
Student Profiles in English: Issues and Implications

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At the Open University of Sri Lanka, one aspect of academic success is proficiency in English, and the university strives to provide equal opportunities for learning English to all students in all faculties. However although English is considered vital for academic programmes, since the inception of OUSL, no attempt has been made to postulate linguistic profiles of students vis-a-vis proficiency in English. This paper therefore addresses this issue and attempts to establish certain parameters of proficiency in selected student populations. The paper is based on student performance at the Grading Test in English, a test which is administered on entry to all faculties and departments that mandate English as a compulsory requirement. This paper focuses on student competence in English and presents a comparison of the abilities of students in different faculties and academic departments. Our initial survey appears to reveal that there are significant differences in the abilities of students, faculty wise as well as department wise. These findings seem to support a need for further investigation into the social and educational background of students as determinants of academic progress within OUSL.

INTRODUCTION

Commenting on Open Education, Gough (1988) states that institutions that profess to offer open modes of learning need to ensure equality of access to educational resources. These educational resources may include print material, audio-visual material, laboratory practicals, workshop sessions, discursive day - school sessions and perhaps even on - the - job training. Whatever resource or resources an institution may choose to use needs to be available in equal measure to all students at that institution.

Availability of material, however, is not the single measure of success. What is more crucial is to ensure that these resources have a direct impact on student learning. In fact, in open institutions, educational resources are meant to encourage learner independence, to create self - directed and autonomous learners. As Morgan points out

"the experience of learning should equip the learner to handle problems or issues that could not have been predicted in advance" (Morgan. 1994. p. 114)

The effectiveness of educational resources therefore underpins the experience of open learning. Thus it is of paramount importance that the institution ensures that these resources actively assist students to orient themselves towards learning. Providing this assurance is in itself a daunting task; and the task is made more daunting when the resources have to be provided in a language that is not the students' mother tongue. In countries such as Sri Lanka, the language of higher education in certain fields happens to be English. Thus universities such as the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) necessarily have to create educational resources in English; and competence in the English language is vital for academic progress at university level.

ENGLISH AT OUSL

Proficiency in English

As mentioned above, proficiency in English is a necessary adjunct to learning in Sri Lankan universities, and OUSL is no exception. Each of the three faculties at OUSL, viz. the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), the Faculty of Natural Sciences (NS) and the Faculty of Engineering Technology (Eng. Tech.) have in fact posited English as a mandatory requirement for all Bachelor's degree programmes as well as for certain other certificate programmes such as Diplomas.

Though all faculties have adopted a common attitude towards the importance of English in their academic programmes, the level of proficiency required varies within and among faculties. In HSS, for example, the requirement for the BA in Social Sciences is higher than that for the BA in Legal Policy or the Bachelor of Laws programme. Table 1 below indicates the various degree / diploma programmes of OUSL that mandate compulsory English proficiency, and the level of proficiency required for each of these programme.

Table 1: English Language Requirements for OUSL Academic Programmes

English Courses & Levels	HSS		NS		ENG.TECH	
	BA in Social Sciences	BA in Legal Policy /LLB	B.Sc / B.Ed (Sc.)	B.Sc (Nursing)	B.Sc	Dip.
Level 0 - Beginner.	*	*			*	*
Level 1 - Lower Intermediate (Part 1)	*	*	*	*	*	*
Level 2 - Higher Intermediate (Part 2)	*	*	*	*	*	
Level 3 - Advanced	*					

* Mandatory requirement for award of certificate.

As Table 2 demonstrates, in HSS, Social Sciences students have to complete (or demonstrate competence in) four levels of English, ranging from Beginner to Advanced. Law students, on the other hand, have to complete three levels, a requirement which is also reflected in the B.Sc. for Eng. Tech. The Diploma in Technology however requires only two levels of proficiency.

Both HSS and Eng. Tech. have made provisions for students with minimal proficiency by mandating that such students should complete the Beginner course in English. In NS, however, students with

minimal competence have to follow the lower intermediate level course.

