



English Language Needs of Learners on the Openings/ Level 1 Courses in the Open University: a Pilot Study of Tutors' Perspective

Prithvi Shrestha

OpenELT

Department of Languages

Faculty of Education and Language Studies

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Summary

This study explores the English language needs of learners on OU Openings or Level 1 Courses across the university, with a particular focus on learners who do not use English as their first language. Essentially this research attempted to find out the views of a small sample of tutors about the language skills learners are expected to have before they join the OU, the language skills they lack or the areas they need support in, how these learners are supported and whether the current provision of language support is sufficient.

The research was conducted with eleven tutors and one student via telephone interviews and emails for which a questionnaire was developed and given out prior to the interview. This was fundamentally a qualitative study, attempting to capture as much information as was possible in the short time available. The study was conducted in six days, which was very limited for this kind of study.

The findings suggest that these tutors perceive a clear need for English language support for the non-native speakers of English on the OU Openings or Level 1 courses. Efforts have been made at the regional level to support these learners. However, the responses in this study suggest that the current provision is not as effective or adequate as it should be.

This study also makes several recommendations about how the current situation can be improved. It should be noted that it is not possible to generalise the findings due to the size of the data sample. However, this pilot study indicates a need that deserves further investigation.

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Why this Study?	4
3. The research method and its validity	5
4. Results of the data analyses and discussion	6
5. Limitations	14
6. Recommendations and conclusion	15
7. References	16
8. Acknowledgements	17
9. Appendices – questionnaires and a text extract	18

English language needs of learners on the Openings/ Level 1 courses in the OU: a pilot study of tutors' perspectives

Prithvi Shrestha

1. Introduction

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the English language needs of learners (particularly those who speak English as an additional or other language) on Openings or Level 1 courses in the Open University (OU), UK. This paper is a research report based on data collected from a small number of the OU tutors from different regions. Views of one learner are also included. The report gives a background to the study, describes the research tool used and its validity, analyses the data, discusses the findings and makes recommendations based on the results.

2. Why this study?

The OU has been delivering courses in various disciplines for nearly four decades across the UK and outside. Over the years, the demographic profile of the student body has changed as the UK has become more multicultural and diverse in many respects including education and employment. This has an impact upon the way OU operates because the university encourages equality and diversity (see the OU mission statements). As a result, the learners who are enrolled on any OU course are not necessarily native English language speakers (which might have been the case two decades ago) who may not need any support with their language skills¹. As all the OU courses are written and delivered in English (except for the modern language courses such as French or German), it is essential for the learners to be competent in the use of English language. Certain courses (such as Health and Social Care) have attracted more learners from ethnic minority groups such as Africans, Bangladeshis, etc., who use English as an other/additional language (ESOL²) or may use a different variety of English. This means these learners may face difficulties while studying their chosen courses in English. Being educated in a different socio-educational setting may create additional challenges. This may result in poor achievements and frustration among these learners. It may even lead to dropping out of the course, which affects student retention levels. Despite the seriousness of this situation, there does not appear to have been much research conducted into it at the OU

¹ It does not mean that English native speakers have no problem with English language, which is a separate issue (literacy) and it is not possible to address it in this study due to the lack of space, time and resources.

² For reasons of convenience, I will be using ESOL throughout this paper to mean English as other or an additional language.

extensively.³ Recently, English as an Additional Language (EAL) Special Interest Group (SIG) was formed as a forum in order to discuss and explore the problem and find ways to support such learners. This pilot study was sponsored by the EAL SIG and is intended to inform the dialogue within the Group and between it and policy makers in the OU, course teams in different faculties and learners. This report will highlight the current issues, provide information to interested stakeholders, and hopefully influence current thinking and future actions.

3. The research method and its validity

In order to collect the data for this study, a questionnaire was designed (see Appendix) as it is “a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information ... being able to be administered without the presence of the researcher” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p. 245). Given that the respondents were from different parts of the UK/ the OU regions, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews, because of which telephone interviews were conducted (see *ibid.* p. 291 for explanations as to why). Similarly, the questions were open-ended so as to capture “an honest, personal comment from the respondents” (*ibid.* p.255) and because the nature of this study is exploratory, which means it was not appropriate to obtain information by very structured or closed questions.

