

【原著】

Investigating the English Language Needs of First and Second Year Japanese University Students

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大学1・2年生の英語に関するニーズ調査

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Abstract

Knowledge of English language needs is crucial for both students and providers of language education. The identification of needs can help with determining useful course goals, and foster motivation to develop the skills necessary to achieve those goals. This paper examines the needs of first- and second-year university students taking a General English (GE) communication course at the Bunkyo English Communication Center (BECC). Results showed that most participants knew their current and future language needs, agreed with their course goals, and felt that their English language needs were being met by the education provided. Additionally, students indicated their preference amongst macro and micro language skills to be spoken interaction and vocabulary respectively. This research has provided useful information for BECC management regarding its GE course, and it is hoped to have encouraged students to reflect on their English language needs.

Introduction

When considering curricula for a second or foreign language, one must naturally think of the reasons for study. At Hiroshima Bunkyo University (HBU), all first-year students are required to take two semesters of English language study in order to graduate with their bachelor's degrees, regardless of major. This necessitates these students obtaining a passing grade (60%) in their General English (GE) communication course, known as Freshmen English (FE), carried out at the Bunkyo English Communication Center (BECC). Prior to this study, the GE course was compulsorily taken over two years: FE and Sophomore English (SE). However, for the year this study commenced, 2018, a decision was made to change SE to an elective course.

With regards to the needs for English language, these undoubtedly differ depending on the student. Students who require English for their future occupations would need a more comprehensive repertoire of the language compared to those who would like to communicate on an overseas holiday, or students who only seek a passing grade to graduate. The diverse needs of a cohort of students composed of different departments can make curriculum design a

problematic task. When conducting a needs analysis, Huhta, Vogt, Johnson, and Tulkki (2013) note that it “involves consideration of not just one perspective or one context but multiple perspectives and multiple contexts” (p. 10), which does not make the task a straightforward one. Therefore, external frameworks were called upon to help guide curriculum design at the BECC, which caters to students from five departments: Education, Global Communication, Welfare, Psychology, and Nutrition.

In 2012, the current GE course offered to students was initially guided by the Common European Framework of Reference-Japan (CEFR-J) (Tono, 2012), and ultimately renewed in 2014 using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). Long (2015) states that “no language teaching program should be designed without a thorough needs analysis” (p. 1); however, due to time constraints the BECC team modified a range of CEFR and CEFR-J illustrative language descriptors into concrete curriculum course goals in lieu of conducting a thorough needs analysis (Bower, Rutson-Griffiths, Kodate, Foale, Lusk Lehde, and Semmelroth, 2015). Three primary reasons for choosing the CEFR were related to structure, learner autonomy, and transparency (Bower et.al, 2015), which are discussed below.

Structure

The original decision to renew the GE curriculum came from a consensus that it was “fragmented and lacked cohesion” (Bower, Runnels, Rutson-Griffiths, Schmidt, Cook, Lehde, and Kodate, 2017, p. 178). The CEFR presented a solution to this problem with its comprehensive framework, including an abundance of illustrative descriptors at differing levels of proficiency in communicative language activities, strategies, and competencies. BECC management set about creating an overall plan to structure the curriculum, implementing functions and notions from the Council of Europe’s *Waystage 1990* (van Ek & Trim, 1991a) and *Threshold 1990* (van Ek & Trim, 1991b) documents, creating two course streams according to CEFR common reference levels: A1-A2 and A2-B1. The plan involved the creation of a two-year curriculum containing 12 thematic units. A GE task-based lesson template was devised giving teachers assigned to curriculum creation a structure to work with. Guidance and feedback on skills to be included in individual lessons was given. In particular, the skill that the main task should incorporate was written at the beginning and end of each lesson as a ‘Can Do’ statement. This allowed management to distribute the main skills employed in tasks somewhat evenly across the curriculum, with a heavier weight allocated to speaking. See Appendix A for a table of the distribution of skills in the GE curriculum. How BECC GE students ranked the importance of various language skills was deemed useful for understanding their perceived language needs. Additionally, this knowledge could influence any future curriculum adjustments.