At the upper end of the scale, the BA in Social Sciences demands a high level of competence as all students have to complete the Advanced Course in English prior to registration for the final level (Level 5) of the BA programme.

All other Bachelor's programmes require only a higher intermediate level of competence in English. Students in such programmes receive their Bachelor's certificates only if they have completed the English course at Level 2, ie. Part 2.

The Grading Test in English

All English language courses at OUSL are conducted by the Department of Language Studies (LSD) and placement in the courses is decided on the basis of performance at the Grading Tests (GT) conducted by LSD at various times of the year. The GTs are conducted on entry to the programmes, and all students are required to sit the GT relevant to their discipline.

Placement for the different levels is set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Placement at the Grading Test in English

Score at Test	Level
0 - 19	Beginner
20 - 49	Lower Intermediate (Part 1)
50 - 69	Higher Intermediate (Part 2)
70 and above	a) Exempted from Beginner, Part 1 and Part 2 courses b) Have to follow Advanced Course if registered for BA in Social Sciences

The GTs used for the three faculties are based on a common format and consist of two sections: Section A which deals with Grammatical competence and Writing, Section B which deals with Fluency and Reading comprehension. The linguistic skills tested in the GTs reflect the views of the academic staff at OUSL. Surveys conducted by LSD had established that what staff recognised as vital were the skills of Reading (for all levels of study) and Writing (at higher academic levels). It is relevant to note that at OUSL, print material is the most widely used educational resource - hence the primacy of the skill of Reading. At higher levels, (Levels 5 and 6) course material and day - schools are offered only in English while written work at these levels (ie. project work, assignments and final examinations) is carried out in English.

In testing these skills, LSD uses a variety of question forms. In Section A, Grammatical competence is checked through MCQ items; and Writing through two questions, one that tests the mechanics of Writing (capitalisation, punctuation etc.) and the other a holistic test

of competence. This consists of an essay that is scored for linguistic coherence, ability to write expository prose, command of vocabulary and general competence. Section B consists of a cloze passage which tests linguistic fluency, and a passage which tests aspects of Reading such as comprehension, use of deictic and coherence devices, vocabulary etc.

Although all GTs share a common format, details of the questions vary from faculty to faculty and discipline to discipline. The Tests in fact are based on subject specialisms and thus reflect an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) rationale. For example, in NS, the Reading passage for B.Sc (Nursing) is adapted from medical or nursing literature while the passage for the B.Sc. (NS) reflects general science. This ESP bias is incorporated also into Section A where, for instance, the essay topics include at least one of specific interest to the relevant faculty or discipline.

While the GTs do cater to specialist interest, the basic objective is of course to check linguistic proficiency. To this end the test format has been so devised that each section indicates particular levels of proficiency. Section A which contains the easier areas of MCQ items and basic writing tasks helps to indicate proficiency at Beginner and Lower Intermediate levels. Section B on the other hand contains linguistically complex items which incorporate sophisticated vocabulary. Hence only those with a high level of proficiency are expected to score in Section B which thus helps to define the more competent student.

The distribution of linguistic skills through the two sections also helps to ensure that student placement is appropriately established. Thus for example the Beginner student who can hardly cope with the complexities of Section B is placed in a group where his/her Writing and Reading skills are built up. The differing levels of competence at higher levels too can be sorted out as the student with near - native fluency copes with all aspects of Section B, scoring the required mark of 70+. The student who still needs some assistance at higher levels finds some of the items difficult and hence his / her score falls

in the 50 - 69 mark range. It is perhaps relevant to mention that the present format was arrived at after experimenting with different GT formats over the years. The appropriacy of the format was strengthened in 1993 when the GT was validated against an international test of proficiency, the Anglo-world and University of Edinburgh proficiency test (Hill and Fenn. 1989) which is one of the tests used by the University of Edinburgh to ascertain proficiency in English of international students. The Pearsons product - moment correlation between the variables was $R = .892$ indicating a high level of acceptability (Ratwatte. 1995). The results of the 1996/97 GTs analysed in this paper further support the reliability of the testing mechanism used by LSD.

