
A Needs Analysis of Academic English Language Skills among ESL Postgraduate Scholars in Jhang District

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Abstract

Academic success in ESL requires English language proficiency especially on postgraduate research scholars in Pakistan. This is a qualitative research examining the English language learning needs of ESL MPhil research scholars in Jhang, concentrating on reading, writing, speaking and listening skills needed in academic and research purposes. Data were gathered as the result of semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 participants and were then analyzed based on a thematic analysis in order to determine patterns and recurring themes. The results show that the respondents have serious issues associated with vocabulary and grammar, sentence structure, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation, which affect their reading research papers, writing academic papers, presenting research, speaking to supervisors, and participating in professional and international partnerships. The research paper gives prominence to the relevance of a systematic needs analysis in designing learner-centered English language programs that suit the needs of postgraduate scholars in specific academic and research areas. Discussions on implications that may be applied in curriculum development, institute teaching methods and institutional support are provided with a focus on how English as an Academic Purpose (EAP) can be used to help ESL scholars increase their academic performance and research potential in semi-urban settings.

Keywords: ESL, Postgraduate Students, English Language Needs, Academic English, Needs Analysis, Research Scholars, Pakistan.

Introduction

English has been the core global language which plays the main communication role between individuals of different language groups. More than ever before, there are more people that use English as a second or foreign language than as a first language (Kameda, 2001). This has further led to the use of English in academics, professional and institutional activities in many countries that do not speak English. Acquiring the English language is now a key to academic achievements and professional growth in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) (Rao, 2018). English plays a rather important role in Pakistan. It is considered one of the indicators of competence, academic credibility, and career progression, so its use is virtually inevitable in research and higher education (Fareed et al., 2021). Most colleges and universities use English as a medium of instruction, scholarly communication, research writing and academic assessment is dominated by English. In the case of postgraduate research scholars, particularly those located in non-

metropolitan areas like Jhang, a good command of the English language is not only an ability but also the key to their academic survival and advancement.

The role of English as a global academic language has continuously been highlighted by recent research. The students in ESL situations need high proficiency in English language at undergraduate and postgraduate levels; hence, the teaching programs should be based on the clear sense of the actual language needs (Bibi and Bukhari, 2020; Fareed et al., 2021). This renders the needs analysis an important process in the creation of appropriate and efficient ESL teaching. In the case of postgraduate research scholars, they should have advanced reading skills, writing skills, listening skills and speaking skills. Literature reviews need reading skills whereas research proposal, thesis, dissertations, and journal articles need writing skills.

In addition, since English is the language of instruction at postgraduate level, other skills that have to be established include effective listening and speaking skills. These not only allow them to interact in the classroom but also to engage in the academic processes like the seminars, conferences, webinars, and research presentations in the national and international forums. As such it is necessary to understand the particular language learning requirements that ESL research scholars in Pakistan especially post-graduate students of Jhang require in an effort to enhance their academic achievements as well as facilitate their research work.

Universities of ESL as well as EFL have begun to put more importance on the English language proficiency of their students and those they intend to accept into the institution as they understand that it plays a key role in academic achievement. The needs analysis is an important part of determining what exactly the learners need to know in terms of language and providing them with the tricks to operate in the academic setting. Therefore, the needs analysis is incorporated in most academic and research programs in order to establish the English language requirements of their courses and level of study.

A body of research has already been conducted in Pakistan to investigate the needs of students regarding the English language in the various stages of study (Ahsan et al., 2012; Channa et al., 2013; Khalid, 2016). The focus on the postgraduate research scholars of those semi-urban and less-resourced areas like Jhang has been minimal, however. This gap is filled by the current study with an inquiry into the L2 acquisition requirements of ESL research students studying MPhil and PhD programs in Pakistani universities and specifically postgraduate students in Jhang.

In particular, the present study examines the aspects where these scholars have problems with the English language, such as academic reading, comprehension of their coursework, writing a research article, writing thesis and dissertation, and oral academic communication. The final objective of the research will be to determine the academic needs of ESL post-graduate research scholars in academic and research writing of the Jhang University. These specialized courses can help teachers, supervisors, and institutions to develop instructional practices that can effectively help the scholars enhance their academic and research studies in improving their proficiency in the English language.

