

A Subjective Needs Assessment of EGP Students at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan

*Ali Gholami Mehrdad**

*Department of English, Hamedan Branch, Islamic Azad
University, Hamedan, Iran*

The present article reflects the results of a needs analysis survey carried out on a group of 52 students in a general English course at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan, Iran, in which a 32-item questionnaire adapted from Kavaliauskiene and Užpaliene (2003), Iwai et. al (1999) and Seedhouse (1994) is used to investigate the students' conceptions of good learning of English expressed in terms of their own wants and lacks. The results of the data analysis point to a need to improve the course syllabus in different ways.

Keywords: General English, Subjective Needs Analysis, Syllabus Design

There has recently been increased interest in needs analysis (NA), not only in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), but also in the area of English for General Purposes (EGP). For long, most NA surveys have been carried out as part of program evaluation studies to collect what is needed for curriculum improvement, accountability to the stakeholders, and content specification in the field of English for specific purposes, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) context and adult language education, but scarce are the studies carried out in English for general purposes (Brindley, 1984; Ferris, 1998). The reason has been the expressed doubts concerning the effectiveness of an NA for a general English course, which

*Corresponding author. E-mail: ali.gholami.mehrdad@gmail.com

seemingly has no specific target domains of English use (Seedhouse, 1994).

However, although it may seem true that in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) setting, learners lack extensive opportunities to use English in their daily lives, it may not sound unreasonable for general English education programs to ask about future tasks that learners will encounter in reality. Since as Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue, utilizing NA in EGP is no different from adopting it in ESP. They claim that:

It is often argued that the needs of the general English learner, for example the schoolchild, are not specifiable...In fact, this is the weakest of all arguments, because it is always possible to specify needs, even if it is only the need to pass the exam at the end of the school year. There is always an identifiable need of some sort. What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need (p. 53).

Therefore, there must be more NAs done in such contexts to uncover the different stakeholders' needs as well as to generate awareness that such needs exist. Normally the national curricula for general English curriculum reflect the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of language education held by teachers, parents, and policy makers, but not students (Seedhouse, 1994). But fortunately that awareness is coming and the recent increase in the interest to investigate the needs of the students in general English context is a reflection of that change of attitude.

Review of Literature

Since needs analysis serves as an important initial step in curriculum design for further development of teaching materials, learning activities, tests, program evaluation strategies, and so forth, there is an impressive amount of research on needs analysis in the language teaching field. Recently, great emphasis has been placed on needs analysis for English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, and English for General Purposes (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002; Brown et al., 2007; Cowling, 2007; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; Kusumoto, 2008).

In general terms, needs analysis (also called needs assessment) refers to the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum which is supposed to meet the learning needs of a particular group of students. Brown (1995) defines it as “the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” (p. 36).

Needs analysis is defined by Richards, Platt, and Platt (1995, p. 189) as "the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities. Needs assessment makes use of both subjective and objective information (e.g., data from questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation)."

The outcome of a needs analysis should be a list of goals and objectives for the parties involved, which should “serve as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies, as well as for reevaluating the precision accuracy of the original needs assessment” (Read, 2008; Brown, 1995, p. 35).

In the case of language programs, those needs will be language related. Once identified, needs can be stated in terms of goals and objectives which, in turn, can serve as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies, as well as for reevaluating the precision and accuracy of the original needs assessment. Thus needs assessment is an integral part of systematic curriculum building (West, 1994). Indeed, there are studies which have confirmed that needs analysis can best be implemented in curriculum development (e.g. Boshier & Smalkowski, 2002; Chaudron et al., 2005).

Talking about needs analysis Yalden (1987) draws the distinction between learners' wants (defined by themselves) and learners' needs (defined by others). The learners' specification of their own wants will certainly form a large part of the needs analysis. In the final analysis, however, the teacher will determine what their needs are by interpreting the data received from the first

two parties. The means employed will be questionnaire and interview.

