

INVESTIGATING THE PERCEIVED NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS LEARNING EAP

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Abstract: The perceived needs of students learning EAP were analysed using a questionnaire which investigated the subjects' preference for particular topics and various modes of learning in relation to both the target and present situation. The target situation in the questionnaire was represented by items concerning study skills; while items concerning the present situation were oriented to the contents of the EAP course and its methodology and activities. The findings provide evidence for determining items for inclusion in an EAP programme. They also allow us to identify items as highly, reasonably or not at all recommended for inclusion.

Key words: needs, needs analysis, English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

Learners in a teaching-learning process constitute the major stakeholders. Johnston and Peterson (1994:66) define stakeholders as those directly engaged in the programme; in language teaching, the main stakeholders are the students, teacher, teaching institution, parents (or funding provider) and user institution.

Developing materials for inclusion in a syllabus or curriculum based on the needs and interests of the learners is essential for the success of the learning and teaching process. Nunan's model (1985) of 'Elements in a Process Syllabus' identifies needs analysis as a central aspect which directly influences the goals, input for material designing and grading and the teaching/learning process. Nation (1996) regards needs (along with principles and environment) in his model of the course design process as an influential factor contributing a realistic list of language, ideas or skill items. Brindley (1989) considers needs analysis as one of the fundamental principles underlying learner-centred systems of language learning.

Due to the diverse background of the students, educational institutions often have difficulty in identifying the needs of the students and matching them

to course design. The various types of syllabus that course designers may adopt, ranging from a formal syllabus (emphasising grammar and vocabulary), to a functional, and task-based syllabus may contribute confusion to the process of arranging suitable materials for their learners. Another possible problem is that a specific subject like English has no pre-determined materials for inclusion in the syllabus as pointed out by Brumfit (1984:88): “Language teaching has no obvious content in the sense that history or physics teaching may be said to have”. Indeed, the term ‘content’ is frequently ambiguous in discussions of language teaching, for it can refer simultaneously to the items of language that may be selected for the syllabus or curriculum design, or to the topics which may be included in reading, writing, or speaking – the subject matter of linguistic interactions.

This study is useful for an English Language Centre as one of the inputs to help with the planning of the English Proficiency Programme for academic purposes. Furthermore, the experience of investigating the needs of these students will be of great value in similar tasks with all types of learners studying English (including those within the context of New Zealand) for different kinds of purposes.

This study is trying to answer the following questions:

1. What types of study skills do the learners consider the most important to have?
2. What aspects of New Zealand culture do the learners feel they need to know in order to cope with life in New Zealand?
3. What activities do the learners want to do in and outside the classroom and how do they want to be treated in order to learn better?
4. What types of topics for discussion are most interesting to the learners?

A needs analysis includes all the activities used to collect information about the students' learning needs, wants, wishes, desires, etc. It can be very formal, extensive and time consuming, or it can be informal, narrowly focused and quick (Strong-Krause, 2008). Needs analysis is performed to cater for the demands of all parties – known as stakeholders – involved in a language learning programme. In a more practical way, Nunan (1990) points out that teacher-learner needs analysis involves negotiating roles: identifying what learners expect from teachers and what responsibility teachers expect learners to assume for their own development. It is not adequate to rely solely on the ‘intuition’ of the teacher or course designer; and, at least, empirical data are needed to support the decisions made by the authorities concerned in the training programme

(namely, the course designer and teacher) in determining the materials to teach and the actions taken.

Although needs analysis belongs mainly to the domain of English for Specific Purposes, the work of Seedhouse (1995) shows how needs analysis can be carried out in a General English classroom, especially with respect to problem solving and as a basis for designing aims, courses and materials. It also illustrates how a tight and direct link can be maintained between needs, aims and materials. In a negotiated syllabus, since learners are required to participate in the selection of content, mode and route of working, assessment, and so on, needs analysis plays a paramount role (Clarke, 1991). Activities which aim to identify the learners' needs generally occur on the first day of the course in the form of 'introduction sessions' and 'pre-tests', facilitated by the institution and administered by the class teacher.

Brindley (1989) categorises needs into 'objective' and 'subjective' needs. The former, he explains, refer to those which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language proficiency and language difficulties; while the latter includes the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation, derivable from information about affective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learners' wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies.

Furthermore, Robinson (1991) identifies two major types of needs analyses as 'target situation analysis' (TSA), that is, needs analysis which focuses on students' needs at the end of a language course and 'present situation analysis' (PSA) which seeks to identify what the students are able to do at the start of the language course. She also suggests the idea of combining the TSA and PSA into 'the language audit' to determine how much language training is needed in terms of time and facilities required.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is often associated with study skills – the ability involved in knowing how to learn. Topics like using a dictionary effectively, note taking, understanding lectures, writing a summary, etc. are the most common components in EAP programmes. This is outlined by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who divide ESP into English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Business and Economics (EBE), and English for Social Sciences (ESS) and identify EAP courses as those that often include study skills components in all of the divisions of ESP mentioned.

