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An Investigation of English Language Needs of Iraqi Non-English Major Students: A Case of EAP Students

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KEY TERMS

English Language Skills
Needs Analysis
English for Academic courses
Learners' English Language needs

ABSTRACT

Needs analysis as the systematic collection of data on students' needs and preferences especially for English for Academic Purposes courses can provide insights for designing a course or finding the weaknesses and strengths of such courses. Relying on Needs Analysis as a cornerstone of such courses, the researcher conducted needs analysis on a group of 200 male and female non-English major students at the Thi-Qar University in Iraq. The researcher conducted a convergent mixed parallel method through the administration of TAŞCI's questionnaire and conducting structured interviews with 15 students. The findings suggest that the reading skill was the prioritized skill followed by the speaking skill. Also, it was found that the students' problems included poor vocabulary and the complex use of reading materials in general and professional texts. They also mentioned pronunciation as a problematic area. It was also inferred from the interviews that the students' needs were not limited to the campus use and they needed this skill off campus for reading English subtitles or e-books. Policy makers and syllabus designers at Thi-Qar University as well as other Iraqi universities in the region are suggested to focus more on the reading skill.

1. Introduction

The English language has a fundamental role in higher education. English for specific purposes emerged for the facilitation of communication in the 1950s as a consequence of the improvements in technology, science, and business worldwide when English was the lingua franca of the world (Kırkgöz & Dikilitaş, 2018). This trend continued with people's needs becoming more specific and their communication becoming more driven based on needs that led to the emergence of ESP sub-branches such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or EOP (English for occupational courses). ESP can be referred to as an applied field of English Language teaching divided into different branches

such as EAP and EOP (Daulay, 2020). Thus, in EAP, needs of the language learners in various disciplines became more specific (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Kirkgöz & Dikilitaş, 2018).

Paltridge and Starfield (2013) define ESP as a learner-centered approach in which the development of the communicative competence is meant to happen based on the specific realities and needs of a specific target group of learners. ESP is a “unique domain” because the kind of materials and even the teaching procedure have to be in agreement with the needs of learners (Habtoor, 2012). Similarly, Richards and Schmidt (2010) state that the ESP courses have the aim of satisfying the specific needs of specific groups of learners and they are in contrast with general language purposes. The importance of English for undergraduate students is emphasized by Soliman (2016) who states that the inability to master English will be a hindrance in students’ ability for studying in not only vocational fields but also in their demands of the millennial life. According to Robinson (1991) there are two important characteristic features to any ESP course. One is that it is “goal-oriented” and the second one is that it relies heavily on “needs analysis”. It has also been noted that the focus on the needs of learners will help them with the development of some basic language skills required of them (Ali, 2011; Begimkulova & Mannonova, 2020) and also it will “aid teachers in making an appropriate decision for material development” (Menggo, et al., 2019, p. 740). Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 121) define NA as “the process of establishing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of a course.” This can help to deeply understand the wants and needs of learners whose goals might vary from other learners to learn English. According to Robinson (1991) NA aims at determining what the students precisely need to do using the English language.

Concerning EAP courses, it has been highlighted that they are basically more practical rather than theoretical (Hyland, 2006). Besides, a number of teaching methodologies as well as syllabi are recommended for such courses including the early views focusing on lexico-grammar (Grabe 1994, cited in Flowerdew & peacock, 2001), to more learner-centered ones or hybrid ones (Hyland, 2006). However, while the practical aspect is more important than theory and while each context (Durmusoglu Köse, et al., 2019) merits its own attention, it seems that Needs Analysis can present actual information for the improvement of EAP courses while it can work as a compensation for problems and needs (Harwood & Petric, 2011). Besides, needs analysis can provide EAP stakeholders with rich data to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the current courses and a pre-evaluation of prospective courses.

Many universities in Iraq offer EAP courses. The English courses offered at university level in Iraq normally focus on a range of skills and sub-skills. However, research findings including the conduct of Needs Analysis have not supported the use of specific skills or sub skills that are presented to the students and the courses are not based on Needs Analysis. Research papers written by Iraqi scholars either review the situation (Aljorani, 2019; Al Kaabi, 2020; Edan & Mahdi, 2011), or have focused on engineering faculties (Celik, et al., 2014), technical institutes (Najmaddin, 2019), and problems and challenges of teachers in Iraq (Kareem, 2020). Thus, concerning the fact that needs analysis is a critical step for any EAP course, this study sought to investigate the non-English major students’ needs of the four English language skills and their sub-skills together with their English language problems at the university level to fill the gap and find the students’ views.