Having designed the questionnaire, it should have ideally been piloted in order to test its validity. Lack of time and resources meant this was not possible, however, the questions were critically read by someone other than the researcher and judged to be appropriate for the purposes intended. The appropriacy of the questions appeared to be confirmed by the fact that there were no major difficulties during the interviews except on one occasion with one respondent on Question 1. The researcher needed to provide further clarification of Question 1 in order to obtain the information sought. Throughout the study, the researcher was aware that he should not be leading the respondent in order to avoid data contamination.

Once the questions were ready, the subjects⁴ were contacted via email and telephone. The respondents were mainly the course tutors or the people involved in the delivery of the course, who

³ However, see the work done by EAL SIG on their website (<http://intranet.open.ac.uk/hsc/eal/index.shtml>)

⁴ Jo Mutlow, the Convenor of the EAL SIG, provided the names of these subjects for the interview, drawing on recommendations made by group members. Courses represented were *K100* and *Openings*. Further details of the respondents can be obtained from the researcher.

had agreed to participate in the study. The respondents' direct contact with the students was varied. The following table shows the number of respondents from different regions, their position within the OU and the number of the participants with ESOL expertise (if any):

Region	Position	ESOL expertise
Region 01 (London) - 2	Associate Lecturer (2)	1
Region 02 (Oxford) - 1	Student (1)	
Region 04 (West Midlands) - 1	Staff Tutor (1)	
Region 09 (North) - 2	Assistant Regional Director (1)	
	Associate Lecturer (1)	1
Region 11 (Scotland) - 2	Staff Tutor (1)	
	Associate Lecturer (1)	1
Region 12 (the Republic of Ireland) - 1	Associate Lecturer (1)	
Region 13 (South – East) - 3	Associate Lecturer (3)	2

Number of respondents, regional representation, their position within the OU and the number of respondents with ESOL expertise.

As soon as a suitable time was agreed upon with a respondent, the questionnaire was sent to them by email so as to enable them to be prepared to respond fully during the interview. Altogether eight people (seven tutors and a learner) were interviewed while four respondents preferred to reply in writing. Choice of medium did not appear to affect the nature of the information provided.

The telephone interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent so that the data would not be lost while talking over the phone and taking notes. The researcher had made it clear that the recording was for his reference purposes only. The interviews took 30 minutes in average. It should also be noted that the researcher asked some additional questions in order to clarify or obtain more in-depth information, specifically while asking Questions 1 and 2 (see Appendix).

When the interviews were completed, the information was collated for each question. The results are presented and discussed below.

4. Results of the data analyses and discussion

The results of the responses to each question are shown below, and are followed by the discussion.

Question 1 (English language competency required)

All the respondents agreed that there is an assumption in the course that the learners have a good level of reading and writing skills in English despite the fact that OU courses are open to all and do not have any entry requirements particularly for the Openings or Level 1.

Most of the respondents believe that the learners are expected to have the ability to read and understand the course materials, and write essays in general⁵. Using academic vocabulary appropriately, taking notes, constructing sentences correctly, spelling accurately, using referencing words like ‘this’ and ‘that’ correctly, and using punctuation marks appropriately are other major English language skills that a learner is expected to have. In one tutor’s opinion, learners are expected to be able to write in simple, short and comprehensible sentences. Given that most of the teaching in OU does not require face-to-face interaction, speaking and listening are not a major issue. Nonetheless, six of the respondents indicated that some course materials require the learners to watch videos or DVDs of case studies or listen to CDs or other audio materials, which means the learners are expected to have the ability to process the information by listening. Likewise, learners need to have the ability to communicate clearly over the phone as many of the tutorials are conducted in this way. Of course, some tutorials are carried out face-to-face as well, which involves listening and speaking skills.