Furthermore, Nunan (1988) states that “information will need to be collected, not only on why learners want to learn the target language, but also about such things as societal expectations and constraints and the resources available for implementing the syllabus” (p. 14). Nunan (1988) and also Brindly (1984) classify needs analysis under two headings: “*objective needs*” and “*subjective needs*”. They assign objective needs to be diagnosed by the teacher on the basis of the personal data of the learners. In the light of this data, the teacher can select or plan a suitable syllabus. Subjective needs are derived from the learners themselves and influence the teaching methodology of the syllabus.

Of course, some other researchers have categorized the types of needs that can be extracted for curriculum development/improvement. Brown (1995) discusses the dichotomy of *situation needs* and *language needs*, where he defines *situation needs* as information of the “program’s human aspects, that is, the physical, social, and psychological contexts in which learning takes place,” (p. 40) and *language needs* as “the target linguistic behaviors that the learners must ultimately acquire” (p. 40).

Both situation needs and language needs can be based on objective information or subjective information. These distinctions interrelate with each other and provide a framework for what types of question can be asked.

Moreover, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) literature has widely discussed the value and importance of a needs analysis in language program and curriculum development for foreign language programs in addition to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (e.g., Chaudron et al., 2005; Iwai, Kondo, Lim, Ray, Shimizu, & Brown, 1999). However, needs analysis studies on general English courses have rarely been reported in the literature. The following summarizes the importance of needs analysis for general language courses from various perspectives such as learner-centered curriculum, task-based curriculum, performance assessment, proficiency-oriented curriculum, and motivation:

1. In a learner-centered curriculum, teachers' reconciliation in content selection through extensive consultation with students about their learning needs and interests is critical (Brindley, 1989); needs analysis helps teachers create in-class activities in which the students can utilize learned skills and knowledge as tools to meet their real-life needs in meaningful ways (Nunan, 1988).

2. Needs analysis helps teachers understand "local needs" of students or the needs of a

particular group of students and make practical decisions in pedagogy and assessment for improvement (Gillett & Hammond, 2011; Tarone & Yule, 1989 cited in Iwai et al., 1999).

3. Needs analysis should be a central component of performance assessments, whose purposes are to test students' ability to perform tasks in real-world situations (Read, 2008; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998 cited in Iwai et al., 1999).

4. Needs analysis is an integral component of task-based syllabi where real-life target tasks should be identified by a needs analysis (Long & Crookes, 1992 cited in Iwai et al., 1999).

5. In proficiency-oriented instruction/curricula, needs analysis helps teachers understand the potential differences in learning expectations between themselves and their students (Birckbichler & Coral, 1993 cited in Iwai et al., 1999; Kaewpet, 2009).

6. Obtaining input from the students about a planned or existing program through a needs analysis is fundamental to the design, implementation, evaluation, and revision of the program (Dooley, 2010; Savignon, 1997 cited in Iwai et al., 1999).

7. A program that attempts to meet students' perceived needs will be more motivating and successful (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991 cited in Iwai et al., 1999, Dooley, 2010).

It is surely because of this great importance attached to NA and the insights it may offer that new concerns and interests have emerged to apply the needs assessment methods to EGP courses, and it is this growing concern that has motivated the present writer to investigate the subjective needs of a group of students in a

general English course at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan, Iran.

Method

The study was designed to survey students' needs and wants in a general English course at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan.

Participants

The subjects of the study were 52 university students (18 males and 34 females) between 19 to 29 years old, majoring in Arts (8), Engineering (14), Humanities (21), Science (5) and Other (4). Among these thirty one (59.6%) were freshman, 15 (28.8%) were sophomore and six (11.5%) were senior.

The subjects all attended the class two sessions a week as a part of their overall education and as a pre-requisite to their ESP courses, and studied a textbook titled 'Pathway to English: A course for general English classes', authored by Gholami, A., Jamshidi, B., and Ahmadi, D. and published by Daneshjoo Publications, Hamedan, Iran.