2. Methodology

This present study employed a mixed method using both quantitative data and qualitative data. The kind of mixed-method was parallel (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The type of parallel mixed method in this study was convergent as both qualitative and quantitative data collection is conducted within the same phase giving equal weights to both data and analyzing each separately. However, interpretation is based on putting the results together (Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2011). As for the quantitative data, it was analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive analysis was run in order to find the frequencies and percentages for each skill. The data related to the interviews was transcribed and then analyzed. Data was examined to develop codes by recurrently reading and reflecting on the data to be reduced to themes (Dornyei, 2007).

2.1 Participants and Setting

The accessible population for the present study included the university non-English major students at the University of Thi-Qar located in Nasiriyah, Iraq. The departments from which data was collected included Law, Geography, History, and Psychology. The students had a variety of language proficiency levels and backgrounds. The research sample included 200 students who were selected based on purposive sampling technique based on the research objectives and questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The age range of the students was from 17 to 40. There were 136 male (68%) and 64 (32%) female students. As for the qualitative phase of data collection, the structured interviews, 15 students were interviewed who were randomly selected from among the sample.

2.2 Instrumentation

In order to collect the quantitative data TAŞÇI's questionnaire (2007) was adapted. A reliability index of 0.75 was found for the present study. The questionnaire included 5 sections including the four language skills section and the problems section in Likert scale. In addition, to collect students' views structured interviews were conducted. Interviews are also recommended by Richards (2001) as a means of collecting data for Needs Analysis. The interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings. The interview research questions asked the students their attitudes and preferences toward the English language four skills as well as their problems in its learning.

3. Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the data and the findings.

3.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 4.1 shows the results of descriptive analysis for students' opinions about the importance of learning and using the four language skills. The majority of the students selected 'Reading' as the most important skill (f=122, p=61%) and 'Listening' as the least important skill (f=12, p=6%).

Table 1

Results of Descriptive Analysis for Students' Opinions about Learning and Using the Four Language Skills

	1 (The most important)		2		3		4 (The least important)		Mean	SD
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%		
Listening	73	36.5	75	37.5	30	15	12	6	2.07	.88
Speaking	101	50.5	62	31	33	16.5	4	2	3.10	.95
Reading	122	61	56	28	20	10	2	1	3.33	1.14
Writing	77	38.5	81	40.5	31	15.5	11	5.5	2.16	.77

Figure 1 shows the bar graph of the importance of four different skills. Based on the findings, it is observed that the most important skill is reading, followed by speaking, while listening is considered the least important.