Research Questions

1. What academic English skill needs do ESL postgraduate research scholars from Jhang have in reading, writing, listening, and speaking for research purposes?
2. What challenges do they face using English for academic communication?
3. How can a needs-based EAP program address identified academic English skill gaps?

Research Objective:

1. Identify skill needs in reading, writing, listening, and speaking for research purposes.
2. Examine challenges in academic communication.
3. Propose a needs-based EAP program to address identified gaps.

Literature Review

English as a Special Purpose (ESP).

The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is the language teaching method that concentrates on the specific communicative requirements of learners in their academic or professional spheres. To ESL postgraduate research scholars in Pakistan, particularly MPhil students in Jhang, these targeted language requirements are important to comprehend in order to develop effective teaching. According to the ESP theory and practice, the teaching of language must be founded on the real needs of the learners in their studies (Belcher, 2013).

English is not only necessary to learn in classrooms but also do research studies, read academic texts, write research papers and prepare thesis or dissertations, which is the case of research scholars in Jhang. As a result, the analysis of English language should be systematic and based on the principles of ESP. This is done by determining the linguistic skills of the disciplines of students, especially the language of academic research and writing papers (Swales and Feak, 2012). According to this analysis, it is possible to construct an ESP curriculum that is based on actual academic assignments, interests, and challenges of the learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Azam and Asim, 2023).

According to Paltridge and Starfield (2016), the academic genres that fall under the ESP are broad, and they include research articles, literature reviews, and conference presentations. Therefore, needs analysis must focus on the characteristics of the language that one needs to use to be effective in such genres, which include academic vocabulary, coherence, and argumentation, and citation practices. In this case of Pakistani ESL research scholars based on Jhang, the need based analysis of ESP is essential to creation of instructional resources that will actually aid them in achieving their academic development and in their research.

English as an academic purpose (EAP).

Communication and language skills are the key to success in higher education (Aliakbari and Boghayeri, 2014). English for academic purpose (EAP) has evolved as a specialized branch of ESP to meet the academic needs of the learners since it is acknowledged that even no single method or material can fit the needs of students with different linguistic and educational backgrounds. For ESL research scholars in Pakistan especially those living in semi-urban regions such as Jhang, EAP is very important in assisting the academic literacy and research communication.

Studies have revealed that students would like to receive language support, which is closely connected with academic tasks, instead of general English. Indicatively, Evans and Green (2007) established that students desired learning in areas of academic reading, writing, and presentation skills. EAP hence is committed to empowering students to study academically using the English language in an efficient and effective manner (Sager, 1994). Another point, which was also made by Zhu and Flaitz (2005), is that EAP assists learners to enhance their English in a manner that would directly lead to success in their academia and research.

In the past, EAP and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) were considered as two fields that are closely related. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), there is a tendency that academic and professional language requirements are similar especially to students who study and work at the same time. In relation to the Pakistani MPhil research scholars, the acquired language as an academic means can often be transferred to the work and research level, particularly in the teaching, academia, and industry. Other scholars however claim that EAP ought to be left alone in terms of focusing on academic literacy and research communication (Jordan, 1997).

EAP in Higher Education.

EAP has acquired a significant role both in English-speaking higher education institutions as well as in the ESL high institutions where English is the instructional language (Jordan, 1997). English is the leading language of tertiary education in Pakistan and especially in universities, textbooks, research articles, and

assessment practices are mostly in English (Fareed et al., 2021). Consequently, MPhil students particularly those in areas such as Jhang have to master sound academic English language in order to handle course and research requirements.

Many students not majoring in the arts are also obligated to take EAP courses which are designed to provide the general academic skills required e.g. reading research texts, writing assignments and making presentations (Liyanage & Birch, 2001). Since the Pakistani students have a wide variety, English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) might be appropriate compared to highly specialized ESAP at the early stages. Nevertheless, with the advance to research based programs, EAP should place more emphasis on discipline related academic writing and research texts (Mo, 2005, p 230; Jordan, 1997, p 87). As a postgraduate research scholar based in Jhang, it is also a cornerstone to being able to interact with the global research literature and participate in the academic debate.

