

Using A Needs Analysis As A Means of Reflection on ESP Syllabus

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This article suggests using a needs analysis as a useful means of reflection in order to highlight to what extent language needs assessment can illustrate whether or not exist any discrepancy between 'felt' needs and 'perceived' needs as well as between learners' needs and interests that can be relevant to syllabus designs. The study looks at the results of a needs analysis carried out with university students of ESP.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in looking at needs analyses as a strong justification for the decisions planners make about language programmes as well as a vital prerequisite to the specification of language learning objectives. Although the definition of needs is the basis of any needs assessment, it is difficult to find an operational definition suitable in any context of second language learning. Nevertheless, a definition of needs is most often agreed to be expressed as “a gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state” (Berwick, 1994:52), or as being something like ‘the gap between what is and what should be’ (Brindley, 1994:65).

Two major streams have emerged about the meaning of ‘needs’ and what ‘needs analysis’ should imply in ELT. The first is the *goal-oriented or product-oriented* interpretation whereby the language of the target situation is described and the syllabus is devised solely on the needs the learner will meet in a particular communication situation. The second stream is termed *process-oriented* interpretation which sees needs primarily as means of learning. That is to say:

It means trying to identify and take into account a multiplicity of affective and cognitive variables which affect learning, such as learners’ attitudes, motivation, awareness, personality, wants, expectations and learning styles’ (Brindley: 63).

These different perspectives on needs analysis reflect the shift which has taken place in language teaching from language-centred to learner-centred approaches.

Our approach to needs analysis in this study supports the view that both interpretations must have their place when carrying out a needs analysis, which has been pointed out by numerous authors (Widdowson, 1981, Berwick, Brindley, Richterich, 1983, Richterich and Chancerel, 1980, Robinson, 1991). Thus, we will try to relate general concepts and methodologies in language needs assessment to our particular concern with the present needs analysis in ESP.

2. 'Felt' needs vs. 'perceived' needs

This paper suggests using a needs analysis as a useful means of reflection in order to highlight to what extent language needs assessment can illustrate whether or not exist any discrepancy between 'felt' needs and 'perceived' needs as well as between learners' needs and interests that can be relevant to syllabus designs.

We may start by considering 'felt' needs as those which learners have, sometimes referred to as 'expressed' needs and in a devalued viewing as 'wants' or 'desires'. 'Perceived' needs represent the other side of the coin, they are those which teachers (or other experts) have about learners' educational gaps. Along with this, 'perceived' needs have also been described as 'normative' 'real' or 'objective' needs.

These views definitely reflect a clear contrast between 'objective' and 'subjective' needs as Brindley (70) states:

The first of these terms refers to needs which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language in real-life communication situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties. The second term refers to 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 regards to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies.

3. Aims

Although the distinction above described is not as clear cut as might be supposed, it is useful since it lets us seek the source of need and come to a potential agreement between learner-centred and teacher-centred inputs. Information from students should lead to reach compromises between what learners expect and want and the teacher feels he/she can and ought to provide.

Thus, given the likelihood that some disparity of views can exist, the twofold aim of this study is, firstly, to know and reflect on how students involved in learning English for specific purposes assess their language needs and, secondly, make us aware of any learner preferences that may require us to modify or negotiate our ESP language syllabus. Due to the fact that we have already started the implementation of *El Nuevo Plan de Estudios* in the Faculty of Pharmacy, which means a complete change with respect to former annual number of credits and subject-content designs, it can be of vital importance for us to obtain most information as to what constitutes valuable teaching and learning activities and try to overcome that perception gap between teachers and learners.

4. The empirical study

The needs analysis was carried out in the Faculty of Pharmacy (University of Granada) when *EL Antigo Plan de Estudios* was still in force. Information on learners' needs was gathered using a questionnaire which was administered to 300 first-year students, although the total number of registered students was near 900. That is to say one third of all the students. This was the first and only year these students were compulsorily exposed to English language instruction in the University setting. The FL background for the students was varied although all were supposed to have studied English for at least 4 years in Secondary Education.

The choice of a questionnaire as the technique for investigating needs was made on the basis of its ease to be handed out to a large number of people in spite of its disadvantage in that some students would not bother to fill it in

seriously. To make their behaviour more conscious they were told their information would be taken into account for designing new subject-content in *EL Nuevo Plan de Estudios*. It was written up in Spanish to ensure comprehension. The 11-item questionnaire includes, in a way or another, a simple combination of goal-oriented and process-oriented needs analyses (see Appendix).

Thus, the 11 items on this questionnaire are a rough attempt to reflect the learners' 'felt' needs about their actual learning needs and learning means, their future communicative needs in the target situation (as lecturers, researchers, laboratory workers, etc. in the Pharmaceutical and Health science fields) as well as their interests, aptitudes and attitudes towards English. In this sense, there is an underlying aim contrasting what the real learning needs are and what the prospective needs will be.