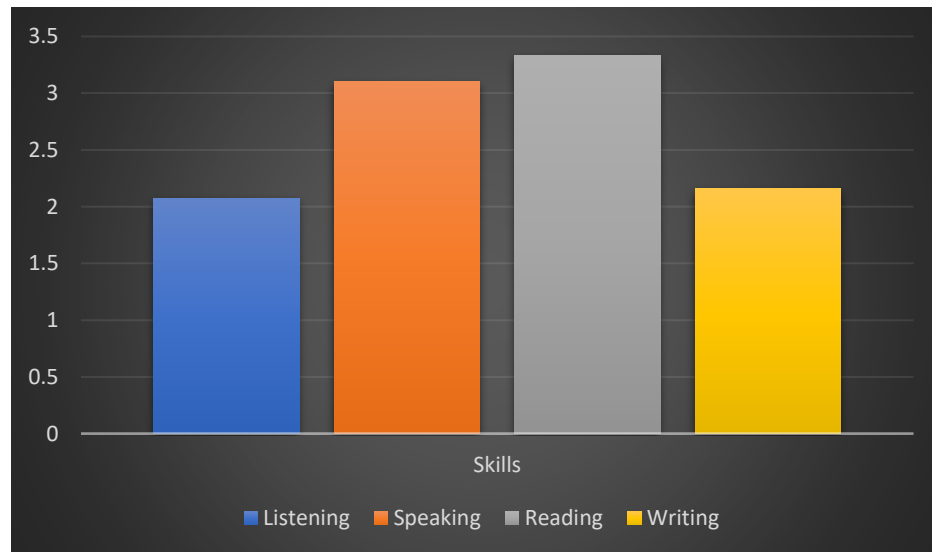


Figure 1 the bar graph of the importance of four different skills

Table 2 shows the results of descriptive analysis for students' opinions about English language problems. Poor vocabulary (f=131, p=65.5%) had the highest percent of strongly agree and "The complex use of English in reading materials in general", and "The complex use of English in professional field" (f=99, p=49.5%) had the highest percent of agree.

Table 2

Results of Descriptive Analysis for Students' Opinions about English Language Problems

	SD		D		N		A		SA		Mean	SD
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Poor vocabulary	1	.5	0	0	4	2	64	32	131	65.5	4.62	.581
Poor grammar	1	.5	1	.5	3	1.5	96	48	99	49.5	4.46	.608
Poor listening comprehension	1	.5	0	0	5	2.5	88	44	106	53	4.49	.601
Poor speaking skill	1	.5	1	.5	3	1.5	95	47.5	100	50	4.46	.608
Slow reading speed	1	.5	0	0	8	4	85	42.5	106	53	4.48	.626
Poor writing skill	1	.5	0	0	9	4.5	75	37.5	115	57	4.52	.634
Poor pronunciation	1	.5	1	.5	10	5	81	40.5	107	53.5	4.49	.626
The complex use of English in reading materials in general.	0	0	4	2	9	4.5	99	49.5	88	44	4.44	.615
The complex use of English in professional field	0	0	3	1.5	13	6.5	99	49.5	85	42.5	4.46	.664

To answer the first research question frequency and percentage were utilized. Table 3 shows frequencies and percentages of the items on the reading skill construct. This skill includes 11 items. The majority of the participants selected agree and strongly agree for this skill. Among 11 items, items 1 had the highest percent of strongly agree (52%). This means that based on the participants' perspective, English reading skill is very important for "reading textbooks". Regarding the next part, why reading skills are necessary for Iraqi students, the majority of participants selected "To understand the main ideas of reading texts" (49%).

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of the Items on the reading skill

Item	Strongly disagree		disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly agree		Mean	SD
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Textbooks	0	0	6	3	26	13	63	31.5	105	52.5	4.34	.816
Exam questions	0	0	1	.5	18	9	87	43.5	94	47	4.37	.667
Journals	1	.5	4	2	15	7.5	99	49.5	81	40.5	4.28	.729
Novels	0	0	3	1.5	15	7.5	96	48	86	43	4.33	.679
Newspapers	0	0	0	0	15	7.5	113	56.5	72	36	4.29	.596
Tables	0	0	0	0	16	8	105	52.5	79	39.5	4.32	.615
Main ideas	0	0	0	0	21	10.5	81	40.5	98	49	4.39	.670
In detail	0	0	0	0	16	8	94	47	90	45	4.37	.629
Translate	0	0	0	0	9	4.5	107	53.5	84	42	4.38	.571
Interpret	0	0	1	.5	14	7	120	60	65	32.5	4.25	.597
Summarize	1	.5	0	0	9	4.5	105	52.5	85	42.5	4.37	.619

To answer the second research question frequency and percentage were utilized. Table 4 shows frequencies and percentages of the items on the speaking skill construct. This skill includes 5 items. The majority of the participants selected agree for speaking skill. Among the 6 items, “To make presentations at seminars and conferences” had the highest percent of strongly agree (43%). This means that based on the participants’ perspective, English speaking skill is very important for “making presentations at seminars and conferences”. In addition, “To participate in class discussions” had the highest percent of agree (63.5%).