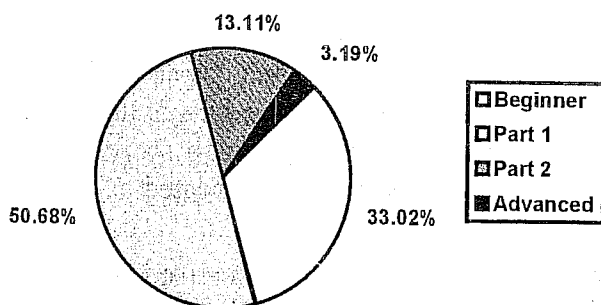
This then forms the academic background to the issues discussed in this paper. We also need to be aware of the complex sociolinguistic position of English in Sri Lanka. For though English has been widely used in the island for more than a century, and though students are aware of the need for proficiency in English for academic studies, large numbers of Sri Lankans are denied access to functional English. The reality that LSD grapples with is the University's demand for proficiency set against the widely differing levels of competence of OUSL students. Since 1990, LSD has attempted to provide students with a variety of courses that cater to the needs of different groups of students. Having begun with a unitary course in 1990, LSD then established courses at two levels in 1992. In 1994, a zero-level Beginner Course was introduced to help students with minimal English; and in 1995 with the establishment of a Diploma in English, an Advanced Course in Academic Reading and Writing was made available. These courses reflect the major patterns of linguistic ability of student groups at OUSL. However the finer details of student competence particularly within and across faculties had not been delineated. These are the details that are discussed below.

THE LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF OUSL STUDENTS

Overall University Profile

A total of 3477 students sat for the Grading Tests in 1996/97. Figure 1 below indicates the overall levels of proficiency of OUSL students.

Figure 1 - Percentage of students in the different levels - University Profile



As demonstrated by the chart, the majority, 50.68%, are those with Lower-Intermediate level proficiency (Part 1), and the next largest majority, 33.02%, were graded as Beginners. Only 13.11% could be considered as being of Higher-Intermediate level (Part 2) while a small minority (3.19%) were exempted from following English courses.

Looking more closely at student performance, we discovered that at lower levels (Beginner and Lower-Intermediate), proficiency was indeed very weak.

Table 3: Average Mark of OUSL Students at Each Level

Group & Mark Range	Average Mark	Percentage of Students
Beginner 0 - 19	12.7	33.02
Part 1 20 - 49	35.7	50.68
Part 2 50 - 69	58.5	13.11
Advanced 70 & above	73.6	3.19

Table 3 which indicates the average mark for each level demonstrates that the average Beginner level student is only capable of scoring 12.7% in the Grading Test. The fact that the Lower-Intermediate students too are weak is indicated by the average score which is 35.7%, ie. lower than the 40% conventionally accepted as the 'pass mark' for all examinations

Another revealing feature is the gap between the average Beginner student and the average Lower-Intermediate student - a difference of 23 percentile marks.

At the higher level, however, average student proficiency is acceptable as the mean scores are 58.5% for the Higher-Intermediate and 73.6% for those exempted. Here the average score is higher than the cut-off mark for that level indicating that the average student at each of these levels is able to cope linguistically with the tasks set for that level.

The performance of the average students also validates the GT and justifies the manner in which students are assigned to the different levels. The average mark obtained by the students in each of the levels demonstrate that they are well within the range specified for that level. For example, the range for Part 1 is 20 - 49 and the average mark is 35.7% which is approximately the mid-point.

Since, as mentioned above, the GT distinguishes between levels of proficiency in a variety of linguistic skills, it would be useful to examine the facts set out above in terms of linguistic skills. Table 4

below sets out the average performance of OUSL students in the different language areas.

Table 4: Average Score in Language Skills of OUSL Students

Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
67.14%	33.78%	32.69%	43.55%

Table 4 indicates that OUSL students, on entry, demonstrate an acceptable grasp of the grammatical rules of the English language. This competence however is not reflected in practical demonstrations of their ability to read and write in English. The score for Writing and Reading is low (33.7% and 32.6% respectively), a fact that has particular implications in terms of academic success.