Learner Autonomy

The BECC provides a Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), where students are encouraged to take control of their learning via several possibilities. The GE curriculum includes a homework course component that requires students to access the SALC directly and choose from a selection of skill-based activities linked to the CEFR common reference levels. The SALC has an English-

only policy fostering usage of the language outside of class time where students can sit with teachers and partake in free discussion, watch movies in English, or join English-related group events. Students may also book advising sessions with learning advisors to discuss their studies, in either English or Japanese. Given that there are a limited number of opportunities to use English outside the BECC, the SALC exists, in part, to allow motivated students to improve their English skills, and foster motivation in those who may lack it. Dornyei (1994) states “motivation is one of the main determinants of second/foreign language (L2) learning achievement” (p. 273), and Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) point out that motivation may precede learner autonomy. In the case of students taking the GE course, motivation is a key issue since most are not English language majors. One way for students to increase motivation is to set goals, and as Karaoglu (2008) states “students can help themselves achieve their goals by determining their own language needs” (para. 11). Therefore, the importance of encouraging learners to consider their language needs cannot be understated, which was a motivating factor behind this study.

Transparency

One aim of the CEFR is to promote transparency amongst a variety of stakeholders in the educational sector (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2018). A desired result of the GE curriculum renewal project was to have clear course goals with defined learning outcomes so that students could know what they would study, teachers could create tests that align with materials to ensure the curriculum aims are being achieved, and administrators could promote the language program knowing what skills graduates would be expected to attain (Bower et.al, 2015). Since the commencement of the GE curriculum renewal, little research has been undertaken to directly investigate whether students agreed with the overarching goals of the GE curriculum and if their English needs were being met. This study attempts to address these issues to help continue improving transparency at the BECC.

With the aforementioned three primary reasons in mind for utilizing the CEFR with the GE curriculum renewal project, the following research questions (RQ) were asked with regards to students' English language needs:

1. Do students know their English language needs (current and future)?
2. What level of agreeance do students have with the GE overarching course goals?
3. Which language skills do students rank as more important for their study?
4. Are students' English language needs being met at the BECC?

Methods

This research was conducted among first- and second-year students who took the GE communication courses at HBU from Semester 2, 2018 to Semester 2, 2019 (from September, 2018 to January, 2020). An online survey was carried out each semester to gather information about students' needs in English and English studies, and perceptions about the GE curricula (See Appendix B for the survey questions).

Participants

Over the three semesters, 1371 responses with consent were collected and used for this study. The details of the responses can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of responses gathered over three semesters.

| Semester 2, 2018 | Semester 1, 2019 | Semester 2, 2019 | Total |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------|
| 348 | 516 | 507 | 1371 |

Survey

There were two versions of the survey: one was for the A1-A2 level course and the other for A2-B1 level course. Two points of contention are noted here from the first year (Semester 2, 2018 and Semester 1, 2019) that led to changes in Semester 2, 2019. Originally, eight skills were grouped together to determine students' preferences. In Semester 2, 2019, this was changed to a separation of language skills according to macro and micro classifications. In this paper, macro-skills are defined as speaking (both spoken production and spoken interaction), writing, reading, and listening. Micro-skills were identified as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. The second contentious point was the inclusion of presentation as one of the original eight skills. Presentations are a major component of the BECC GE curriculum; therefore, how students ranked this as being important for their study was deemed useful information. However, after considering various teacher feedback, presentation was included as an example of the macro-skill of spoken production in the third semester. An additional change to the survey from Semester 1, 2019 is that a question asking students' gender was added due to boys being accepted to study at HBU. Therefore, participants in this study were all female in Semester 2, 2018 and both male and female for the 2019 academic year.

Results

The participants were asked whether they know what they need to be able to do using English now and in the future (See Survey Question 4 in Appendix B). 76.7% of students answered that they know their current needs, and the figure slightly decreased when they were asked about their future needs, with 73.2% reporting positively. Examining the differences between the years of the participants, 76.8% of first-year students and 76.3% of second-year students reported that they know their current needs (Figure 1). There was a slight difference between the first-year students' and second-year students' responses when they were asked about their future needs with 71.5% of the first-years reporting positively whereas 77.3% of their counterparts did so. Comparing the female students' responses to male students', 77.1% of the female students and 73.8% of the male students reported that they know their current needs to some extent, and 73.6% of the female and 70.9% of the male students reported that they know their future needs (Figure 2).