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of the Items on the speaking skill

Item	Strongly disagree		disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly agree		Mean	SD
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Class discussions	0	0	2	1	44	22	127	63.5	27	13.5	3.90	.621
Daily conver.	1	.5	16	8	114	57	60	30	9	4.5	3.30	.702
Talk to foreigners	0	0	2	1	71	35.5	81	40.5	46	23	3.86	.779
Presentations	0	0	0	0	20	10	94	47	86	43	4.33	.651
Ask questions	0	0	2	1	7	3.5	116	58	75	37.5	4.32	.591

To answer the third research question frequency and percentage were utilized. Table 5 shows frequencies and percentages of the items on the listening skill construct. This skill includes 6 items. The majority of the participants selected agree for listening skill. Among 6 items, "To follow spoken instructions from lecturers" had the highest percent of strongly agree (54%). This means based on the participants' perspective, English listening skill is very important for following spoken instructions from lecturers. In addition, "To understand seminars, conferences." had the highest percent of agree (60.5%).

Table 5

Frequencies and Percentages of the Items on the listening skill

Item	Strongly disagree		disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly agree		Mean	SD
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Daily conversation	1	.5	15	7.5	134	67	43	21.5	7	3.5	3.20	.642
Spoken instructions	1	.5	0	0	29	14.5	62	31	108	54	4.38	.767
Radio and TV	0	0	2	1	11	5.5	113	56.5	74	37	4.30	.616
Discussions	0	0	3	1.5	10	5	92	46	95	47.5	4.40	.657
Seminars	0	0	0	0	11	5.5	121	60.5	68	34	4.29	.562
Take notes	0	0	1	.5	9	4.5	110	55	80	40	4.35	.590

To answer the fourth research question frequency and percentage were utilized. Table 6 shows frequencies and percentages of the items on the writing skill construct. This skill includes 6 items. The majority of the participants selected agree and strongly agree for the writing skill. Among 6 items, "To write essays" had the highest percent of strongly agree (63.5%). This means that based on the participants' perspective, English writing skill is very important for writing essays. In addition, "To write term projects" had the highest percent of agree (61%).

Table 6

Frequencies and Percentages of the Items on the writing skill

Item	Strongly disagree		disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly agree		Mean	SD
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Laboratory reports	1	.5	0	0	15	7.5	107	53.5	77	38.5	4.30	.648
Term projects	0	0	2	1	10	5	122	61	66	33	4.26	.595
Homework	1	.5	19	9.5	108	54	61	30.5	11	5.5	3.31	.739
Take notes	0	0	11	5.5	111	55.5	50	25	28	14	3.48	.802
Essays	1	.5	0	0	9	4.5	63	31.5	127	63.5	4.58	.630
Research papers	0	0	0	0	10	5	107	53.5	83	41.5	4.37	.577

To answer the last research question again frequency and percentage were utilized. Table 7 (Appendix 1) shows frequencies and percentages of the items on students' attitudes and preferences toward their English language needs. This questionnaire includes 21 items.

Among the 21 items, item 8 had the highest percent of strongly agree (74%). This means that the students required to be taught in separate classes according to their proficiency levels. In addition, item 7 had the highest percent of agree (77.5%). This means that the majority of the participants believe that even if students fail in English courses in preparatory classes, they should be allowed to continue their education. Finally, results revealed that item 15 had the highest percent of disagree. Therefore, 46.5% of participants think that there are not adequate English resources and textbooks translated into the English language.

3.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The data for the interview questions were analyzed to be reduced to themes (Dornyei, 2007) and they were categorized based on their frequencies (Mackey & Gass, 2005). While for all the questions the researcher sought to find their views that were not pre-specified, emergent coding was conducted (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

The first question of the interview regarded the students' preferences for the reading skill. The most frequent reading sorts included 'reading the English movies and instructional materials' subtitles', 'reading various books, e-books and other non-books', and 'reading scientific articles and texts'. Table 8 presents the interviewees' responses to the first interview question.

Table 8

Interviewees' responses to the first interview question

Interviewee	Response
1	Watch English movies and read their subtitles on YouTube On campus and off campus
2	Reading short instructional materials on YouTube for students
3	Strengthen these skills through social programs and communication
4	Reading textbooks and non-textbooks in English on campus and off-campus
5	Reading various books
6	Reading different texts in social media
7	Reading books in libraries and e-books
8	Reading scientific articles and movie subtitles
9	Reading texts written by the master
10	Reading stories and novels
11	Reading English subtitles of foreign movies and clips
12	Reading scientific texts
13	Reading scientific articles and movie subtitles
14	Watching English movies and reading subtitles on YouTube
15	Reading newspapers and magazines

The second question of the interview regarded the students' preferences for the speaking skill. The most frequent speaking sorts included 'communication with friends and teachers off and on campus' and conversation on cyberspace'. Table 9 presents the interviewees' responses to the second interview question.