We investigated this issue more closely in terms of the different groups of students, ie. Beginner, Part 1, Part 2 etc. Table 5 sets out these details.

Table 5: Average Score in Language Skills of Student Groups

	Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
Beginner	33.33	4.06	8.47	9.36
Part 1	59.66	26.55	26.54	32.82
Part 2	86.66	43.20	46.66	63.66
Advanced (Exempted)	96.0	66.22	61.53	78.44

The linguistic differences between each group is clearly demonstrated in Table 5. At Beginner level, students are weak in all aspects of language. Competence in Reading and Fluency are very weak and Writing is almost non-existent. It should be noted here that 33% of all OUSL students fall into this category, ie Beginner.

At Part 1 level, grammatical competence is acceptable but here too Writing and Reading are weak. At the higher levels, on the other hand, students' skills certainly show improvement - but it is relevant to note that students of the Part 2 group have merely passable levels in the skills of Writing and Reading (ie. 43.2% and 46.6% respectively). This therefore indicates that Part 2 students too need enhancement of such skills. In contrast, the exempted / Advanced group perform well above average in all areas, demonstrating a very high level of grammatical competence and Fluency and good scores in Writing and Reading. (66.22 and 61.53 respectively)

These statistics help us to create a linguistic profile of the OUSL student.

- On entry, the average OUSL student is one with a grasp of the grammatical rules of English, but whose Writing skills and Reading skills are below par. Such a student would therefore find it difficult to read complex academic prose and produce coherent and well - written assignments or papers.
- The Beginner as the name implies, has some grasp of the structure of the language but cannot read or write.
- The Part 1 student is one whose knowledge of grammar is acceptable but needs to pay a great deal of attention to enhancing his / her Reading and Writing Skills.
- The Part 2 student has a good knowledge of the rules and structure of English, and demonstrates an acceptable level in the skills of Reading and Writing. However this level needs to be enhanced if the student is to perform well at higher academic levels. (Level 5 and 6)
- The student who has been exempted or considered an Advanced student is one with an excellent command of the structure of the language, and can cope with Reading and Writing in English.

Profile per Faculty

What is set out above is the general linguistic profile of the average OUSL student and of each student group. Since the GT is designed to suit the needs of each faculty and discipline, we then examined the details for each faculty and discipline. Of the 3,000+ students who sat the GT, a total of 869 were from HSS, 998 from NS and 1610 from Eng. Tech. We set out below the details, for each faculty overall, and each for disciplines within the faculty.

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

When student performance was more closely investigated in terms of learner groups, it revealed that there were certain similarities as well as differences between the HSS profile and the overall OUSL profile. This is reflected in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Percentage of Student Groups in HSS

Group	HSS	Social Sciences	Law
Beginner	18.3	38.27	0.86
Part 1	44.3	40.99	47.2
Part 2	27.73	14.32	39.44
Advanced (Exempted)	9.67	6.42	12.5

The data in Table 6 shows that the student proportions in HSS reflects that of the overall OUSL profile insofar as that the largest population falls into the Part 1 group. However, it differs from the overall OUSL profile in that Part 2 consists of the next largest group. The proportion of Part 2 students is almost double that of the overall OUSL proportion for this group. It should also be noted that the percentage of those exempted in HSS 9.67% is three times that of the OUSL percentage (3.19%). Further, the proportion of Beginners

in HSS too (18.3%) is much lower than that for the OUSL percentage for this group, i.e. 33.02%.

The average performance of HSS students, skill-wise, is set out in Table 7.

Table 7: Average Score in Language Skills of HSS Students

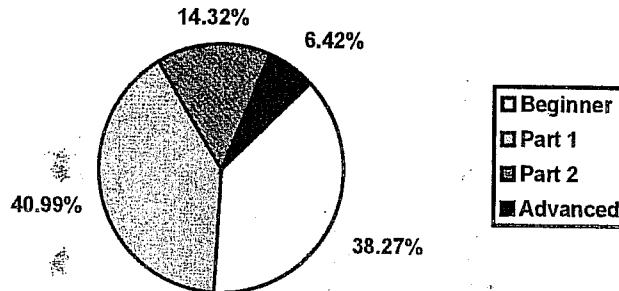
Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
71.52	40.13	39.27	56.11

The data in Table 7 which shows the skill profile of the average student in the Faculty of HSS demonstrates that, overall, grammatical competence far exceeds that of Reading, Writing and general Fluency. This would suggest that, at entry, although students have a certain competence in grammar and are fairly fluent they do not seem to have the ability to use this knowledge in the performance skills.