It is worth mentioning that this questionnaire was intended to be piloted as the first draft of what should be posterior studies since we think of needs analysis as an ongoing process.

5. Results

We now consider each of the items in turn, beginning with the overall results and moving on to a comparison of the different items. Results of percentage and number of answers per item will be reported below each question keeping the same structure of the questionnaire to facilitate its reading. The unequal number of answers is due to the fact that some students failed to fill in the whole questionnaire so the percentages have been worked out only from the items answered.

Question nº 1. *En tu opinión ¿es necesario saber inglés para aprobar la licenciatura?*

| | | | |
|---------------------|-----|---|------|
| SI | 137 | - | 46% |
| NO | 162 | - | 54% |
| Total nº of answers | 299 | - | 100% |

Question nº 2. *¿Crees que es conveniente un conocimiento de inglés para graduarse en Farmacia?*

SI 220 - 73%
NO 80 - 27%
Total nº of answers 300 - 100%

Question nº 3. *Si la respuesta es “SI” indica qué funciones en inglés necesitarías dominar:*

3.1. Percentage of different proficiency within each function.

| | Adecuadamente | Algo | Innecesario | NºA. |
|------------------------------|--|---------|-------------|----------|
| Leer textos/artículos | 176-78% | 49-22% | 2-0% | 227-100% |
| Escuchar conferencias | 145-66% | 65-29% | 11-5% | 221-100% |
| Participar en seminarios | 51-24% | 117-55% | 46-21% | 214-100% |
| Escribir artículos/abstracts | 57-28% | 76-37% | 70-34% | 203-100% |
| Otros..... | (Inestimable percentage to be worth mentioning). | | | |

3.2. Percentage per level of proficiency for each function.

| | Adecuadamente | Algo | Innecesario |
|------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------|
| Leer textos/artículos | 41% | 16% | 2% |
| Escuchar conferencias | 34% | 21% | 9% |
| Participar en seminarios | 12% | 38% | 36% |
| Escribir artículos/abstracts | 13% | 25% | 54% |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Total nº of answers | 429 | 307 | 129 = 865 |

Question nº 4. *¿Crees que necesitarás leer material escrito en un idioma extranjero para futuros trabajos de investigación?*

SI 267 - 90%
NO 31 - 10%
Total nº of answers 298 - 100%

Question nº 5. *Si la respuesta es “SI” ¿de qué idioma(s) se trataría en orden de importancia?*

1rst. 261 - 98%

2nd. 5 - 2%

3rd. 0 - 0%

Total nº of answers 266 - 100%

Question nº 6. *¿Crees que necesitarás leer material escrito en un idioma extranjero para realizar tus futuras funciones profesionales?*

SI 197 - 66%

NO 100 - 34%

Total nº of answers 297 - 100%

Question nº 7. *Si la respuesta es “SI” ¿de qué idioma(s) se trataría en orden de importancia?*

1rst. 195 - 99%

2nd. 3 - 1%

3rd 0 - 0%

Total nº of answers 198 - 100%

Question nº 8. *¿Te recomiendan textos en inglés como material de lectura?*

SI 116 - 40%

NO 175 - 60%

Total nº of answers 291 - 100%

Question nº 9. *¿Con qué grado de facilidad lees en inglés?*

Con facilidad 116 - 39%

Con dificultad 181 - 61%

Total nº of answers 297 - 100%

Question nº 10. *¿Piensas cursar estudios de posgrado/llevar a cabo trabajos de investigación en un país de habla inglesa?*

SI 86 - 30%

NO 201 - 70%

Total nº of answers 298 - 100%

Question nº 11. *¿Cómo describirías la utilidad del inglés para un profesional bien cualificado en tu campo?*

Necesario 94 - 32%

Conveniente 194 - 64%

Innecesario 12 - 4%

Total nº of answers 300 - 100%

6. Discussion of results

Though main comments stand out by themselves, we now will go through the data for each item eliciting those details that can be relevant to our purpose.

To start with, questions 1, 2 and 3 deal with “process-oriented needs” or “learning needs”.

In **question 1**, which was supposed to be an objective one, the small difference between both percentages may be because the students differed as to the meaning of the question itself. It could be read, at least in our opinion, in two ways:

a) *¿Does it mean you have to have a high level of proficiency to pass the English subject and so to be able to get your degree?. In the “NO” case, the pass mark in English would be questioned. In both cases “SI” and “NO” it could also entail a masked excuse for those who feared to fail the subject.*

b) *¿Does it mean you need English to pass other subjects?*

This meaning would be against the reality of the general methodological teaching trend in the Faculty of Pharmacy where it is solely based on class note-taking.