Table 9

Interviewees' responses to the second interview question

Interviewee	Response
1	Strengthening speaking by watching English movies and YouTube
2	Using the basic language
3	Social communication with my friend
4	Talking to teachers in the classroom
5	Speaking English at university
6	speaking English at university
7	Conversation on campus and off campus
8	Talking to myself at home and talking to classmates at university
9	Conversation through cyberspace
10	Speaking English with a university professor and with friends abroad
11	Speaking English on cyberspace
12	Explaining educational videos
13	Conversation through cyberspace
14	Explaining English movies
15	Explaining stories to friends in English

The third question of the interview regarded the students' preferences for the listening skill. The most frequent listening sorts that the students mentioned included 'listening to news', 'listening to educational and other clips', and 'listening to professors' teaching and instructions'. Table 10 presents the interviewees' responses to the third interview question.

Table 10

Interviewees' responses to the third interview question

Interviewee	Response
1	Listening to the news in English
2	Listening to Mass media and YouTube
3	Listening to topics in English clips
4	Listening to teachers in the classroom
5	Listening to English lessons at the university
6	Listening to the teachers' curricula in English and the students' questions and answers with the professors
7	Listening to audiobooks and informative videos
8	Listening to the news
9	Listening to friends' conversations and news and stories
10	Listening and watching foreign movies
11	Listening to YouTube clips
12	Listening to educational clips
13	Listening to educational clips
14	Listening to the news
15	Listening to the news and foreign channels

The fourth question of the interview regarded the students' preferences for the writing skill. The most frequent writing sorts included 'writing reports, papers, and in exams', 'chatting through text', 'writing articles', and 'writing stories'. Table 11 presents the interviewees' responses to the fourth interview question.

Table 11

Interviewees' responses to the fourth interview question

Interviewee	Response
1	Writing articles in English
2	Writing stories in this language
3	Chatting in English
4	Writing in all university exams in English
5	Writing various scientific and non-scientific texts
6	Writing my homework in English
7	Writing in university courses and course papers in English
8	Writing course reports in English for the teacher
9	Writing my personal information in English and writing about university stuff in English
10	Chatting with foreign friends
11	Chatting via Facebook
12	Chatting in English via Facebook or through posts in English on Instagram
13	Writing various scientific and non-scientific texts
14	Writing Professional articles in English
15	Writing a story

The fifth question of the interview regarded the students' problems. The most frequent problems that the students mentioned included 'the inability to pronounce long or hard words or sentences', and 'the inability to write sentences correctly'. Table 12 presents the interviewees' responses to the fifth interview question.

Table 12

Interviewees' responses to the fifth interview question

Interviewee	Response
1	Pronouncing long words
2	Pronouncing hard words
3	Pronouncing long words and sentences
4	Pronouncing difficult words and long sentences
5	Pronouncing words correctly
6	Pronouncing long sentences
7	Pronouncing words correctly and quickly
8	Pronouncing words correctly and quickly
9	Pronouncing long sentences correctly
10	Writing sentences correctly
11	Writing sentences correctly
12	Understanding words and reading (pronouncing) them correctly
13	Pronouncing words correctly
14	Pronouncing long words
15	Inability to understand the teacher's speech in English and inability to pronounce long sentences correctly

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Needs analysis is the foundation step in designing courses (Almaiah & Alyoussef, 2019; Bernard & Zemach, 2003) and can be used for evaluating current courses for their weaknesses and strengths (Atefi Boroujeni & Moradian Fard, 2013). Through this sort of systematic collection of data specially that in the present study a mixed method was employed, a sound syllabus can be designed. While Thi-Qar University presents English for Academic Purposes course like many other universities, it seems that an on-going evaluation of the courses can have a contributing effect on the quality of courses. It has been stated that the English courses offered at Iraq Universities mostly ignore this important step and lack this stage. The theory which supports needs analysis is humanism which focuses on caring for human needs and looks for humanistic values (Seel, 2011).