The scores obtained by the average student in Reading and Writing are comparable suggesting in terms of skill development, these two areas seem equal. However, given that the scores barely approximate to the conventional 'pass mark' (40), it can be said that these skills need further enhancing. On the whole however, the average HSS student when compared with the average OUSL student appears more proficient in all areas of language.

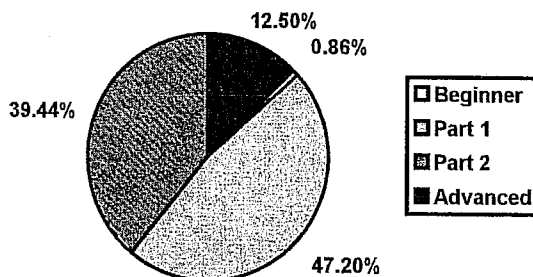
We next examined student performance discipline - wise and we found significant details emerging about the linguistic skills of the Social Sciences students and those of the Law students.

Figure 2 - Percentage of students in the different groups - Social Sciences



A total of 405 students were from the Department of Social Sciences and 464 from the Department of Law. The distribution of students across learner groups in these two HSS disciplines is markedly different. In the Social Sciences, the majority is divided almost equally between the Beginner group (38.27%) and Part 1 (40.99%). In Law however, the greater majority of students are classified either as Part 1 (47.20%) and Part 2 (39.44%). Furthermore in this discipline, the Beginner group is minimal, merely 0.86%, and the proportion of exempted / Advanced students in Law (12.50%) is double that of the Social Sciences (6.42%).

Figure 3 - Percentage of students in the different groups - Law



We next examined the individual skills of students in each Department. This is set out in Figure 4.

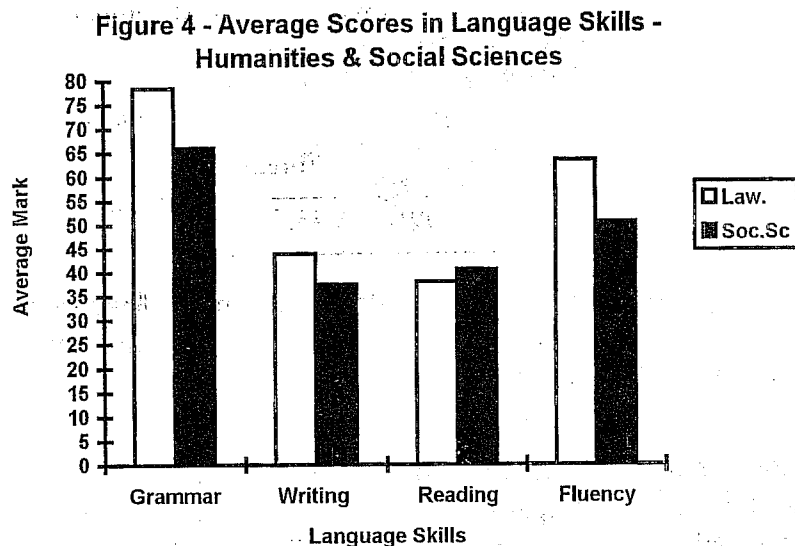


Figure 4 indicates that the Law students are more proficient in all areas (other than Reading) than the Social Sciences students. The average Law student seems to have a very good grasp of the grammar of English, a fairly high degree of fluency and an acceptable level of Writing and Reading. The Social Science student demonstrates very acceptable levels of grammatical competence and fluency, and a passable level of competency in Reading and Writing. (See Appendix 1, Table A for statistical details.)

Faculty of Natural Sciences

When compared with the OUSL profile, the NS profile indicated certain distinct features.