Data Collection

Instrument

The data for the present study was collected using a 32-item questionnaire, administered 1 month before the end of the course. The items on the questionnaire were adopted and adapted from three different studies by Kavaliauskiene and Užpaliene (2003), Iwai et. al(1999) and Seedhouse (1994), and were meant to elicit information in five different areas. These included students' background (part A) containing six items, students' conception of what is effective (part B) including nine items, students' wants and needs (part C) including nine items, students' preferences for the class management (part D) including four items and students' conception of the course (part E) including four items.

The items on the last four sections were designed on a Likert scale of four in which (1) received the lowest value and (4) the highest.

Procedure

To do the survey, the students were given the questionnaire and about 40 minutes to do the items. But before this, the researcher teacher explained in Persian, the subjects' native language, the purpose and meaning of those items on the questionnaire which the subjects did not understand.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using SPSS statistical package, version 17, for the frequency of responses. Now, in what follows the results of the analysis for each item are discussed.

The items on the first section (related to students' background) included:

1. Have you studied English anywhere other than at school and university?
2. If yes, how long did you study English there?
3. Do you plan to take English beyond the foreign Language requirement at university?
4. When you started this course, how was your knowledge of English?
5. When do you use English outside the classroom?
6. How do you expect to use your English language training in the future?

The analysis of the data for these items shows that 32.7% of the subjects have had previous experience with English while 67.3% have not had such an experience. Among the first group,

65.4% have been taking English classes for less than a year, 5.8% for 1-2 years, and 28.8% for more than 3 years.

When asked about their proficiency before the course, 69.2% students believed they had a weak command of English, 23.1% said they thought they had a reasonable knowledge of English and 7.7% believed they had a good proficiency.

As to using English outside the class, one student (1.9%) said they used it at work, 27 students (51.9%) said they used it for sending e-mails, 7 students (13.5%) maintained they used English in other situations and 17 students (32.7%) said they never used English outside the class.

Asked about their use of English in the future, 3 students (5.8%) said they would like it for overseas training, 3 students (5.8%) said they would like to use their knowledge of English to pick up writing reports and translation, and 37 students (71.2%) said they would use English for reading their ESP courses.

The second part of the questionnaire included 9 items related to students' opinions as to what they thought was effective in improving their English. They were given the following options:

1. To memorize many words and idioms
2. To understand the grammar of English
3. To study the content of the course carefully
4. To do many exercises on grammar, reading, writing, ...
5. To memorize many English sentences from the text book
6. To write model English sentences and memorize them
7. To improve the general reading skills
8. To improve the general writing skills
9. To learn about the English culture

As it is clear from the above list, the items in this part were meant to check students' conceptions of what is good to learn. The results, as expected, showed interesting patterns:

- No one among the participants believed that memorizing many words and idioms would not be effective while 47 students (90.4%) believed it would be a very effective strategy to memorize many words to improve English.

- As to the place and role of grammar, 43 people (82.7%) believed that it is very effective. This may point to the fact that most of the students are under the wrong conception that knowing grammar of English means knowing the English language or as Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008) point out by grammar they mean another kind of grammar which is more communicational.

- On the importance of studying the content of the course carefully, 47 students (90.4%) believed in the great role this could have on improving their knowledge of English. Furthermore, 49 students (94%) believed that doing many exercises is very effective. These show students' right conceptions of what leads to a better knowledge of English.

- Memorizing model English sentences attracted 21 students (42.3%) while (57.7 %) of the students saw such an activity either not effective or not so effective. Roughly, the same percentages were observed for memorizing English sentences from the textbook (40.3% as opposed to 59.6%).

- The results of the analysis for the next two items revealed that students rightfully recognized the place of good reading and writing skills in improving their knowledge of English. But what was interesting was that there were more students who believed that improving writing is more important than improving reading (82.7% for writing and 73.1% for reading). This is a point that must be taken cautiously.