Although the learners are expected to produce work in English with grammatical accuracy, some of the tutors interviewed expressed the opinion that it does not have to be 100% accurate, which may be due to the focus being given to the content rather than the use of accurate language. In other words, as long as the meaning is not impeded, linguistic inaccuracies may be acceptable. This is particularly true with the ESOL speakers.

In addition to English language skills, almost all the respondents pointed out that the learners are expected to have certain academic or study skills, which are considered to be essentially related to academic English. According to one tutor, they have to “begin to communicate accurately and reliably using structured and coherent arguments recognising the purpose and audience.” Three of the tutors expressed that it is also important for the learner to maintain a particular authorial voice in their writing by using appropriate pronouns. They believe that the learner needs to be able to

⁵ All the tutors interviewed stated that academic essay writing skills are expected to develop during the course.

demonstrate the ability to “interpret and critically analyse the words in the academic context.” It was essential for learners to present the written work in a coherent/ organised way. For the respondents this meant the learner having to follow the conventions of academic writing such as writing a proper introduction, using good paragraphing, using appropriate linking devices, signposting and ending with a proper conclusion. One tutor observed that learners need to master “the skills of using a dictionary when in doubt” and be able to “follow clear instructions and produce a coherent piece of writing.” The majority of the tutors mentioned that in some courses like business studies or health and social care, learners have to be able to work with graphs, charts and numbers. In addition, they sometimes have to relate their experience to what they have studied (i.e., reflective writing).

Four of the tutors strongly indicated that the OU learners are also expected to develop ICT skills, which enhance their ability to work in English. One tutor gave the example of the ‘spelling and grammar’ tool available in their PCs in order to check the learner’s accuracy in English⁶.

Question 2 (English language skills gaps as noticed)

Throughout the interviews, the recurring theme in terms of noticeable difficulties among learners was writing skills, particularly in relation to examinations. All the interviewees including the learner believed that writing difficulties were a major hurdle to the learner’s success in exams. According to the tutors, the problem revolves round spelling, grammar (articles, subject-verb agreement, singular-plural, verb-ending), structures, sentence construction (e.g., sentence without a subject and/or verb) and handwriting (specifically for those who follow a different script like Arabic or dyslexic ESOL learners). These skills gaps are found not necessarily among the ESOL learners only but also among the native English language speakers who come from non-traditional education backgrounds. Examples of the skill-gaps referred to by respondents were: the wrong use of apostrophes with every word ending in ‘s’; paragraphs written without any punctuation marks; difficulty in moving from spoken to written register. These views were also echoed by the learner-informant.

Some tutors indicated that cultural differences may have caused difficulty for ESOL learners, coming from different cultural backgrounds. This is more pronounced when these learners have to deal with idiomatic/ colloquial expressions or phrases, which are heavily culturally loaded. If the learners interpreted such expressions literally, they will miss the point. According to two tutors,

⁶ This, however, may be counter-productive as well according to the learner being interviewed because the learner cannot use such facility in the examination situation.

another interesting ‘cultural problem’ in writing was producing very long sentences. One of the tutors believed that the learner wrote in such a way because that is what their culture may value.

Three of the respondents also pointed out that cultural backgrounds can affect the performance of academic skills more generally. For instance, one tutor suggested that evidence of lack of critical thinking or analyses can be attributed to the learners’ cultural or socio-educational backgrounds where it may not be considered acceptable to be critical of the higher authorities in some cultures. As a result, the learner may tend to copy the original work rather than writing critically and using their experience to back up what they believe to be true. Sometimes this may lead to unintended plagiarism. Although for some respondents this was felt to be a serious issue on some courses among some OU students, this report has no evidence to support this view that plagiarism is due to the culture.⁷

Some tutors also noted that it is very difficult to identify whether ‘problem’ is related to language or thinking/intellectual ability. This is made more difficult by the fact that some learners do not consult with the tutor which makes it almost impossible to diagnose the problem.

One tutor commented that it is particularly difficult to say what skills are lacking since the ESOL learners vary so much, ranging from “functionally illiterate” to those who have taken Cambridge proficiency exams, that they cannot be generalised.