Table 8: Percentage of Student Groups in NS

Group	NS	B.Sc / B.Ed. (Science)	B.Sc (Nursing)
Beginner	21.64	22.96	6.33
Part 1	63.93	62.13	84.81
Part 2	12.83	13.28	7.59
Advanced (Exempted)	1.6	1.63	1.27

The profile of NS closely mirrors that of the university overall with the largest proportion being Part 1 and the next largest, Beginner, and with the proportion of Part 2 corresponding closely to the OUSL proportions.

It should be noted that almost one - fourth of the total number entering the Faculty are Beginners. Furthermore the proportion of those exempted in NS (1.6%) is half that of the overall university proportion (3.19%). In fact the large majority of NS students (85.64%) are at the lower end of the scale ie. Beginner or Part 1.

The average performance of NS students in the various language skills is set out in Table 9.

Table 9: Average Score in Language Skills of NS Students

Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
60.07	26.34	30.22	30.0

The score obtained for Writing is low indicating that the average student in the Faculty of NS, on entry, is weak in Writing. Although the mark obtained for Reading is higher than that for Writing, this too is well below the conventional 'pass mark', suggesting that both

Reading and Writing need to be further enhanced. The scores also reveal that the overall fluency of the average student is poor.

A total of 919 students of NS were those in the B.Sc. or B.Ed. (Science) programmes. Only 79 students were in the B.Sc. (Nursing) programme.

The proportions of the students within learner groups in these two disciplines within NS appear to be different.

Figure 5 - Percentage of students in different groups - Nursing

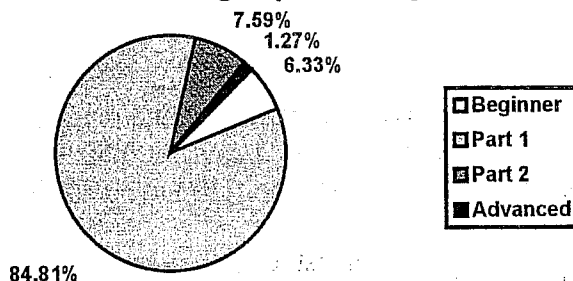
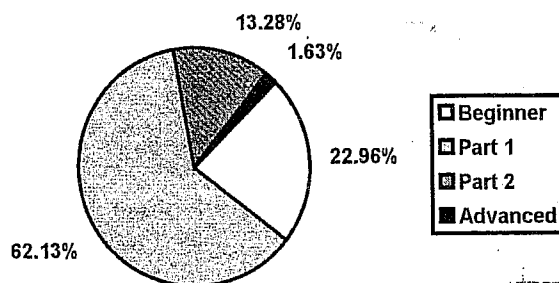


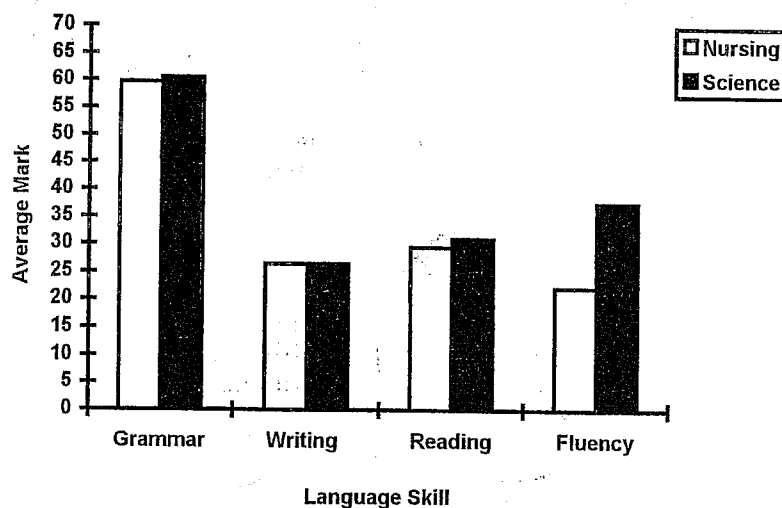
Figure 6 - Percentage of students in different groups - Science



The proportion of Beginners in Nursing is significantly smaller (6.33%) than the proportion for the B.Sc./B.Ed. programmes (22.96%). On the other hand, there are fewer Part 2 students in

Nursing than in the B.Sc. / B.Ed. programmes. Thus the distribution of students across learner groups in the NS disciplines varies.