As study skills are a major focus in EAP, Jordan (1993) examines the need to include study skills in EAP as many overseas students have not received help in developing study skills in their own language/country.

However, the importance of learning something other than study skills has been articulated by most scholars investigating pre-sessional or EAP courses. Jordan (1993) identifies the needs of international students learning EAP from three points of view: social functions, study skills, and practice in the language associated with his/her specific subject. Blue (1993) has looked at the role of language and some other factors that make for a successful academic experience such as information about the foreign culture. Brumfit (1993) emphasises the need for coherent cultural analysis as an integral part of language learning and language socialisation. Furthermore, Christison and Krahnke (1986), based on the learners' perceptions, found that social contact with native speakers and television and radio contribute most to the improvement of language skills. They (1986:77) state: "the students felt that language teaching should help address this need, not only for its social benefit, but for the language learning experience that it would provide".

METHOD

The method used for this study is survey design with questionnaire, which is adapted mainly from Beatty and Chan (1984) and Ostler (1980). Beatty and Chan investigated changes in the perceived needs of Chinese students. They used a questionnaire with a Likert Scale of five (very important) to one (not at all important) to investigate the needs of Chinese students in learning English and compared the needs of students who had never been to the USA and those who had been in the USA for over 6 months. Ostler (1980) also used a questionnaire to examine needs according to students' major and class standing. He divided the questionnaire items into five sections namely Biographical Data, Assessment of Academic Skills, Oral-Aural Proficiency, Reading Skills and Requirements, and Sentence Combining.

Fifty four students with various national and language background learning English for Academic Purposes at an ELI (English Language Institute) participated in this research. The students also come from a variety of major studies including Social and Pure Sciences. All of the subjects can be considered to be mature students. A simple statistical analysis was used to calculate the to-

tal and means of each item and to rank the means in order to show the items from the most to the least important perceived needs as previously carried out by Beatty and Chan (1984).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Study Skills

As table 1 shows, the most important study skill for the learners is 'to understand lectures' with a mean of 4.8 followed by 'to write an assignment/paper' with a mean of 4.7 and 'to participate actively in class discussions' and 'to write a report of project work' having means of 4.5 each. The least important study skills, according to the learners, are 'to fill out application forms' with a mean of 3.2, followed by 'to write formal letters', 'to read university leaflets', and 'to discuss issues with classmates' with means of 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9 respectively.

It is surprising to find out that the relatively high ranking in this study (with a mean of 4.4) of the skill 'to take essay exams' is not reflected in the results of the study conducted by Beatty and Chan (1984). They found that the students (both those who had been to the USA for six months and those who had not) ranked that item much lower with a mean of 2.7. It is possible that the students going to study in New Zealand had difficulty in doing an essay exam when they took IELTS (International English Language Testing System) before they came to New Zealand; while those heading to study in the USA had to take TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) which did not include essay exams.

Table 1 shows the relative rankings of the study skills as recorded by the subjects in the present study from the most to the least important, with the mean of each skill presented.

Besides the skill items presented in the questionnaire as listed in the rankings above, some students suggested alternatives in the column headed 'other' in the questionnaire. These alternatives included keep note (sic), pronunciation, use computer quickly and correctly, find out my own way how to study, to do homework, and understanding radio and TV.

The student's suggestion keep note may actually mean 'note taking', and the skill ranked eleven in the list; and the term pronunciation can be interpreted as meaning 'to pronounce words properly'. There is a question as to whether the English Proficiency Programme should cater for demands to learn how to

use computer, to do homework and to find out the students' own way to study; whilst understanding radio and TV is actually not a part of study skills. The students' additional suggestions tell us how they view EAP, or rather, how they view their needs in terms of improving their study skills. It is not clear whether the items written by individuals reflect what other students feel they need to have. However, those items, especially the ones related to study skills and language learning should be taken into consideration when designing a similar questionnaire in the future.