Conversely, **question 2** provides us with a high disparity between “*sies*” and “*noes*” (73% vs. 27%). It can be put down to the words “necesario” and

“conveniente” used in the first and second questions respectively. It seems to me that students **feel** a certain discrepancy between what they think should be beneficial (*conveniente*) for their education and what is actually easier (*necesario*) for them to get their degree, that is *needs vs. interests*. Furthermore, the 27% of “NO conveniente” can be reasonable since a high number of the students have from the very beginning a definite purpose: to run a Chemist’s shop, very likely an ongoing family business.

3 has, in principle, two possibilities regarding percentage estimates.

3.1. Percentage of different proficiency within each function.

The highest score (78%) with respect to “*leer textos/artículos*” was obtained in the “*adecuadamente*” level. This unsurprisingly parallels those obtained in almost every ESP needs analysis besides coinciding with our **perceived** needs.

“*Escuchar conferencias adecuadamente*” had quite an important advantage (66%) over the grade “*algo*” (29%), which, in this case that deals with first-year students, seems to us rather odd. Speaking skill implied in “*participar en seminarios*” scored the highest percentage (55%) on the grade “*algo*” followed by almost a draw between “*adecuadamente*” e “*innecesario*”. Here the results coincide with our own expectations so that there is an agreement between **felt and perceived** needs.

Finally, the “*escribir artículos/abstracts*” function surprises us as to it obtained the lowest percentage (28%) awarded “*adecuadamente*” of all the levels of proficiency. This was not, obviously, within our expectations as we know from experience that writing skill is largely considered as one of the two first needs required for academic and specific purposes in the current opinion. A sudden thought came to my mind when reading these results: could it be due to the students’ consciousness of their own poor proficiency on writing in Spanish?. Could it be due also to the order in presenting the functions?

3.2. Percentage per level of proficiency for each function. We observe first that “*adecuadamente*” obtained the highest number of answers (429) what is a good sign of the overall level of mastery that should be required in the functions as it is also that the number of answers related to level “*algo*”

differed substantially from the one related to level “*innecesario*” (307 vs. 129). It resulted in the following rank order:

“*Adecuadamente*” was first concerning first and second functions (“leer textos/artículos” and “escuchar conferencias”) and last in third and fourth functions (“participar en congresos” and “escribir artículos /abstracts”).

“*Algo*” was first with respect to third function (“participar en congresos”), second in the other three functions (“leer textos/artículos”, “escuchar conferencias” and “escribir artículos/abstracts”).

“*Innecesario*” was first regarding third and fourth functions (“participar en congresos” and “escribir artículos/abstracts”) and last in first and second functions (“leer textos/artículos” and “escuchar conferencias”).

In summary, there are major differences between first and second function group and third and fourth function group. They seem to be in an opposite-direction, while the highest percentage was obtained by the first group in “*adecuadamente*” the second group obtained it in “*innecesario*”. Consequently, these students think of reading and listening skills as priorities over speaking and writing skills concerning specific purposes. That is to say, receptive skills over productive skills.

As mentioned earlier, one of our aims involved in this analysis was to achieve information from the students’ felt needs and interests. This input would provide us with a valuable information to be contrasted with our perception of their needs expressed quite recently in the syllabus of the *Nuevo Plan de Estudios*. Honestly, we have to admit they do not exactly parallel each other.

Let us make some due considerations about them. Students overwhelmingly agreed that reading texts and articles adequately (78%) was their first urgent need. In this sense, there is a thorough coincidence with the priority entailed in the *Nuevos Planes de Estudio* where this function is taught in the first year conveying 4 credits out of 9.

Listening to lectures adequately (66%) was agreed to be their second need which differ completely from the place and number of credits given in our syllabus where listening skill together with speaking skill share the third place with only 2 credits. Besides, we have to deal with very large classes,

the average mean of students may be over 100 per group, what makes speaking training almost an impossible task. I am afraid, our students will be disappointed in the matter.

What is most surprising to us was that writing articles and abstracts as “unnecessary” attained 34% and only 28% “adequately”. In our syllabus, it is in the second place conveying 3 credits and it seems to be of relevant significance regarding their nearer target needs.

Independently that the suggestions made in the section named “others” obtained inestimable percentages it is worth mentioning that translation and grammar were mostly included, which should be taken into account for future needs analyses.

Questions 4, 5, 6 and 7 deal with goal-oriented or product oriented needs. Numbers 4-5 and 6-7 in pair seek information about any foreign language reading needs first for research and then for professional duties. In both cases, English was almost unanimously chosen as the foreign language needed. It inevitably set us wondering that if they think English is so important, why is it, then, that class attendance is not as high as it should be and, at the same time, that they often complain of English being compulsory? Doubtless, in our opinion, the hidden reason that can lead them to behave so is a simple matter of discrepancy between their needs and immediate interests. We cannot forget that 1st year students have 5 other hard subjects besides practice to cope with.