Figure - 7 Average Scores in Language Skills - Humanities & Social Sciences



In terms of linguistic skills, NS students (in both disciplines) have a fairly high level of grammar but are weak in all other areas. In fact, in the areas of Reading and Writing, NS students are below par, particularly in the latter skill. (See Appendix 1, Table B for statistical details.)

Thus in terms of a linguistic profile for NS it could be said that the student who enters this faculty is one with some competence in grammar but with weak levels of Reading and Writing. On the whole the student is weak in those skills necessary for academic progress at OUSL.

Faculty of Engineering Technology

All Engineering Technology students are grouped together irrespective of their subject speciality ie. Civil, Mechanical, Electrical Engineering or Textile Technology etc. Hence no distinctions were made in terms of disciplines. As with the other Faculties, in terms of learner groups, Eng Tech too demonstrated certain significant features. These are indicated in Figure 8 and Table 10.

Figure 8- Percentage of students in the different levels - Technology

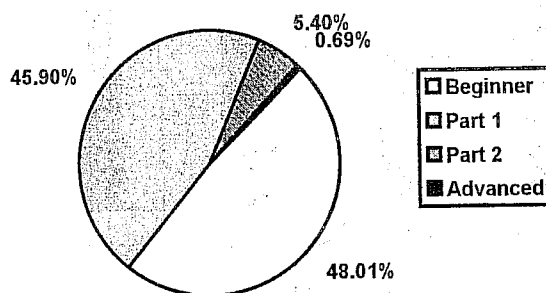


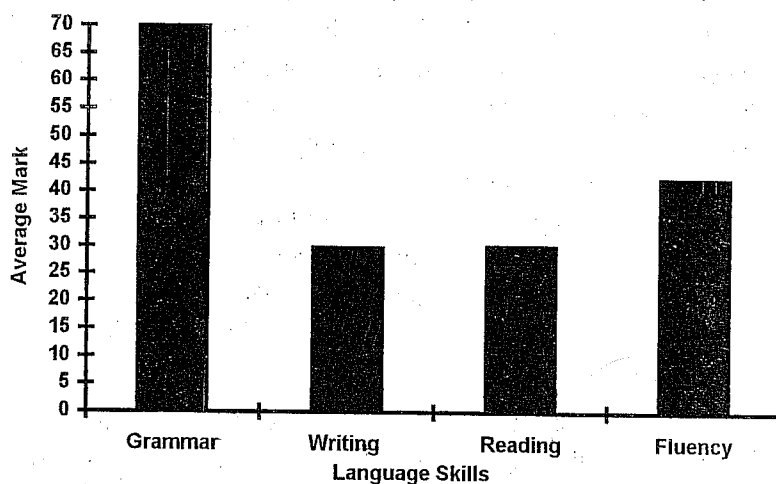
Table 10: Percentage of Student Groups in Eng. Tech

Group	Proportion
Beginners	48.01
Part 1	45.90
Part 2	5.40
Advanced (Exempted)	0.69

In Eng. Tech the majority are Beginners and the next largest group is classified as Part 1. Only a small minority fall into the Part 2 and exempted groups (5.4% and 0.69% respectively.) This pattern contrasts markedly with the overall OUSL profile and with those of the other faculties, where Part 1 was the largest group. Eng. Tech thus seems to be the Faculty with the largest number of students at

Beginner level. Furthermore the proportion of those exempted too is small compared to the university proportion (0.69% compared with 3.19%). In fact, Figure 8 reveals that more than 90% (in fact about 94%) of Eng. Tech students have a very low level of proficiency in English.