In order to get insight into whether the GE curriculum course aims align with students'

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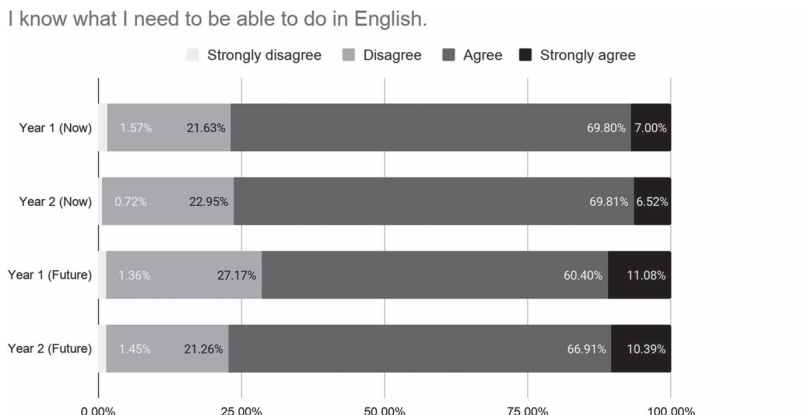


Figure 1. First- and second-year students' knowledge of current and future language needs.

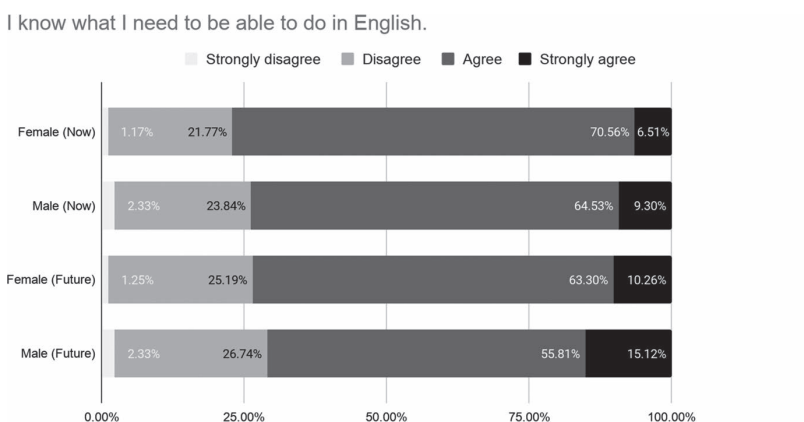


Figure 2. Female and male students' knowledge of current and future language needs.

perceptions of necessary language goals, the participants were asked to indicate to what extent they feel they need to be able to acquire the skills incorporated in the 'Can Do' course goals (Survey Question 3). It should be noted here that the A1-A2 course goals span two years. These goals are different to those of the A2-B1 lessons, which are, again, shared across Year 1 and Year 2. Examining the average points of students' responses, it can be said that students generally agree with the overarching course goals. As can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, a reasonably uniform agreement occurred over all course goals, with the goals that received the highest point being Reading 3 and Speaking 1 (3.36) and the lowest point Technology (3.18) for the A1-A2 course, and the highest point Speaking 1 (3.52) and the lowest Technology (3.25) for the A2-B1 level course.

Figures 5–7 illustrate the order of skills the participants deemed necessary when learning English at the BECC (Survey Question 2). Figure 5 shows the data gathered from the first two semesters of the study whereas Figures 6 and 7 show the data from the third semester. As previously mentioned, the survey was altered in Semester 2, 2019 by separating macro-skills from micro-skills and the relabeling of "speaking" to "spoken interaction" and "spoken production." To

(A1-A2) Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree (1 point), Disagree (2 points), Agree (3 points), Strongly agree (4 points)