Question 3 (language support available)

The third question was directly related to the availability of the English language support to OU learners. The interviewees had different opinions on this because some regions did not have the ESOL learners or had very few of whom the tutors were aware while other regions had many. This influenced how the regional centre operates. Most of the tutors mentioned individual tutor support during the course (including feedback on Tutor Marked Assignments [TMAs]), regional student support unit, special sessions, *The Good Study Guide*⁸, *The Effective Use of English*⁹, and workshops on essay writing skills as currently available within the OU. Some tutors said they use email discussions or e-forums to support the learners. It also became clear that some regional centres recruit tutors who have some expertise in ESOL learner support, which the respondents perceived to

⁷ However, see Sowden (2005) on plagiarism in relation to multilingual learners.

⁸ By Andy Northedge, The Open University.

⁹ Developed to provide online language support to the learners.

be very useful. Recently, a mentoring scheme has been started in Region 13, in which a tutor with ESOL expertise mentors a tutor who does not have such expertise but has to help the ESOL learner.

Question 4 (suitability of current provision, remedial actions and suggestions for improvement)

The previous question addressed the respondents' view of the current English language support provision. The majority of the respondents expressed the view that the current provision of English language support is not sufficient or effective. They thought even though some regional centres have taken the initiatives to run workshops in order to assist the learners with English language support needs or academic study skills needs, they are not well attended.¹⁰ Moreover, they are run in a very few regions like London and West Midlands, according to the respondents. Some tutors believe that those who attend such workshops have benefited hugely. However, it was felt that the learner retention was very low, which raises the question of cost effectiveness. Additionally, according to one tutor, these workshops may not be appropriate for these learners because they tend to assume that "all learners have the same level of English."

Many tutors claimed that *The Good Study Guide* is a very useful tool to improve the learners' study skills including writing in English. However, one tutor commented that it is difficult for an ESOL learner to understand the information in the book as the text itself requires a higher level of skills in reading and comprehension than some learners have.

The Effective Use of English was mentioned by seven tutors¹¹ (including the learner¹²) as a language support tool. However, five of them expressed the view that it was not effective enough as can be seen from these quotes:

"not suitable not good enough",

"not terribly effective, overly prescriptive, unhelpful and not user-friendly",

"not effective and not used"

"It is good in part but it is essentially for the native speakers, not for the ESOL learners."

They also added that this tool has no longer been used and has not been recommended to the learners. On the other hand, the other two tutors believed that the tool is useful.

¹⁰ This is confirmed by my personal communication with the London Region Student Support Unit as well, which runs effective use of English workshops every year. This year they were not attended well but the reasons were not clear.

¹¹ One of the tutors was not aware of this tool.

¹² She did not specifically mention the resource but she indicated that she has used online support when she needed.

The tutor-mentoring scheme mentioned in *Question3* has been found to be very effective in some places (particularly Region 13), according to three respondents. Two of these tutors mentored other tutors while the third was mentored. Two of the tutors actually talked about a case study to the researcher, which showed that both the tutor and the learner benefited from the scheme.

One study-guide that was mentioned by one tutor was the Y156 *Study Guide*. This was seen as very effective and learner-friendly, and particularly useful for ESOL speakers.

The second part of the question dealt with if any steps had been taken to improve the current situation. The majority mentioned that some regional centres and individual tutors (including staff tutors) have taken initiatives to tackle the problem. For example, three of the respondents said that if tutors cannot support the learner, they refer them to the regional centre, which directs them to the appropriate body or people. Sometimes learners are referred to ESOL support tutors in some regions. Despite these efforts, one tutor pointed out that it is often difficult for some students to access support due to the nature of their work (e.g., shift work or family commitments). Some respondents stated that they have tried to offer support to needy learners by focusing on one problem at a time (e.g., paragraphing, punctuation, etc.). However, many respondents believed that this may not be a widely used approach. Some interviewees were of the opinion that there is expertise which is available in some regions but not 'centrally' available.