- Finally, the analysis of the data for the last item mentioned above, that is, the effect of learning the English culture on improving the students' English showed disappointing results. Only 5 students (9.6%) believed that it is very effective while 73% believed that it is not effective or not so effective.

The items in the third part of the questionnaire asked students what they liked about learning English. These included the following:

I would like to be able to

1. read a text in a textbook with correct pronunciation
2. understand all the words, expressions, and grammar rules that appear in the textbook
3. understand the gist of the passages in the textbook
4. choose an article from newspapers and foreign magazines and read them
5. extract necessary information from internet
6. write my thoughts or opinions about the content of the texts in the textbook
7. write a summary of the texts or articles I read in a textbook or magazine
8. write an article related to my major
9. request an application form from an institution abroad, and to be able to fill it in

As it may be noticed, the first 5 items concern students' reading skill and items 6-9 demand students' writing skill.

The first item in this section, reading a text with correct pronunciation, appears to have been the most favorite to the sample where 96.2% of them have stated they like to be able to do this after they take up their English courses.

As to the second item, understanding the words and grammar rules in the book, 42 students (80.8%) showed a great preference while only 2 students (3.8%) believed it is not so much appealing to them. This again points to students' grammar-oriented approach to learning English.

Concerning the third item, 36 students' (69.2%) stated that they like to understand the gist of the texts in the textbooks while, 11 students (21.2%) stated that this is somewhat appealing to them.

Out of the 51 students who answered the fourth item, choosing articles from newspapers and magazines, and reading

them, 31 students (59.6%) showed a strong tendency and 15 students (28.8%) a rather moderate tendency.

The fifth item concerned extracting necessary information from internet. Around 46 out of 47 students who answered this item, that is, 97% of the subjects, believed it is somewhat or a lot significant to them to know how to extract the information they want from internet through using their knowledge of English. This is a point that must not be overlooked.

Only 43 students out of 52 answered items 6 and 7 in which writing their thoughts about the content of texts and summarizing the texts or articles were of concern. As to item 6, 28 students (53.8%) believed being able to write their thoughts in English is important to them while the percentage was even lower for summarizing the texts (46.2%). When these are compared with the percentages obtained for the next item related to their ability to write an article related to their majors, where 75% of the 50 students answering the item believed it is very important to them, it could be argued that the higher value for this item is the result of its being related to their educational or professional advancement.

Finally the percentages for the last item in the third section showed that around half of the students (51.9%) believed being able to request an application form and to fill it out in English is somewhat or very important, and about half (44.3%) believed it is not so much important or not important at all. The justification for this may be students' instrumental motivation.

The items on part four in the questionnaire aimed at identifying students' preference for the kind of the classroom management: Whether they prefer a teacher-center classroom, or they like to work individually, in pairs or in groups.

The analysis of the data on this part pointed to the students' inclination for a teacher-centered classroom (35 students out of 51 answering the item) which accounts for 68% of the whole sample. This is while 27.5 % believed in pair-work and only 15.7% expressed a preference for group work. This is something unfortunate since it runs opposite the dominant views about the features of a good English classroom.

And finally, the last part of the questionnaire surveyed students' ideas about the course. The four items in this part included:

1. Does the course meet your needs as regards your use of English Language?
2. In your opinion, has this course facilitated your English Learning?
3. To your mind, how do you evaluate the themes used on the course?
4. Have your expectations for this course been met?

The data analysis for this part pointed to a rather negative look of students at the course. No one believed the course had met their needs entirely, while totally 37 students (68.6%) believed that it had not entirely met their needs or it had not met their needs at all (23.5%).

However, concerning the second item in this part about the themes, the story is a bit different. Forty four students (86.3%) out of 51 students who answered the item stated that the themes were reasonable (56.9%) or even good (29.4%).