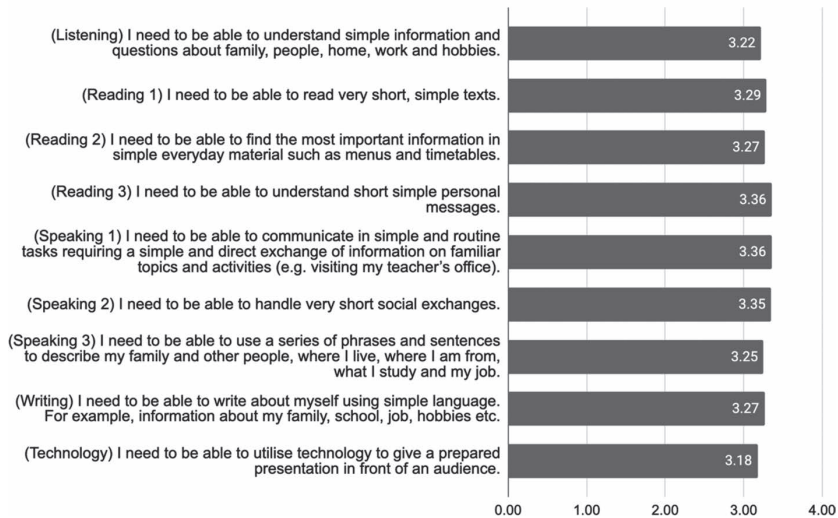


Figure 3. Students' perceptions about A1-A2 course goals.

(A2-B1) Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree (1 point), Disagree (2 points), Agree (3 points), Strongly agree (4 points)

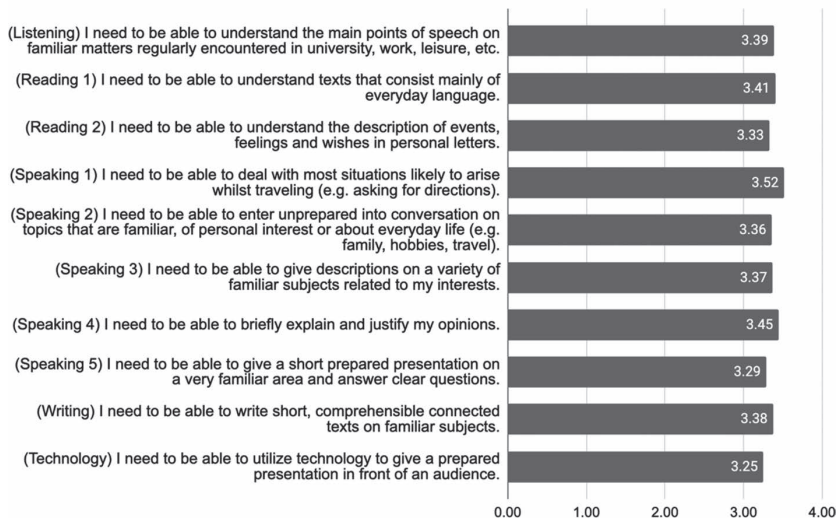


Figure 4. Students' perceptions about A2-B1 course goals.

elucidate the difference between the spoken macro-skills, presentation and speech were given as examples for spoken production, and conversation was given as an example for spoken interaction. Examining the first data presented in Figure 5, speaking was the most preferred skill, followed by listening and vocabulary. Presentation skills were the least favored choice, which is interesting when considering the core skill of presenting is speaking.

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Rank the following skills in order of importance that you need to study at the BECC. (Sem 2, 2018 and Sem 1, 2019)

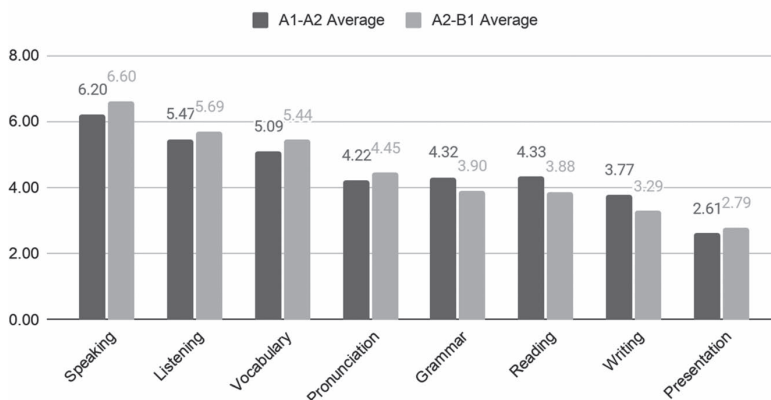


Figure 5. Students' perceptions about English skills (Semester 2, 2018 and Semester 1, 2019).