ESP/EAP Syllabus Design.

When developing an ESP/EAP syllabus, one must take into consideration the needs of learners that are specific (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Paltridge and Starfield (2016) also stress the importance of needs analysis in the creation of proper academic language programs. ESP/EAP contents are not predetermined but they are in a state of flux depending on the shifting academic and research communication needs of the students (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). An ESP/EAP syllabus, in the case of Pakistani ESL research scholars in Jhang, is supposed to give emphasis on the process of building communicative competence in an academic or research kind of scenario. This includes skills as critical reading, academic writing, oral presentation and research reporting. According to Basturkmen (2010), ESP/EAP refers to an act of influencing language learning towards actual needs of learners. Curriculum therefore must be responsive and flexible to enable teaching and learning to be adjusted by the teacher when there is continued assessment and feedback by the learners (Hyland, 2006).

Needs Analysis.

The needs analysis is generally considered to be the most significant and the initial stage in the development of the language program (Benavent & Sánchez-Reyes, 2015). It is the basis of course design in ESP and EAP (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, Dudley Evans and St John, 1998 and Belcher et al., 2011). Needs analysis aims at identifying what the learners already possess, what they do not possess and what they require in order to perform successfully in their studies (Hyland, 2006).

ESL and EFL courses are not commonly planned in a systematic way with needs analysis during design in Pakistan (Cowling, 2007) and this limits their effectiveness. In the case of MPhil research scholars in Jhang, it is important to carry out needs analysis in order to determine gaps in reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities in terms of research and academic work. The needs identified should be the basis of a well-designed curriculum since, according to Robinson (1991), needs analysis must investigate both the current skills of learners as well as future academic or professional needs. This consists of two major steps:

- Current Positioning Analysis (PSA) - determining the current language proficiency of the learners.
- Target Situation Analysis (TSA) - determining the language skills required in future academic and research situations.

Present Situation Analysis (PSA).

Current Situation Analysis determines the position of the learners within the language program. It aids in evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of the current English levels and academic experiences of the students (Jordan, 1997). In the case of ESL research scholars at Jhang, PSA may unveil the challenges of academic reading, research writing, oral communication and listening comprehension. The data regarding PSA may be gathered using questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation, and placement tests.

Furthermore, the information on demographic and educational background could shed some light on the learning experience of the students and their language issues. This knowledge would be required to identify the immediate needs of learners as well as to establish an ESP/EAP program that will assist MPhil scholars to achieve their academic and research objectives.

Methodology

This qualitative research will aim at conducting a needs analysis of the ESL postgraduate research students studying English as a second language at some Jhang enrolled MPhil programs. The aqualitative approach was selected to comprehend the experience of the participants, their perception, and their challenges using English language in academic and research-related situations (Creswell, 2013). Here, the research design, participants, data collection and data analysis techniques have been outlined in the research.

The research design used was qualitative research design where the researcher aimed to understand the exact English language needs of the postgraduate research scholars. This method enabled the scholars to explore the subjective-experience of the participants, such as the linguistic proficiency required to read research literature, to write dissertations or theses and to engage in an academic discussion and presentation. It is appropriate that the study followed the suggestions of Creswell (2013) as a qualitative study was the only appropriate choice to comprehend the needs of these learners that were complex and specific to the context. The questions of the structured interview were created according to the thorough literature review and expert consultation to provide the systematization of data collection and uniformity in the responses (Maxwell, 2012).

Participants.

The study used a purposive sampling technique to choose the subjects who would possibly give pertinent information on the study question (Flick, 2018). The sample used was 30 postgraduate research students on MPhil programs in science subjects and all of them were Jhangis. These students were post-high school students or in-service students of university level programs that were in need of advanced English language use both in the academic and research.

Data Collection.