The findings of the present study concerning the importance of the reading skill are in line with other researcher views such as Spector-Cohen et al. (2001) who believe in the inclusion of strategies for reading comprehension as well as linguistic forms. Furthermore, Taşçı (2007) also found similar results in the study conducted in Turkey on the students' needs. The participants viewed

reading as a primary important skill. Moreover, in the Saudi context also Alsamadani (2017) stated that students prioritized reading together with speaking. The same findings are also reported by Zohoorian (2015), who conducted needs analysis in the Iranian context and found out that reading was the prominent skill. Other researchers who report the same findings are Rostami and Zafarghandi, (2014) based on whose study the main skill of concern was selected as reading by the majority of the students (85%). The reading skill was also selected as the only skill the students of law needed in the Israel context.

Unlike the findings of the present study, in Algeria listening and speaking were the most important skills according to the students' views. These findings were in line with the study conducted in Thailand by Prachanant (2012) where speaking was the most important skill. As for the speaking skill, seminar skills are also mentioned by Gillett (2018) as an important aspect for EAP courses. The findings concerning the problems in English language learning were also in line with Prachanant's (2012) study in which the participants emphasized their problems of inability in understanding foreign accents that relates to pronunciation as well as understanding vocabularies and difficult expressions.

As far as the four language skills are concerned, it can be safely concluded through the analysis of the quantitative data that reading skill was the prioritized skill followed by the speaking skill. Moreover, it can be concluded that students suffer from their poor vocabulary as well as the complex use of Reading materials found in general and professional texts. Thus, the courses must tailor their focus on the reading and speaking skills. Also, it is concluded that more practice on pronunciation is needed which seems to be an ignored component. One of the sub skills to be focused on is 'understanding the main idea' which can be covered by instructors in their courses.

It can be inferred from the interviews that the students' needs are not limited to the campus use and they need this skill out of campus for reading English subtitles or e-books. While for the speaking skill the most important item was presenting in seminars or conferences, the students also needed it for off campus or for using the cyberspace conversation. The needs of the students for the listening skill were mainly limited to following instructions of the lecturers at campus. However, it seems that they also need it for listening to educational materials. The main concern of the students was the preparation of essays and term projects. Thus, it seems that the inclusion of complementary courses on academic writing can be helpful. It is also concluded that the students must be categorized and registered based on their proficiency levels. Moreover, having placement tests to determine the proficiency levels before sending the students to different groups can be supportive.

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Appendix 1

Table 7

Frequencies and Percentages of the Items on the students' attitudes and preferences

Item	Strongly disagree		disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly agree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Q1	0	0	1	.5	9	4.5	84	42	106	53
Q2	0	0	1	.5	13	6.5	123	61.5	63	31.5
Q3	14	7	150	75	28	14	6	3	2	1
Q4	1	.5	3	1.5	6	3	54	27	136	68
Q5	0	0	2	1	10	5	170	85	18	9
Q6	1	.5	0	0	11	5.5	43	21.5	145	72.5
Q7	3	1.5	3	1.5	22	11	155	77.5	17	8.5
Q8	0	0	0	0	15	7.5	37	18.5	148	74
Q9	0	0	0	0	10	.5	104	52	86	43
Q10	1	.5	0	0	9	4.5	105	52.5	85	42.5
Q11	0	0	0	0	21	10.5	121	60.5	58	29
Q12	1	.5	3	1.5	32	16	119	59.5	45	22.5
Q13	1	.5	0	0	35	17.5	115	57.5	49	24.5
Q14	0	0	0	0	12	6	111	55.5	77	38.5
Q15	0	0	93	46.5	55	27.5	34	17	18	9
Q16	0	0	2	1	11	5.5	53	26.5	134	67
Q17	1	.5	1	.5	9	4.5	118	59	71	35.5
Q18	0	0	1	.5	7	3.5	113	56.5	79	39.5
Q19	1	.5	0	0	13	6.5	94	47	92	46
Q20	11	5.5	32	16	110	55	47	23.5	0	0
Q21	6	3	40	20	40	20	112	56	2	1