As we have already mentioned the questionnaire was administered when English was still compulsory. However, in the current academic year, the 4 English credits on reading scientific texts related to their speciality, as an optional subject, has been chosen by more than the 80% of students. This overwhelmingly confirms the data in question. On the other hand, it makes us look back to question 2. The percentage of considering English as ‘convenient’ to get the degree (see question 2) is 68%. If we compare it to the above mentioned 85%, we will have to agree that reality is better than anyone could imagine.

Questions 8 and 9 are focused again on skill needs. Number 8 intended to achieve object information in the educational environment. Surprisingly, it

failed to do so since the not very significant difference between “*si*” and “*no*” results (40% vs. 60% respectively) did not cast light on their actual reading needs. Conversely, data about the level of reading proficiency came to be more explanatory. The 61% of the students admitted to read English with difficulty. Once again, the teacher’s perceived needs and students’ felt needs are parallel.

Questions 10 and 11 shift back to target-oriented needs. Data confirmed our expectations. The 30% intended to receive an ongoing training in an English spoken country. If we consider that quite an amount of students enrolled in Pharmaceutical studies have prospective goals running a chemist’s shop, the above percentage (30%) is pretty sensible. Scores on question 11 match roughly those obtained in question 2 where the focus of the question was quite similar. However, agreement on how ‘convenient’ and ‘necessary’ they consider English should be for a well qualified professional in their field was 96% altogether. This, in a sense, means that students think that their future English needs will be greater than their current ones.

7. Implications for ESP Syllabus

These results on a preliminary needs analysis have resulted to be extremely important with regard the first time implementation of the new syllabus in *El Nuevo Plan de Estudios*. It shows first, that all in all there is a happy agreement between students’ felt needs and teacher’s perceived needs, that from the students’ responses evidence emerges to support teachers’ claims though there still exists some sort of discrepancy which should be taken into account to devise content and skill material.

Second, it has resulted in a support of incalculable value for giving us encouragement to go on with our teaching since it has corroborated that, in spite of certain difficulties, students demand and appreciate English as a relevant subject within their specialized university studies.

Third, carrying out analyses such as this confirms the necessity for consultation and negotiation between teachers and students though it be something somewhat bothersome that not all teachers agree on.

Fourth, needs analysis may be a key help for the teacher's desire and determination to grow professionally through continual reflection and self-development.

Finally, classroom research of one kind or another makes us be once more on behalf of Corder's claims:

In the end successful language 'teaching-learning' is going to be dependent upon the willing co-operation of the participants in the interaction and an agreement between them as to the goals of their interaction. Co-operation cannot be imposed but must be negotiated (Corder, 1977:13).

Clarke also argues that teachers need to insist on the validity of their own perceptions of L2 learning and teaching and to rely on their own experience:

The key point... is for teachers to keep their own counsel regarding what works and what does not work and to insist on an interpretation of events and ideas that includes, implicitly or explicitly, a validation of their own experiences in the classroom. (1994:23)

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APPENDIX

CUESTIONARIO A ALUMNOS DE LA FACULTAD DE FARMACIA

1.- En tu opinión ¿es necesario saber inglés para aprobar la licenciatura?

SI []

NO []

2.- ¿Crees que es conveniente un conocimiento de inglés para gradurarse en Farmacia?

SI []

NO []

3.- Si la respuesta es "SI" indica qué funciones en inglés necesitarías dominar:

| | Adecuadamente | Algo | Innecesario |
|------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------|
| Leer textos/artículos | [] | [] | [] |
| Escuchar conferencias | [] | [] | [] |
| Participar en seminarios | [] | [] | [] |
| Escribir artículos/abstracts | [] | [] | [] |

Otros

.....

- 4.- ¿Crees que necesitarás leer material escrito en un idioma extranjero para futuros trabajos de investigación?
SI []
NO []
- 5.- Si la respuesta es “SI” ¿de qué idioma(s) se trataría en orden de importancia?
1.....
2.....
3.....
- 6.- ¿Crees que necesitarás leer material escrito en un idioma extranjero para realizar tus futuras funciones profesionales?
SI []
NO []
- 7.- Si la respuesta es “SI” ¿de qué idioma(s) se trataría en orden de importancia?
1.....
2.....
3.....
- 8.- ¿Te recomiendan textos en inglés como material de lectura?
SI []
NO []
- 9.- ¿Con qué grado de facilidad lees en inglés?
Con facilidad []
Con dificultad []
- 10.- ¿Piensas cursar estudios de posgrado/llevar a cabo trabajos de investigación en un país de habla inglesa?
SI []
NO []

11.- ¿Cómo describirías la utilidad del inglés para un profesional bien cualificado en tu campo?

Necesario []

Conveniente []

Innecesario []