The data were gathered on the basis of semi structured interviews with 12 questions that were well formulated. The questionnaire was developed in three steps:

Development based on an extensive literature review,

Self-validation by the researchers,

The validation process by experts involved two specialists who gave feedback on the project to guarantee the reliability and validity of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). All the participants were informed and provided their consent before the analysis of the data. These issues were considered with ethics such as the confidentiality of participants/ institutions that were upheld during the study (Guest et al., 2012). The interview questions were developed to explore the English language needs of the participants in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, both in the context of perceived challenges/ obstacles of developing these abilities.

Data Analysis.

The data were processed with the help of thematic analysis, which is one of the most commonly used tools in qualitative research in order to determine the patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). This was done through transcribing the responses of the interview, sorting of the data into themes and sub-themes according to the research questions and analysis of various recurrent patterns regarding the language needs of the participants. To guarantee reliability and validity of the results, the data was analyzed

by two independent researchers and the results compared against each other to attain inter-rater consistency (Guest et al., 2012). Themes were then read to give some insights to the English language needs of ESL research scholars in Jhang and to give recommendations to the learner-centered ESP/EAP programs to meet the academic and research needs of the scholars.

The research provided significant information about the English language requirements of ESL postgraduate research students of Jhang based on the fact that English is the major medium of instruction and communication in Pakistani higher learning institutions. The results given by the participants emphasized the importance of having the command of English in various academic activities such as presentation of research, writing of dissertation and research papers, reviewing literature and writing manuscripts to be submitted in journals or conferences. Also, the interviewees stressed the importance of reading academic books, journal articles, and listening to lectures in English to assist in research learning. The results also highlighted that the acquisition of all the necessary academic skills including reading, writing, listening, and speaking is largely reliant on the proficiency in the English language during their postgraduate studies.

These findings are in line with the literature on ESP/EAP, which emphasizes that language programs must be designed in accordance with the individual needs of learners (Benavent & Sánchez-Reyes, 2015). They also support the significance of needs analysis in the development of successful academic English programs (Belcher et al., 2006; Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Moreover, the results are consistent with the recent studies pointing to the central role of the English language proficiency in the tertiary level of education and research settings (Humphreys, 2022).

On the whole, this research paper proves that English proficiency is a crucial factor to postgraduate learning and the necessity of learner-focused language courses that would meet the needs of ESL research students in the city of Jhang.

Reading Skills

The analysis of the data reveals that reading skills are crucial to postgraduate students. The individuals who participated in the study expressed a number of reasons why they read in their academic work:

- According to SP 14, the reading skills are essential in making sense of books, articles, and newspapers.
- SP 3 put an emphasis on the significance of reading whether in academics or non-academics.
- The SP 5 pointed out that critical reading is required to understand the topics and formulate conclusions.
- The SP 12 emphasized that proper understanding, be it explicit or inferred, of information is necessary to use in research.
- These results show that postgraduate research students need excellent academic reading ability to browse through literature, be critical about their sources, and must be capable of writing their research.

Writing Skills

The research found that writing skills were utilized by ESL research scholars in a variety of ways, but four key areas appeared based on the information:

- Academic Writing: The participants (SP 3, 8, 10, 15) pointed out that it would be necessary to write essays, research papers, review articles, thesis chapters, and academic correspondence with supervisors and collaborators.
- Communication among International Scholars: Some participants (SP 9, 14, 18, 22, 26) have noted that it is essential to communicate the ideas effectively, especially when working with overseas researchers or making the proposals.
- Assessment and Presentations: Participants (SP 2, 6, 29) emphasized that it was important to have writing skills to prepare examinations, the viva exam, and materials to make academic presentations.

Personal and Professional Development: In addition to academia, participants mentioned writing as a way of professional development and social interaction. For example:

- SP 16 has observed the necessity of writing letters, application and research proposal.
- The SP 27 brought out the importance of writing skills in career development.
- SP 13 explained the significance of writing skills in social, political discourse.

These findings highlight the complexity of writing skills in the postgraduate level. They indicate that academic institutions ought to focus on enhancing writing skills of students not just to succeed academically but also to communicate in research, grow professionally and engage the society in general.