The final part of this question required the respondents to suggest ways to improve the current ESOL needs support provision. They unanimously agreed that there must be some kind of English language skills course offered to the students either before they start their chosen subject or during the course. Two tutors even suggested sending the learners to another institution (further education colleges, for example) for English language courses. At the same time, the respondents were also aware that the OU's open access policy does not allow this. In response, some tutors recommended that learners' English language skills need to be assessed or their needs diagnosed early on in the course so that appropriate help can be offered. In other words, despite the negative connotations of the diagnostic test/assessment, they believed that it would help to identify the needs, which could then be appropriately addressed in time. At least four interviewees suggested that tutors needed to pick up the potential problems from the early TMAs based on which they can give quick feedback on their skills. This is confirmed by the learner's response, which shows that she benefited enormously from

the tutor feedback as long as it was corrective rather than negative criticism¹³. The learner also suggested that it would be very useful to offer grammar practice activities online for ESOL speakers.

Some tutors maintained that the OU/ tutors have to be proactive by targeting those who need support rather than waiting for them to approach the tutor. For these respondents, this meant running more special one-to-one sessions. In addition, six of the tutors interviewed proposed that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) sessions would be useful to run alongside Openings and Level 1 courses. A tutor suggested that maybe ESOL learners should be allowed to take dictionaries to their exams. This could help reduce some anxiety related to their language ability.

While making suggestions, the interviewees pointed out several problems, which contribute to making the OU courses more challenging to the ESOL learners (and also some native English language speakers). Firstly, two respondents observed that five months on the Openings course is perhaps “not sufficient to develop skills in English for EAL speakers”. This is compounded by the fact that the Openings courses have “lots of culturally loaded assumptions, adding to language difficulty.” Furthermore, three respondents perceived that there is a false assumption that Openings (including Level 1) are ‘easy’¹⁴. Secondly, almost all the respondents reiterated that subject tutors are not English language specialists and may not have the expertise to assist ESOL learners with their language skills development. This leads to both the tutor and the learner being frustrated because progress is hampered by a language barrier. Third, five of the respondents thought that the course materials are not as accessible as they should be. They thought they should be made more accessible by “avoiding academic snobbery and communicating complex ideas in a simpler way.” Fourth, three respondents noted that there is no mechanism to track down if needy learners have accessed the existing relevant facilities or support. Fifth, three respondents pointed out that currently there is no benchmark for English language skills, which they thought essential. Two of the respondents proposed International English Language Testing System (IELTS)¹⁵ as an option while two others suggested adult ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) curriculum for England and Wales. Sixth, the majority of the respondents observed that there is no official provision for

¹³ This learner felt being let down when the tutor commented that she should have asked the (English) family she lives with and works for to read her essay before submitting it. She believed that it was a very stereotypical interpretation of ESOL learners, which is a form of discrimination against them. Therefore, she expressed that the comments should be positive and constructive.

¹⁴ For example see the extract from Health and Social Care Level 1 course (*Understanding Health and Social Care – K100*) in the appendix. One can readily imagine how easy or difficulty it is for an ESOL learner.

¹⁵ Most UK and Australian universities require the international students to present the IELTS scores as evidence of their English language proficiency, which the OU does not follow since it has the open access policy to all.

supporting the tutor to support the students with English language skills needs. Finally, one respondent pointed out that there is

no clear guidance for ESOL learners and their tutors... assessing some ESOL learners' work I've found difficulty interpreting Learning Outcome 3 for Openings "You have communicated effectively in written English" and the sub-outcome "Written work is easy to understand and accurate". What does accurate mean here? Accurate grammar, formation of letters, punctuation, vocabulary? And how accurate? Should there be different standards of accuracy for ESOL students? What about ESOL students who are also dyslexic?

Question 5 (further comments if any)

The purpose of the fifth question was to pick up any points that were missed in the first four. Almost all the respondents had something to add. Some tutors stated that numeracy is also a major issue, which needs to be considered in tandem with language or literacy problems. This became obvious when the learner has to deal with graphs and charts (also see *Question 1*).