Table 1. Order of Importance of Study Skills According to All Subjects under Investigation

Ranks	Skills	Means
1.	To understand lectures	4.8
2.	To write an essay assignment/paper	4.7
3.	To participate actively in class discussions	4.5
4.	To write a report of project work	4.5
5.	To take essay exams	4.4
6.	To present a seminar in front of the class	4.2
7.	To write a summary of an article	4.2
8.	To talk to a tutor/lecturer	4.2
9.	To use the library effectively	4.2
10.	To use dictionaries effectively	4.2
11.	To take notes during lectures	4.1
12.	To read journal articles	4.1
13.	To discuss issues with classmates informally	3.9
14.	To read university leaflets.	3.8
15.	To write formal letters	3.7
16.	To fill out application forms	3.2
Total		66.7
Average		4.19

Aspects of New Zealand Culture

As can be seen from the Table 2, the top ranks are 'to understand the news on TV', 'to understand the news on the radio' and 'to read newspaper articles' with the mean of 4.5 each. All the items chosen as the most important are con-

nected with the news and not necessarily with New Zealand culture. This could be because from the news students can gain an improvement in their language as well as up to date information about current issues which may come from their home countries. The items related to New Zealand culture are ranked 4, 6, 7 and 9 which have means of 4.2, 3.8, 4.0 and 4.1 respectively. This indicates that they are not seen as the most important, but are considered reasonably important with an average mean of 4.02.

Table 2. Order of Importance of Aspects of New Zealand Culture According to All Subjects under Investigation

Ranks	Aspects of Culture	Means
1.	To understand the news on TV	4.5
2.	To understand the news on the radio	4.5
3.	To read newspaper articles	4.2
4.	To make friends with New Zealanders	4.2
5.	To speak on the phone appropriately	4.2
6.	To be able to chat with New Zealanders	4.1
7.	To have a New Zealander as your teacher	4.1
8.	To know rules applied in New Zealand	4.0
9.	To know New Zealand etiquette	3.9
10.	To understand movies	3.9
11.	To understand signs and public notices	3.8
12.	To attend a social gathering	3.7
13.	To deal with official bodies	3.7
Total		53.2
Average		4.09

An earlier study by Christison and Khranke (1986) suggests similar findings with regard to social contact with native speakers and television and radio, which contribute most to an improvement in subjects' language skills. Although the items related to social contact in this study are not in the top ranks (ranked 4, 6, 9 and 12), they have an average mean of 4, which means that they are considered important by all the subjects.

Two students wrote to read novels and social work in the column 'other' in the questionnaire. These could also be items to consider for inclusion in the syllabus, because 'novel reading' can be a way of improving the students' read-

ing skills; whilst ‘social work’ can be a means of introducing interested students to New Zealand’s social system. With regard to ‘novel reading’, perhaps the teacher could assign students to read a novel and ask them to make a summary or plot of the novel and discuss it in the class. In addition, like ‘understanding movies’ the students can obtain a cultural knowledge from ‘novel reading’ as long as they read novels derived from English cultural background.

METHODOLOGY AND CLASS ACTIVITIES

Table 3 shows the order of perceived importance of the class activities and methodologies the teacher can apply. The order of importance here should be seen as a statement of preference, not as ‘importance’ in the sense of ‘necessity’.

Table 3. Order of Importance of Methodology and Class Activities According to All Subjects under Investigation

Ranks	Class Activities	Mean
1.	To have the teacher give feedback on your work	4.7
2.	To learn new words	4.5
3.	To have speed reading exercises	4.5
4.	To do homework	4.3
5.	To have weekly progress tests	4.3
6.	To work individually	4.2
7.	To use audio materials for learning	4.2
8.	To work in groups	4.1
9.	To do grammar exercises	4.1
10.	To have the teacher correct your mistakes	4.1
11.	To attend guest lectures	4.1
12.	To work in pairs	4.0
13.	To learn common NZ expressions	3.8
14.	To do a roleplay/drama	3.1
15.	To play language games	3.1
Total		61.1
Average		4.07

As can be seen from the table, the most preferred activity is 'to have the teacher give feedback on your work' followed by 'to learn new words' and 'to have speed reading exercises'. To the investigator, this is an indicator of the fact that the students are more focused on their progress in learning English, than the methodology adopted by the teacher. Furthermore, they seem not to care whether they should work individually, in groups or in pairs. Moreover, they may not like to be given 'games' and 'role plays' as activities used in the classroom.

It is a little surprising to notice that the item 'to have the teacher correct your mistakes' with a mean of 4.1 ranks far below 'to have the teacher give feedback on your work' with a mean of 4.7. This could be interpreted as 'Don't correct my mistakes in front of the class' which could be embarrassing, but 'Please correct mistakes on the assignments that I write'.

Two students wrote review and practice formal speaking (esp. in public) in the column 'other' in the Questionnaire. The suggestion review may be interpreted as asking the teacher to review the lessons, while the other could mean 'public speaking'. These appear to be individual preferences which could be included subject to the view of the rest of the class.

TOPICS/THEMES FOR DISCUSSIONS

As can be seen from Table 4, the most important topics for discussion according to the students are topics related to their major subjects. This is an interesting finding and is challenging for the teacher who must provide materials for class discussion. This could prove difficult for the teacher because in one class, there are a variety of major subjects; it is seldom that more than one student is enrolled for a given major subject. However, to lessen the teacher's burden and to avoid class boredom with regard to individual preferences, the teacher could ask the students to write a paper or present a seminar concerning their individual major subject.

