

DETERMINING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEEDS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Learner-centred approaches to curriculum development have been a major trend in language teaching in the past two decades. The main characteristic of a learner-centred approach is the importance given to learners' needs and their expectations in the curriculum design process (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). An analysis of students' needs and interests may be useful in identifying or revising the goals and objectives of a course, deciding on methodology, and determining means of assessment and evaluation (Nunan, 2004).

According to Widdowson (1983), English for Specific Purposes can be categorized according to the specificity of the aims of the course. He proposes that the designers need to "look for ways of defining the aims of our students in communicative terms by devising a means of analysis which preserves the essential features of language use" (Widdowson, 1983, p.6). Based on Widdowson's view, Bruce (2005) suggests the need for a discourse-focused approach to General English for Academic Purposes syllabus and course design which "relates to cognitive genres; is not discipline-specific; and uses a top-down approach in order to develop capacity as well as competence (enabling learners to reapply discourse knowledge in varying situations and forms)" (p.240). The course design is thus informed by a variety of data which includes the intentions, needs and plans of principal stakeholders of the course.

In distance learning contexts, the learners' ideas about their needs and preferences and their perceptions of the learning context have been considered as key factors which determine their language learning. According to White (2003), "[d]istance language learning changes the teaching-learning relationship that students have been confronted with for much of their lives" and "they need to be supported in finding ways of effectively managing themselves and their learning experiences" (p. 98). In order to provide learners with necessary support, it is essential to have an understanding of their perceptions, needs, expectations and their plans for language learning. Only two studies have been done so far in this area in the present context, one on using University Benchmarks in course design (Raheem & Tillekeratne, 2010) and the other on the perceptions of practitioners (Bogamuwa, Abeysekera, Wijesinghe & Satheresinghe, 2010).

The present study attempts to identify the needs, expectations and plans for learning English of the key participants, i.e. a group of undergraduate students at the beginning of the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) course. This exploratory study will provide insights mainly into course design and it will inform the approach to teaching and mode of course delivery as well.

METHODOLOGY

The common ways of investigating learners' needs, expectations or goals are through questionnaire surveys, interviews, or focus groups. The present study explores the use of a less common data collection instrument which is a piece of writing (a timed essay) written by the students on a given topic. The students wrote the essay as part of their English Grading Test. The rubrics for the task guided the students to structure their essay on their needs to learn English, their expectations of the EGAP course and their plans to improve their English. Their

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performance in writing was evaluated separately by a set of marking examiners and the researchers were not involved in that process. The scripts were selected randomly for the research study later. A random sample of 100 essays was used in the study and the data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. A Content Analysis of the essays was carried out by coding the data using a coding scheme which was designed using a sample of data. Content Analysis is considered as an unobtrusive method of data collection as it does not involve the researcher interacting with the people being studied. The essays did not contain the students' names.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data are being analysed and the preliminary findings show that the students have a wide variety of needs and interests. Almost all the students perceive English as an essential skill in pursuing their higher studies. However, their expectations of the English course are not limited to academic purposes. In addition to the support for developing skills for academic success they expect the EGAP course to provide them with general communication skills. Some students are of the view that a course of English will help them in improving their self-confidence and increasing their employability and career promotions as well. Even though the results show that some students have high expectations they seem to have no clear plans for achieving those. Some students show willingness to be self-directed and the findings support the incorporation of self-directed learning opportunities in course design.

CONCLUSIONS

The study investigated the learners' needs, expectations and their plans to improve their English prior to following the English for General Academic Purposes course offered by the Department of Language Studies. The preliminary findings show that learners' needs are diverse and only a few learners have their own plans for improving their English. This is an ongoing research study and the findings will be validated by triangulation. The findings of the study will inform the course restructuring process.

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