Another important issue raised by the tutors was the contradiction between the OU Open access policy and the expectation that learners need to have a certain level of "proficiency in English." Four of the respondents believed that the course materials use "flowery language"¹⁶ which has proved to be difficult for the ESOL learners. According to one respondent, this can be partly solved by providing glossary of the key terms used in the course material at the end of the book. In one tutor's view learners may not have been advised appropriately on their choice of courses, which makes the tutor and the learners' life more difficult. She suggested that it is better to establish a system that would identify the kind of support they would need. The idea is not to allocate a level to them but to diagnose their needs and provide them with support from early on. One tutor made a suggestion to develop an online diagnostic tool to serve this purpose. This could have wider audience/market as well.

Since examinations were considered by the majority of the respondents a major hurdle, some tutors suggested that extra time could be allowed to ESOL learners during exams. They believed that it might take longer time for such learners to process and produce the information compared to a native speaker of English. However, this brings the issue of fairness, validity of examinations and equal opportunities.

¹⁶ When asked what this meant, one respondent explained that the language is highly sophisticated and requires higher skills to process the information contained in the text. This may have to be investigated further.

Some tutors felt that the students were not performing as well as they could because they are “not able to know and understand the concept of OU and distance learning” and the information they receive at the beginning is so “overwhelming” that they are lost. A tutor gave an example of a learner who did not contact her because she thought the tutor would do so. As a result, she did not perform well and failed her exam. This highlights the importance of the kind of information the OU sends to learners regarding their course and how it is sent¹⁷.

Two of the tutors expressed that OU Taster courses can be used to provide the prospective OU learner with the feel of the course. This would help the learner to decide if they are ready for the course or they need to do something else (e.g., English language/EAP) before they start it. One tutor went on to suggest that some learners are likely to gain more success by opting for an Openings course rather than going for a Level 1 course straight away. Keeping this in view two tutors proposed that it may be beneficial to ask the learner to “write a short piece of work in English to see if their English was good enough for the course.”

A tutor suggested that the OU needs to recruit more tutors from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups on Openings or Level 1 courses. This would help to retain BME students. Additionally, these tutors would have the expertise to support these learners since they themselves have been through similar experiences. They will have the empathy and it will help to reduce anxiety among these learners.

From the views presented above, one can notice that there are issues directly associated with English language skills and academic skills. It is also clear from the voices presented here that these issues are very complex and will need to be responded to soon by different stakeholders including the OU policy makers and course developers. Furthermore, the opinions of the tutors interviewed confirm that the OU student population is diverse, multicultural and multilingual. The tutors’ answers to the questionnaire suggest that learners with ESOL background and their tutors are able to respond to varying extents to the situation: some tutors have responded proactively as they have the experience and skills while others have not because they do not feel that they have the expertise to do so. It appears likely that some learners are suffering and may become frustrated, resulting in poor achievement. This will influence student retention on OU courses. These interviews prompt questions about what the official responses are or should be.

¹⁷ Recent work carried out by Learning and Teaching Solutions and Institute of Educational Technology may help solve this problem.

5. Limitations

This study has some limitations because of the nature of its data and the research method. It was a small-scale pilot study and did not involve enough people to generalise the findings widely. It represents the views of teachers only; learners would be able to provide better information as the research is about them and their needs. Their perception of their needs may be very different from those perceived by the tutors. It should also be noted that all the respondents except one were female and the data may have been different if there had been some more male respondents as well. In terms of the method of data collection, this study follows only one method: the questionnaire-interview. This means the data cannot be triangulated. This study is being presented as a pilot study and its findings as indicating a need for further research.