The analysis of the data for whether the course had facilitated their English language learning showed that around half of the students out of 49 answering the item (47.1%) believed it had not, while almost the other half (47%) maintained that it had facilitated their language learning. It seems the results obtained here should be analyzed considering the other factors influencing their learning such as their proficiency level.

And at last, the data on the last item showed that 60.8% of the 51 students believed the course had insufficiently met their expectations, and 11.8% believed it had not met their expectations at all.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of the present study may be summarized as follows:

1. Students show a strong preference for reading with correct pronunciation but the course does not offer much practice in

pronunciation. Elsewhere the students have emphasized the role of reading. It seems what is missing from our general English courses is extensive reading practice. Also pronunciation exercises need to be encouraged.

2. Students high preference for grammar may stem from an over-emphasis on grammar instruction at previous levels. The same can be said about their preference for memorization of words and model sentences. It seems this is because of the wrong conception of English Language Learning as memorization of words and rules. It is suggested that teachers of such courses make attempts to broaden students' views about what makes for a good learning of English.

3. As many students have stated that their principle goal in taking up general English course is to be able to go through their ESP courses, it is suggested adaptations be made into the curriculum or syllabus so that the general English courses may be offered for specialized courses rather than general courses for general classes of students. A general course may run as "General English for students of architecture".

4. Many students have indicated that they use their English for sending e-mails. This is a great possibility, and suggests that exercises should be built in the course to take advantage of this great possibility bringing both joy and variation into the course.

5. As understanding the gist of the texts and summarizing them are other choices many students have picked up, it seems necessary to include such activities in the syllabus as well.

6. The students' preference for a teacher-centered classroom may stem from their lack of effective experience with pair work or group work. Of course this has a deeper root in the Iranian culture, in which many people tend to refrain from group activities and have an inclination for individualized activities. Thus it seems useful the teachers of General English courses bring more of collaborative activities into their classes so that student will be able to benefit from peer-learning and can monitor their own learning.

7. Students' general dissatisfaction with the course they are taking points to a need for making changes to the textbook and the teaching procedures used in such classes.

Conclusion

The present study was primarily carried out to survey students' subjective needs in a General English course, but the results obtained and the insights gained seem to be generalizable to other similar contexts in the country in that it can provide a general picture of how conceptions of a good general English course are changing in our society.

Most of the students surveyed in this study expressed their wish to improve their language skills specially their reading and writing skills to meet the requirements of their ESP courses; however, it seems existing courses in general, and the course in question in this study in particular, fail to meet their expectations and are far from giving them the sort of knowledge and skill that will give them enough footings for their success in such courses.

Also, majority of the students expressed their desire to enlarge their vocabulary and strengthen their grammar. This is an unfortunate thing because as Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008) put it "these learners normally have spent around 6 years learning English at school with vocabulary and grammar-driven syllabuses" (p. 18). So if they are not satisfied with what they have gained, the possibility is that either the kind of grammar and vocabulary they mean is different from what we conceive it to be or the content of the courses they have gone through has been insufficient (Masuhara & Tomlinson, 2008). Of course Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008) take the former possibility to be true, but in a country like Iran, I think, both possibilities hold true.

On the whole it seems that the growing awareness of the significant role English has as a tool for international communications and the great role it can play in academic success of the learners plus the recent surge for English created by the university students' desire to follow up their education in universities abroad, are all gradually changing the perception of learners of what is a good General English course. And this in turn points to the need for revising the content and syllabus for such courses if we are going to address the needs of the learners as they are felt by the learners themselves and not just from our own perspectives as teachers or syllabus designers.

The Author

Ali Gholami Mehrdad is currently a PhD student in TEFL and a member of the faculty of English Department at Hamedan branch of Islamic Azad University. He has compiled a two-volume course for pre-requisite and general English classes, has done research on EFL students' learning styles and preferences as well as EFL students' writing, has translated two books, and has published articles in EFL journals. His fields of interest other than translation are Evaluation and Assessment, learner variables and writing.

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