The second and third most important topics 'Current world issues' and 'Current local issues' are actually correlated with the ratings in Table 2 on Aspects of New Zealand Culture in which the students chose items 'To understand the news on TV', 'To understand the news on the radio' and 'To read newspaper articles' as the most important items for the section on cultural awareness and socialising skills. This is also an interesting finding and responding to it does not present the same challenge to the teacher. The teacher

could ask the students to make clippings on a particular piece of news which is interesting to an individual and discuss it with the class. The teacher could also tape excerpts from the television and radio news and discuss them in the class.

The least important (or interesting) topics according to the students, are those about ‘famous people’ and ‘idols’. This was predicted by the investigator; however those items served as a ‘placebos’ or ‘distracters’ to see if the students were making meaningful choices.

Three students suggested other topics be included in ‘other’ column as class discussion topics. The items proposed were general topics, travelling and social problems and New Zealand values. One of the students even gave a suggestion in more detail ‘If the topic is related to our major subject it is good but if study general topic (he or she added I can’t say what is general topic) and many kinds of topic I think is better’ (sic).

Table 4. Order of Importance of Topics for Discussions According To All Subjects under Investigation

Ranks	Topics/Themes for Discussions	Means
1.	Topics related to your major subject	4.3
2.	Current world issues	4.2
3.	Current local issues	3.9
4.	Television programs	3.6
5.	University life	3.6
6.	Employment	3.6
7.	Hobbies and Interests	3.4
8.	Health and medical insurance	3.4
9.	Transportation	3.4
10.	Famous people	3.3
11.	Your idols	3.1
Total		39.8
Average		3.62

CONCLUSION

With reference to the target situation, the students regard the following topics very important: to understand lectures, to write an essay assign-

ment/paper, to participate in class discussion, to write a report of project work and to take essay exams. Those skills were in the top ranks according to the choice of all students and have an average mean of over 4.3. The teacher then in the class could provide activities that make them able to help master those skills. This seems to be an urgency for the teacher to conduct those activities because the students perceive those skills as 'necessity' or abilities that they lack.

The following topics are considered to be relatively important and are in the middle ranks with an average mean of between 3.75 and 4.25: to present a seminar in front of the class, to write a summary of an article, to talk to a tutor/lecturer, to use the library effectively, to use dictionaries effectively, to take notes during lectures, to read journal articles, to discuss issues with classmates informally, and to read university leaflets. With those skills, the teacher also could provide activities that can help the students cope with the problems related. The difference between these items and the previous ones is in terms of the 'urgency' which may affect the frequency of the activities to be provided for the class.

The last items which are considered to be not recommended as they are in the bottom ranks of the students' choice and have an average mean of below 3.75: to write formal letters and to fill out application forms. The students might have thought that these skills are not needed during their study or they might also think that they feel confident with those skills. Accordingly, it is not useful for the teacher to provide activities or assignments related to those skills.

The highly recommended items which are in the top ranks of the students' choice and have an average mean of over 4.25 are: to understand the news on TV, to understand the news on the radio, to read newspaper articles, to have the teacher give feedback on the students' work, to learn new words, to have speed reading exercises, to do homework, to have weekly progress tests and to talk about topics related to the students' major subjects. Those items can be seen as 'content' or 'topics for class discussion' but they can also be seen as 'methodology' or 'activities' to be applied by the teacher or the combination of both. For example, with items related to the news, the teacher can ask the students to read an interesting piece from the newspaper and ask them to talk about it in the class.

This study focused on a needs analysis of international students learning EAP, seen from the students' perspective, on the basis of variables such as types of study skills, aspects of (New Zealand) culture, methodology and

class activities and topics/themes for class discussion. Obtaining data on student perceptions related to these variables is not a sole solution to the problems of learning and teaching, rather it functions as one input into the intricate matter of curriculum implementation. Obviously, other types of needs analysis are strongly recommended, such as the analysis of the students' language use, which should be carried out in the beginning and during the course implementation, as well as an analysis of individual learners' language use and learning modes, to cater for their demands or help sort out individual difficulties. Furthermore needs analysis on target language use is also strongly suggested.

As for summing up, to make a needs analysis fundamental as a basis for EAP curriculum design, further studies on language learning needs of international students are required. This could be in the form of needs analysis focusing on Target Situation, investigating international students who are already in an English speaking university on the basis of their language problems and other linguistically related aspects. To focus on Present Situation, 'other types of needs' analysis are also recommended especially those oriented to the students' linguistic problems.

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