Speaking Skills

The data analysis indicated that speaking skills are rated as very essential by ESL research scholars in Jhang due to a number of academic and professional interests. Presentation of research, defense of theses, seminars and conferences, interviews and viva examination were the most regularly cited uses. SP 27 has highlighted that it is important to talk in a presentation, seminars, interviews, and thesis defense. Communication skills in such a case are critical in both education and professional growth. The reason for effective communication with supervisors and foreign partners was also pointed out by the participants. As SP 22 observed, one is required to use speaking skills to communicate about research, apply to study higher abroad, and cooperate with international coworkers. The SP 5 made a strong emphasis on speaking skills in order to be able to express ideas confidently during academic discussions, debates, and explanations of experimental outcomes.

These results show that speaking skills play the pivotal role in not only academic success but also in the process of professional networks, cooperation with others, and involvement in international research communities. To conclude, ESL research scholars need speaking skills to deliver research, conduct discussions, undertake advanced education, express oneself in a confident way with colleagues and superiors.

Listening Skills

The skills of listening were also reported as being equally important in academic accomplishment. According to the participants, to comprehend lectures, tutorials, and discussions related to research, they need to listen.

According to SP 11 and SP 20, listening is the important skill needed in order to understand the lecture material, remember important points and grasp scientific terms and theories.

The importance of listening in enhancing pronunciation, vocabulary and speaking skills was also pointed out by the participants. As SP 19 and SP 22 observed, careful listening enables them to speak out words properly when using oral communication.

SP 25 also taught the significance of listening to research e.g. on how to comprehend interviews, recordings, and discussions in their research.

The results reveal that listening competencies play a vital role in academic understanding, personal and professional growth as well as effective research practices.

Complications with Speaking English.

Participants reported a number of challenges related to speaking English in the postgraduate studies:

Communication with foreigners: The participants (SP 4, 7, 11) had difficulties in perceiving other accents and speech patterns, which influenced their effectiveness in communication.

Lack of vocabulary: There are participants who stated that they were unable to find the appropriate words to convey thoughts. SP 1 noted:

I fail to get ideas to speak on a specific topic and some vocabulary issues, which could be the cause of my less than talkative nature.

Low confidence and nervousness during speaking were also caused by the limited vocabulary.

Fear and insufficient fluency: The respondents expressed fear of being involved in discussions because of fear to make mistakes and pronounce words incorrectly. SP 10 stated:

It is impossible to overestimate the role of good accent in the process of effective communication and I always fear to pronounce the words in a wrong way or use the wrong grammar patterns so I usually avoid talks.

The results imply that the aspect of vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence-building techniques should be given priority in academic institutions to improve speaking skills.

Difficulties in Reporting Research.

The participants claimed that it was possible to be hampered in presenting research papers and defending ideas because of:

Poor vocabulary: SP 2 reported:

- I have difficulties trying to come up with the right words and sentences to communicate my ideas.
- Shy and low confidence: SP 5 demonstrated that they have low confidence due to a low vocabulary and lack of confidence in making mistakes during presentation.
- Problems with accent and pronunciation: A lot of participants were afraid of being judged because of their accents that influenced fluency and confidence.
- The results reveal the need to enhance vocabulary and pronunciation so as to enhance fluency and confidence in delivering academic work.

Difficulties in Reading Research Articles.

The respondents cited a number of reading comprehension challenges:

- Complex vocabulary: SP 4 and SP 7 observed that the research articles are hard to comprehend because of use of technical and challenging words.
- Scientific terms and context: SP 25 complained of problems with the comprehension of scientific terminology and context meaning.
- Memory and understanding: SP 14 stated that she has problems remembering the meaning of words, even when it has already been learned.
- Complexity of the sentences: SP 16 revealed difficulties in long and complicated sentences in research papers.

More issues: According to some respondents, the lack of interest or a slow reading pace became an obstacle. These findings explain why ESL research scholars need to have good academic reading skills that involve vocabulary development and complex text-reading strategies.

Challenges in Writing.