Figure 9 - Average Scores in Language Skills - Engineering Technology



An examination of the data in Figure 9 showing the skill profile of the average Eng. Tech. student reveals that the scores in Reading, Writing and overall fluency is lower than that of grammatical competence. This indicates that, as in the other Faculties, performance skills are less developed than grammatical knowledge. (See Appendix 1, Table C for statistical details.)

The average Eng. Tech. student when compared with the average OUSL student shows a slightly higher competence in grammar. However, the scores obtained by Eng. Tech. student in Reading, Writing and Fluency are lower than those of the average OUSL student.

CONCLUSION

This survey of performance in the Grading Tests has helped to indicate certain crucial information about the linguistic proficiency in English of the student population of OUSL. Since the survey has investigated not only the overall university profile but also details of competence vis-a-vis faculty and discipline, it has helped also to highlight important academic issues.

- Of paramount importance is the issue of ability. The survey has revealed that more than 80% of OUSL students are weak in their English. This therefore raises the question of student ability to cope with academic work in English. It also raises the issue of the types of assistance that OUSL ought to provide to ensure that academic learning does take place. Providing service courses in English may only be a part of the solution. Guidance in the form of careful counselling prior to entry to OUSL, provision of sympathetic assistance within the Faculty or discipline by way of group discussion for less proficient students could also perhaps be considered.
- More specifically it is relevant to note that academic work at OUSL especially at higher levels involves reading and writing in English. It is in these skills that students (of all Faculties) are particularly weak. This finding therefore should be noted, and educational materials reviewed to ensure that students could read, comprehend and complete the academic work expected of them.
- It may be relevant, if not urgently necessary, to check the readability of course materials produced at OUSL to ascertain whether the linguistic complexity of the materials is appropriate. The provision of assistance by way of glossaries, concise summaries and supplementary guides would also benefit all students.

- Another vital consideration is the time allotted for learning English. Currently it is expected that students would progress from one learner level in English to another within six months. However the fact that the overwhelming majority are weak implies that these students would need careful tutoring and a great deal of time to cope with work in English. Faculties should therefore neither expect nor counsel students to complete their degree programmes in the minimum time. (ie. three years)
- The survey has revealed that a disturbing number of students belong to the Beginner group with Eng. Tech. having the largest number, NS the next largest and HSS the smallest proportion. These Beginner students, in particular, need a great deal of assistance. Those programmes that do not posit a mandatory Beginner course should perhaps review their decision if they wish to ensure that all students who enrol complete their chosen programme of study.

In this regard, it would be interesting to conduct a study of the Beginner groups in each Faculty and discipline, and note their progress in the subject specialisms they choose to follow.

- Programmes in Law and Nursing have the smallest number of Beginners. This could perhaps be attributed to the pre-entry screening of applicants in both these disciplines.

This study is only a preliminary survey of the linguistic proficiency of OUSL students. It now needs to be supported by other studies which examine other relevant characteristics such as the progress of students through their chosen programmes of study, aptitude and motivation of students, attitudes to learning etc. It should be noted, however, that this study examined students at entry. We should now investigate student progress through the English programmes as well as at the point of exit from English courses. Student ability at these points should again be compared with general academic progress.

If OUSL is to provide meaningful programmes of study for Sri Lankan students, it needs to take note of all information that pertains to such students. Student profile data, as Woodly and Ashby point out

.... can contribute to our understanding of adult learners, in terms of their characteristics, their goals their expectations and factors affecting their motivation. Used effectively... this will lead to greater student satisfaction, which in turn will produce greater commitment to the organization providing the course - [Woodly & Ashby 1994. Page 25]

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APPENDIX 1*Table A - Average Scores in Language Skills of Students in HSS Disciplines*

	Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
Law	78.43	43.75	37.87	63.33
Soc. Sc.	66	37.25	40.4	50.33

Table B - Average Scores in Language Skills of Students in NS Disciplines

	Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
Nursing	59.67	26.34	29.41	22.15
Science	60.46	26.35	31	37.5

Table C - Average Scores in Language Skills of Students in Eng. Tech.

	Grammar	Writing	Reading	Fluency
B.Sc./ Dip. Eng. Tech.	69.89	29.78	30.12	42.55