6. Recommendations and conclusion

Based on the responses obtained from the tutor interviews and discussions held at recent EAL SIG meetings in London, it is clear that the OU is working with a growing number of learners with a great need for English language support together with academic skills support. Hence, the researcher would like to make the following recommendations in order to address the current issue in question:

- It should be recognised that the OU now has learners who speak English as (an) other/additional language. The implications of this are important for everyone involved in the process of developing, designing, writing and producing the learning materials, and those who deliver teaching and learning. There is a need for awareness-raising about what these implications are.
- The OU should consider creating English language support provision rather than depending upon individual tutors alone or sending ESOL learners to other institutions. While it is possible to refer learners to a local institution which offers ESOL courses¹⁸ that are normally free and funded by the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC), it should be noted that they may still not be able to achieve academic skills necessary for the OU courses. For this reason, it is advisable to develop an EAP course to this end.

¹⁸ See Linda Hollow's recent report (February 2006) for EAL SIG.

- Course designers should explore ways in which Openings and Level 1 course-materials could be made more accessible to ESOL learners. This might include consideration of whether the amount of complex academic language could be reduced without interfering with the integrity of the course; if one is not already provided, whether the provision of a glossary of terms at the end of each textbook would be helpful; there may also be questions about how culturally loaded information is presented in courses.
- Learners with English language support needs often have ‘spiky’ profiles, which means each of them has different needs, which may have to be addressed individually. There are questions about how such support can be delivered.
- A tutor-mentoring scheme where someone with TESOL expertise can mentor other tutors who do not have such skills could be considered. There is already some evidence within the OU that this approach is effective (as seen in *Question 4* above).
- An online diagnostic assessment tool should be developed, which can identify ESOL learner’s needs from the very beginning. There is already a free self-assessment tool called Dialang, available online in 14 European languages including English. This is based on The Council of Europe, *Framework for language Teaching, Learning and Assessment*. It can be downloaded from www.dialang.org on to a PC and accessed.
- OU taster courses could be used more widely to assess the learner readiness.
- More online grammar practice activities could be developed targeted at ESOL learners.
- Continued exploration of ways in which tutors can be more proactive in supporting the ESOL learners from early on should be encouraged. One suggestion is to ask learners to write a short assignment specifically for the purpose of providing formative feedback quickly. This may be arranged as a special session.
- ESOL learners on the Openings courses should be encouraged to do English language courses (e.g., EAP if available within the OU or somewhere else) to enable them to improve their academic skills alongside.
- Ways of increasing the recruitment of BME tutors should continue to be explored.
- Ways of carrying out staff development for tutors who have to deal with the ESOL learners could be explored.
- If there is uncertainty, it would be helpful to seek clarification of policy and guidelines on how language skills are to be regarded in student assignments. There are complex relationships between language and content to which individual tutors may feel uncertain in responding. It might be possible to work towards descriptors for each level of achievement.

- There is a need for a full-scale study of the kind carried out in this pilot, but involving learners as well as tutors.

The researcher hopes that the findings presented in this report will draw the attention of all those concerned with the needs of OU learners who speak English as an Additional Language and will lead to new action plans for the benefit of these learners.

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9. Appendices

Tutor Questionnaire

Language needs survey across OU student population and beyond with a particular focus on the learners on the Openings / Level 1 courses in Health and Social Care

Main focus:

- What English competency skills are necessary for Opening/Level 1 courses? (This should be responded by the tutors or course designers)
- What are the needs of the ESOL/EAL learners? (this needs to be addressed by tutors and students)
- How much the current provision at OU and other HEIs meet these needs? (This needs to be addressed by the relevant departments and the market research).

Please think of the following questions and respond as appropriate (if possible from the learner perspective as well)

1. What are the specific language /study skills that a learner needs to have to do the Openings/ Level 1 course(s) in your Faculty/Department?
2. Generally which English language skills have you noticed most lacking in the learners?
3. What kind of language support is currently available in your faculty/department for the existing learners?
4. Is the current provision suitable and sufficient to meet the needs of these learners? If not what steps have been taken to tackle this problem? What do you suggest?
5. Any other comments on the English language skills needs?

Thank you for your invaluable time and opinion!

Note: The purpose of this survey is to find out a better picture of the learner needs in terms of language (English) within the Faculty of Health and Social Care. The information or opinion you have provided will be used to solely serve this purpose and not anything else without your permission.

