they need assistance with. Malaysian Universities need to pay more attention to their EAP courses as they can provide more programmes/ syllabi that help to reinforce and improve international students' ability on explaining ideas while running research or taking courses, giving a presentation, which is one indispensable component of most academic settings, giving reasons to justify their opinions, findings or research programmes, and finally improving their ability to discuss in meetings because interactions can be an efficient factor in their pursuit of knowledge.
 - c. In terms of writing, the findings of this survey suggest that Malaysian universities ought to hold workshops or classes in which note taking skills are taught to international students in addition to preparing them to write papers and articles for journals as these are the most required academic writing tasks.
 - d. As male students differ with their female counterpart in terms of their speaking needs, it seems logical to run courses which are gender-based where international students can freely learn to negotiate their ideas and learn how to survive in an academic setting in Malaysia. This, however, may be costly.
 - e. Finally, Malaysian universities need to offer EAP courses according to the international students' education level instead of offering these to students coming from different educational levels. As for this study, it was found that the PhD students' needs are different from those of the bachelor and master students when speaking needs are considered; accordingly, the classes held for similar education programmes (Bachelor, Master, and PhD) would yield more benefits for the students.

Although international students may have difficulties understanding lectures, asking questions, taking part in class discussions, writing formal essays and selecting appropriate English to express ideas, it is an oversimplification to see problems arising from linguistic difficulties alone as it is believed that students and faculties tend to attribute academic and social problems to English proficiency alone, when in fact difficulties are more likely to stem from the lack of familiarity with cultural norms or the new university setting (Todd, 1997; Fox *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, it seems relevant to offer EAP courses which also focus on the culture, social norms and values of *the host country* and the target language. In addition, it is important to highlight that students' achievement is affected by social factors and the students in a classroom learn in a social situation which is in fact affected by social influences from outside the classroom (Gholami *et al.*,

2012). Moreover, social contexts determine formal learning opportunities and it is in this social context that the learner's language is occurring; learners who participate in structured social networks (Gholami *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, EAP programmes should not only pivot around teaching of technical skills. It is "too simplistic to think that the task of the EAP tutor is simply to help students with their academic writing skills and the language work involved in formulating questions, learning to interrupt and to ask for clarification" (Harris & Thorp, 1999, p. 11). Rather, EAP courses have to focus on the total surrounding context within which students are studying.

FUTURE STUDIES

In order to test whether the findings of this study can be generalized to other EFL international students who are studying in Malaysia (or other countries where the English is a second language), further surveys are needed. The Needs Analysis questionnaire can be used to analyze the productive skills needs of students from Asian countries such as China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and those from Arab countries who are currently taking EAP courses in Malaysia. Moreover, analyzing the needs of EFL students with respect to the receptive skills (reading and listening) will also add to our understanding of the international students in Malaysia.

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