Rank the following skills in order of importance that you need to study at the BECC. (Sem 2, 2019)

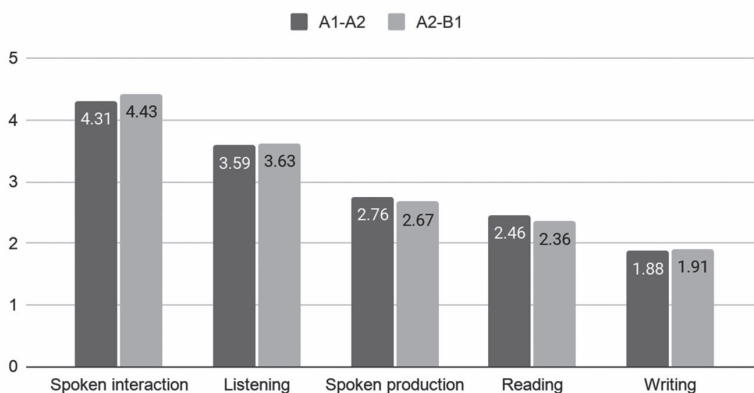


Figure 6. Students' perceptions about macro-skills (Semester 2, 2019).

Rank the following skills in order of importance that you need to study at the BECC. (Sem 2, 2019)

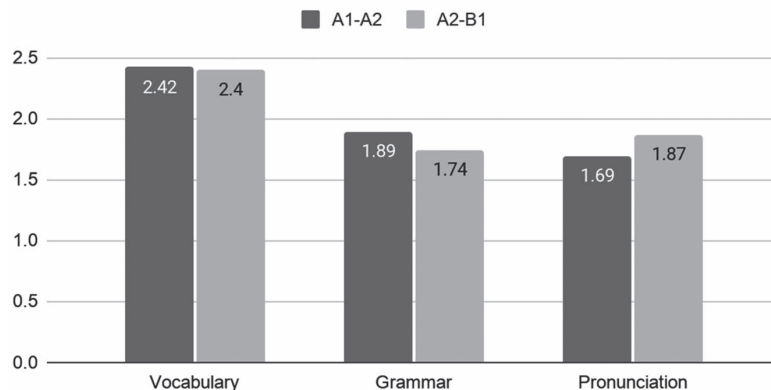


Figure 7. Students' perceptions about micro-skills (Semester 2, 2019).

Looking at the third semester’s data presented in Figures 6 and 7, spoken interaction was most popular among the macro-skills, followed by listening and spoken production. Writing was the least preferred macro-skill. Among the micro-skills, vocabulary was the most favored skill, which is consistent with the results in Figure 5. Although there was a slight difference between A1-A2 and A2-B1 students’ responses with the micro-skills of grammar and pronunciation, the order of necessary skills was generally agreed across the two streams.

Lastly, the participants were asked whether their English learning needs were being met by the courses offered by the language center (Survey Question 5). As can be seen in Figure 8, while almost all the students reported that their needs are being met, 113 students in total across three semesters (8.2%) suggested that there is a gap between their needs and what is offered in BECC classes. Examining the responses more closely, Table 2 shows that the main strand of comments or suggestions was related to grammar, highlighting the difficulties of understanding and using English grammar and the need for more instruction or practice (Table 2).

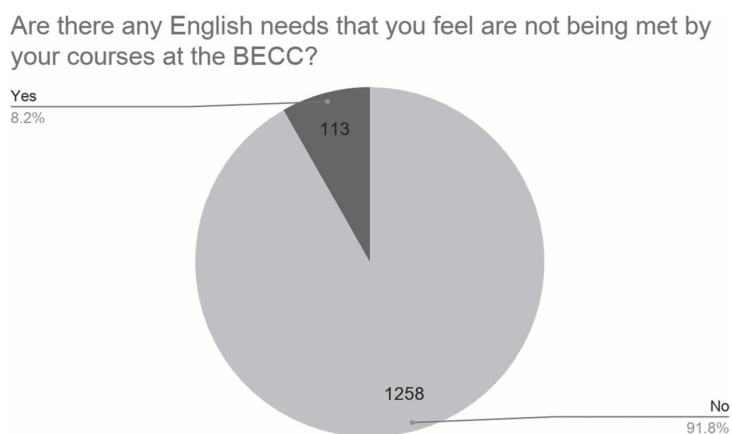


Figure 8. Students’ opinions on their English needs being met by BECC classes.