Learner Questionnaire

Language needs survey across OU student population and beyond with a particular focus on the learners on the Openings / Level 1 courses in Health and Social Care

Main focus:

- What English competency skills are necessary for Opening/Level 1 courses? (This should be responded by the tutors or course designers)
- What are the needs of the ESOL/EAL learners? (this needs to be addressed by tutors and students)
- How much the current provision at OU and other HEIs meet these needs? (This needs to be addressed by the relevant departments and the market research).

Please think of the following questions and respond as appropriate

6. What are the specific language /study skills were you expected to have to do the Openings/ Level 1 OU course?
7. Generally which English language skills did you feel you had lacked during the course?
8. What kind of language support have you been given in your faculty/department?
9. Is the current provision suitable and sufficient to meet your needs? If not what steps have been taken to tackle this problem? What do you suggest?
10. Any other comments on the English language skills needs?

Thank you for your invaluable time and opinion!

Note: The purpose of this survey is to find out a better picture of the learner needs in terms of language (English) within the Faculty of Health and Social Care. The information or opinion you have provided will be used to solely serve this purpose and not anything else without your permission.

The extract on the next page is from K100 *Understanding Health and Social Care* Level 1 course:

1.2 Silences and concealment

Anthropologists and psychoanalysts use the term 'taboo' to describe forbidden activities, feelings or relationships. All societies seem to have particular rules and rituals to deal with bodily functions, sexuality and death, sometimes expressed in terms of hygiene or religion, and these keep them separated off from everyday life. When social rules function well they are invisible. We only notice them when we have committed a *faux pas* and caused embarrassment. Marie very quickly and correctly learnt the rules in this establishment: from the lack of acknowledgement of this aspect of the job she picked up that it was not an oversight that no one had spoken about it. It was *not to be* spoken about. In another care home down the road a friend of Marie's complained to the proprietor that one of the (male) residents tried to grab her in a sexual way. He told her quite sharply that 'if she couldn't stand the heat she should get out of the kitchen'. In other words, she was being told not to complain and that her only option, if she didn't like it, was to leave. She found she was working in an occupational subculture where only certain things are permitted to be discussed (like the auxiliaries working in Cedar Court whom you met in Unit 4).

This kind of silence tends to be produced when there are hierarchies in which tasks are delegated to some people rather than others. Dealing with intimate care tends to be a low-status task. It is often referred to as 'basic' care as opposed to the more technical tasks within nursing and the planning, educational or therapeutic tasks within residential services. In Unit 4 it was referred to as 'backstage work', following Goffman. Hughes, another sociologist, writing in 1971 coined the term 'dirty work', which is the work within any society or profession which is delegated downwards and/or concealed (Hughes, 1971). Caring for people's bodies could be regarded as the 'dirty work' of care, as well as 'backstage' work.

While nurses are taught procedures for carrying out personal care tasks, they are rarely explicitly 'taught' how to deal with the emotions these tasks occasion. Learning 'on the job' produces a kind of knowledge based on practice rather than theory which is literally difficult to put into words. This helps to keep the work and the skills it involves invisible.

1.3 Women's work

Gender and power play a role in keeping issues like this out of the public arena. One reason for women's comparative silence in our culture is that more of what they do is defined as 'private' or 'personal'. Things they talk about are often downgraded – being deemed unimportant, boring or inappropriate. When large and difficult areas of experience are left out of public discussion we need to ask why. Ignoring the experience of certain groups of people is a way of exercising power over them. It allows their points of view and their needs to slip off the agenda. Women and members of minority ethnic groups have protested against being treated in this way. But it is an experience shared by carers and users of services (Pascall, 1986, p. 30, and Brown and Smith, 1989, p. 108 [make this link](#)).

Beyond the fact that women have tasks to do which are defined as not worth discussing, is the fact that women do seem to be given roles in dealing with and containing feelings, and particularly sexual feelings. This is true in care settings and also in other work such as shop work where 'the customer is always right', or in reception where the