One of the key spheres of challenge was reported to be writing:

Vocabulary weaknesses: SP 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 13 complained about not being able to find the right words to use in essays, research papers, or abstracts.

Grammar and sentence structure: A big number of participants had difficulties in sentence structuring and clarity in writing.

Arranging thoughts: SP 2, 14, and 17 experienced a problem with the ability to organize the information in a logical manner that led to writer block at times.

These results underscore the fact that vocabulary deficiencies, grammatical and inability to organize the ideas are some of the greatest barriers to successful academic writing. These areas should be met by institutions to enable ESL research scholars to come up with high-quality academic work.

Challenges in Listening

Listening was defined as one of the active skills needed to understand the lectures, webinars, and communication with foreign researchers. The participants have indicated problems in:

Accent comprehension: 14 respondents stated that they have difficulties following the accents of lecturers or

speakers that belong to different linguistic groups.

Understanding online lectures: SP 5 and SP 18:

I have participated in numerous online seminars and conferences, but I do not know what the speakers mean, due to several reasons. The results indicate that the development of the listening skills is necessary to achieve academic understanding, effective interaction, and successful involvement in the research operations.

Discussion

The current research indicates the critical significance of an academic English instructional approach that is need-based among ESL research scholars in Jhang as it is presented by Evans and Green (2007) and Sager (1994). Speaking skills were also cited by the participants as core in their academic activities, such as presenting research, writing articles, attending conferences, interviewing, defending theses, and communicating well with supervisors and foreign colleagues. This research also revealed restricted vocabulary and poor fluency to be major challenges to effective communication as it has been before (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998; Nation and Nation, 2001).

The results highlight the importance of needs analysis before designing a course at postgraduate level in Pakistan as proposed by Cowling (2007). Needs analysis will give important information about the specific language needs of learners and it will also be used to develop language courses that are specific. Models like the one created by Munby (1978) to analyze the needs of the target can be used by the institutions to identify the skills that are needed by the students in English academically and in their research and development activities.

Overall, this research adds to the body of literature on the topic of language needs analysis since it identifies the particular English language needs of ESL postgraduate learners at Jhang, emphasizes the significance of addressing the needs of language teaching to academic environments, and incorporates the systematic needs analysis into the planning of a course.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of acquiring English language skills to the academic performance of ESL postgraduate research scholars, especially in the Pakistani context. The results have shown that a needs analysis should be carried out in detail in order to determine the particular language weaknesses in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In order to solve these issues, institutions should:

- Institute learner-based language support programs.
- Provide regular feedback and assessment with the use of authentic academic materials in order to build up research and academic literacy.
- Hire trainers to assist the students to master academic English skills.

Through a comprehensive needs analysis involving all stakeholders using various tools, the programs will turn out to be relevant and working. The recommendations can improve the performance of ESL research scholars in institutions by accepting and applying them, which will ultimately enable the development of science and research in Pakistan.

Recommendations.

According to the results, the following recommendations can be made to improve the English language proficiency of ESL research scholars as an organization that operates in Jhang:

1. Complete needs analysis: Institutions ought to be able to determine particular difficulties and needs of ESL research students to develop applicable curricula and support programs.

2. Deliver language support programs: These are to promote reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in achieving academic success and research communication.
3. Exposure to real research articles, dissertations and academic texts can assist students to acquire practical academic literacy.
4. Provide frequent feedback and evaluation: Frequent assessment can keep the students on track of their progress, help them notice their weaknesses and stay motivated in the process of mastering English.
5. Train instructors and tutors: Trainers are supposed to be equipped with training on academic writing, provision of feedback and assessment of research students using the English language.

Additionally, Present Situation Analysis (PSA) and Target Situation Analysis (TSA) ought to collaborate in order to gain the full picture of the needs of the students both undergraduate and postgraduate. Utilizing either of PSA or TSA might not give enough information (Long and Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1988; Siddiqua et al., 2014). This should involve all the stakeholders and maximum resources should be employed towards ensuring the reliable identification of language need and to help in the attainment of desirable academic effects (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

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