Table 2. Students’ suggestions for BECC classes.

| Categories | N |
|-------------------|----|
| Grammar | 15 |
| Speaking | 9 |
| Pronunciation | 7 |
| Reading | 6 |
| Conversation | 5 |
| Others | 45 |
| Total suggestions | 87 |

Discussion

This study was conducted to examine 1) to what extent students enrolled in the GE courses know their English needs, 2) whether students agreed with the course goals being necessary, 3) which language skills students consider important to be taught in the courses, and 4) whether the students' English needs are being met by the courses offered at the BECC. To answer RQ1, the results of the survey suggest that approximately 77% of students know their current English needs and approximately 73% know their future needs to some extent. The results also indicated that slightly more second-year students know their future needs than first-year students (77.3% and 71.5% respectively). One possible answer as to why there was a slight difference is that the second-year course is elective, and some students with no clear English goals or desire to learn English did not continue to study after completing the compulsory first-year course; therefore, those students who chose to take English in their second year may have had more purpose, and hence knowledge of their future needs. There was no evidence to strongly support major differences of English needs knowledge between genders.

With regards to RQ2, approximately three-quarters of BECC GE students agree with their CEFR-adapted course goals. This can be said for both A1-A2 and A2-B1 courses and across all five language skills: listening, reading, speaking (spoken interaction/spoken production), and writing as well as technology skills. As previously mentioned, transparency was a key factor in using the CEFR as a framework for the GE curriculum. This result may provide some clarity for BECC management. Most students agree on the goals that they will be measured on in terms of learning outcomes, therefore, management can continue to promote its curriculum to future students and other important stakeholders with more confidence in its overarching course goals.

Understanding how students perceive the importance of language skills was the focus of RQ3. The results of all three semesters clearly show that speaking was the most popular skill for students. In Semester 2, 2019, when speaking was separated into interaction (e.g., conversation), and production (e.g., speech/presentation), spoken interaction proved to be most important for GE students. The GE curriculum is composed of lessons containing various skills that ultimately scaffold to the main task written as a 'Can Do' statement. It would be difficult to ascertain the length of time students spend on each skill; however, the most prevalent macro-skill in the GE curriculum is also spoken interaction, which accounts for approximately 39% of all the main tasks. Writing did not appear to be a popular choice for students to study, languishing in the bottom two skills across all three semesters. In terms of main tasks, writing is also one of the least represented skills in the GE curriculum. These two results suggest, in part, some commonality with how both students and BECC management view the importance of language skills for this general English communication course. The prevalence of presentations in the GE curriculum warranted feedback from students whether they were deemed useful for their studies. In the first two semesters students from both streams ranked it least important to study. However, after placing presentations under the macro-skill of spoken production, its popularity rose to the third most important skill, above reading and writing. This shift in popularity raises questions that may warrant further

investigation.

Determining whether students' English needs were being met, RQ4, was asked to promote transparency regarding the BECC GE language program. The results of this two-part question showed, firstly, that most students (91.8%) were satisfied that their English education needs were being accommodated at the BECC. This positive result can be considered especially pleasing for BECC management due to the multiple perspectives of students whose bachelor's degrees differ depending on the five departments to which they belong. Part two of the question, which asked students to stipulate where their needs were not being met, received suggestions and comments from 8.2% of participants. Grammar instruction was the most common theme that seemed to be in need of attention. GE classes are conducted in English only, the language policy of the BECC. Attempting to understand English grammar without the use of one's mother tongue could indeed be a problematic task, particularly at the A1-A2 CEFR levels.

Conclusion

This study has given some insight into the English needs of two cohorts of students studying the GE curriculum at the BECC. Approximately three-quarters of students indicated that they knew their current and future English needs. Although a thorough needs analysis was not performed before the creation of the GE curriculum, most students generally agreed with the overarching course goals, and there was some indication that the order of importance of macro-skills students deemed necessary to study partly matched the weighting of main task skills in the curriculum. Furthermore, over 90% of students responded positively that their English needs were being met at the BECC on the GE course. Prior to this study, little research had been done to investigate how students perceive the general English courses at the BECC. Being able to identify one's own language needs and define goals is a crucial component of successful autonomous learning; therefore, one of the aims set at the beginning of this study was to provide opportunities to students to consider their current and future English needs and reflect on their studies. It is hoped that these surveys also served as impetus for students to think about what they need to study more and how they need to study. A strong recommendation for future research regarding language needs is gathering data from graduate students to see what skills they need for their current situations, be it work or non-work related, what they found particularly useful from their BECC English studies, and what they wish we had offered them at the BECC.

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Appendix A

| General English Curriculum Main Task Skill Weighting | |
|--|-----|
| Spoken Interaction | 39% |
| Spoken Production | 25% |
| Reading | 14% |
| Listening | 11% |
| Writing | 11% |

Appendix B

Survey on English Needs

Q1: I give permission for my results to be used for research purposes (I understand no identifiable information about me will be stored or used).

- Yes
- No

<Semester 2, 2018 and Semester 1, 2019>

Q2: Rank the following skills in order of importance that you need to study at the BECC (1 = Most important, 8 = Least important)

- Speaking
- Listening
- Reading
- Writing
- Grammar
- Presentation
- Vocabulary
- Pronunciation

<Semester 2, 2019>

Q2-1: Rank the following skills in order of importance that you need to study at the BECC (1 = Most important, 5 = Least important)

- Spoken production (e.g., presentation, speech)
- Listening
- Reading
- Writing
- Spoken interaction (e.g., conversation)

Q2-2: Rank the following skills in order of importance that you need to study at the BECC (1 = Most important, 3 = Least important)

- Pronunciation

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- Grammar
- Vocabulary

Q3: Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree
- I don't know

<A1-A2 course>

| |
|---|
| (Listening) I need to be able to understand simple information and questions about family, people, home, work and hobbies. |
| (Reading 1) I need to be able to read very short, simple texts. |
| (Reading 2) I need to be able to find the most important information in simple everyday material such as menus and timetables. |
| (Reading 3) I need to be able to understand short simple personal messages. |
| (Speaking 1) I need to be able to communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities (e.g., visiting my teacher's office). |
| (Speaking 2) I need to be able to handle very short social exchanges. |
| (Speaking 3) I need to be able to use a series of phrases and sentences to describe my family and other people, where I live, where I am from, what I study and my job. |
| (Writing) I need to be able to write about myself using simple language. For example, information about my family, school, job, hobbies etc. |
| (Technology) I need to be able to utilize technology to give a prepared presentation in front of an audience. |

<A2-B1 course>

| |
|--|
| (Listening) I need to be able to understand the main points of speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in university, work, leisure, etc. |
| (Reading 1) I need to be able to understand texts that consist mainly of everyday language. |
| (Reading 2) I need to be able to understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters. |
| (Speaking 1) I need to be able to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling (e.g., asking for directions). |
| (Speaking 2) I need to be able to enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or about everyday life (e.g., family, hobbies, travel). |

| |
|--|
| (Speaking 3) I need to be able to give descriptions on a variety of familiar subjects related to my interests. |
| (Speaking 4) I need to be able to briefly explain and justify my opinions. |
| (Speaking 5) I need to be able to give a short prepared presentation on a very familiar area and answer clear questions. |
| (Writing) I need to be able to write short, comprehensible connected texts on familiar subjects. |
| (Technology) I need to be able to utilize technology to give a prepared presentation in front of an audience. |

Q4: Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

| |
|--|
| Thinking about now: I know what I need to be able to do in English. |
| Thinking about the future: I know what I need to be able to do in English. |

Q5: Are there any English needs that you feel are not being met by your courses at the BECC?

(Is there anything you would like the BECC to teach in class in the future?)

- Yes (If you answered 'yes' please tell us about your English needs here.)
- No

Q6: Are you a first-year student or second-year student?

- I'm a first-year student.
- I'm a second-year student.

<Only Semesters 1 and 2, 2019>

Q7: Are you male or female?

- Male
- Female