Needs Analysis and Teachers' Perceptions: A Study of English Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Needs Analysis in the context of language-learning-teaching is an important process to design a certain course and syllabus. It helps course designers to set objectives, choose content, method of instruction, appropriate teaching aids and classroom activities for different courses. This paper reports the perceptions of the researchers on the English language learning needs of the English undergraduate students of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University Sheringal, Pakistan. The data is based on the researchers' personal experience and a first-hand observation of the population as the researchers have been teaching in the target context for about a decade. Furthermore, the researchers have always been in discussion with their students and colleagues about the target students' English leaning needs, preferred learning styles, motivation in learning English, interest, strengths/weaknesses, and attitude toward English learning in the target setting. Learners' assignments, exam answer sheets, and presentations have also been used is a source of data collection. A needs analysis model proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) has been applied in order to analyze the data. The results show that the students lack well grammatical sentences, have poor spellings, capitalization problems, limited vocabulary, unaware of collocations, poor/slow reading comprehension, and lack of effective presentation skills. Furthermore, most of the students have lack of involvement in classroom activities and feel shy in speaking English language. It was reported that provision of authentic material, interesting activities, suitable audio-visual aids, relevant texts, language labs and other logistic arrangements can better help them in learning English language. The findings demonstrate that the students wished to have a learner-centered-course which helps them excel in their academic life and learning English language.

Key Words: Needs Analysis, Perceptions, Syllabus, Needs Analysis Model, Undergraduate

Introduction

In the process of designing any general or specific English course, needs analysis is the first step that is important to be taken. Also known as needs assessment originated in 1970s, tries to identify learners' needs and problems in developing a certain course. In other words, it can be defined as a set of systematic procedures used to collect data about students' language skills, purpose of learning, language strength, weaknesses, lacks and wants prior to the development of a course. Thus it will help in setting goals for a course which in turn would decide the type of material, content, classroom activities and method of instruction used in a course. Iwai, Kondo, Lim, Ray, Shimizu & Brown (1999) define needs analysis as the collection of information from a certain group of students in the process of curriculum designing. Brindley (1989) considers it as "the gap between what the learners' actual needs are and what should be taught to them." Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define it as the necessities, lacks and wants of students in a certain course. Similarly, Iwai et al. (1999) say that needs analysis is the basis for any new language program or a reference for a well established foreign language program.

A number of studies show the importance of needs analysis in designing courses which provided foundation to the learner-centered method of language teaching. Resultantly, the focus was shifted to learners' subjective needs and wants. Nunan (1988) states "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account". In addition, he believes that needs analysis is an important asset for teachers to know the language skills needed by students. Belcher (2006) considers needs analysis as the grounding work for designing English for Specific (ESP) or any general English course. Similarly, Nunan and Lamb (1996) believe that needs analysis "provides a basis for setting goals and objectives" of a course. According to Long (2005), needs analysis determines relevance of material and differences of students in terms of needs and style, thus fulfilling the requirements of students in a specific course. The empirical evidences of Taillefer (2007) and Cowling (2007) report that success of teaching and learning in ESP depends much on needs analysis.

In order to analyze the needs of students, ESP researchers have proposed various approaches. The most important are the Deficiency Analysis, Munby's Communicative Need Processor Model, Target Situation Needs, Current Situation Needs and Learning-Centered Approach Model.

In the current study, the Learning-Centered Approach has been chosen for the data analysis of the students. This model was developed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) that possess a vital place among the given approaches to explore the learning needs of the students. In their model, the students' needs have been divided into two categories: (i) The Target Needs (what the students are required to do in the target situation) and the (ii) Learning Needs (what are the factors that may affect students' learning).

The target needs are the needs that students require in the situation they are studying—the type of skills, knowledge and language students need to cope with a particular situation. The target needs

have further been divided into "Necessities, Lacks and Wants". According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), necessities are "the type of need determined by the demand of the target situation; that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation". It means, what is necessary in students' language use in a certain situation or why a skill is necessary in their use of language. In other words we can say, necessities are the language needs of students required by the demand of a situation, e.g. the type of language and skills required by students to write exam papers, assignments and essays etc. In addition, "Lacks" can be defined as the language skills needed by students; what they already know and what they need to know and deficient in— the strengths and weaknesses of students. Similarly, "Wants" are the skills and knowledge wished by students to learn in a particular language program. It tries to seek students' personal views and expectations about the language acquision in a course. For instance, some students consider themselves to be weak in vocabulary, grammar and speaking skill which they wish to be integrated in their course. Furthermore, "Learning Needs" are the factors that may affect the learning process of the students. This includes motivation, interest, society, previous failure, learning styles, awareness, attitude and strategies etc.

There is a range of tools used for gathering information about the needs of students; the main techniques include interviews, questionnaires and observations. The data can be obtained from the target students, teachers, parents, students solved assignments/written work and administrations of the institutes etc. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) also propose a list of approaches to needs analysis: "questionnaires, interviews, observation, data collection (e.g. gathering texts) and informal consultations with sponsors, learners and others.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

  i.   To report the perceptions of teachers about the needs analysis of the undergraduate students of SBB University Sheringal Pakistan in learning English language.
  ii.   To analyze the English language learning needs of the undergraduate students whose major is English literature and linguistics.

Significance of the Study

The study is important for curriculum/syllabus designers as it provides data about the needs analysis of students in general and the current setting in particular. It helps the course designers to set objectives, choose content, method of instruction, teaching-material and classroom activities for designing courses for the particular context—especially a course which may help the students in their academic and English language learning. Furthermore, the study is beneficial for the students and teachers of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University Sheringal as it demonstrates the real English language learning needs of the students. Moreover, the study adds to the body of existing literature on the topic and can be compared with other contexts of the globe.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature as it tries to investigate teachers' perceptions about the needs analysis of their students at the department of English, SBB University Sheringal. The data is based on the researchers' personal experience and a first-hand observation of the target population as the researchers have been teaching in the same context for about a decade. The researchers of the study discussed and analyzed all their perceptions and perspectives about English language learning needs of their students. They discussed and noted down their understandings/observations of all aspects of the needs of their students in learning English language. Furthermore, the data is based on the informal discussions and interviews which the researchers had with other colleagues of the department/campus. In addition, the researchers (quite a few times) have been in discussion with their students about the English language needs of the students in the target context. Some of the areas which came under discussion with the students and teachers are: Students' English leaning needs, preferred learning styles, motivation in learning English, interest, English strengths/weaknesses, and attitude toward English learning in the target setting. Moreover, students' solved assignments, presentations and exam papers have also been used as a source of data collection for the current study. All this helped the researchers to develop a bulk of knowledge, experience, perception and perspective on the topic in respect of the target setting.

In order to analyze and discuss the language learning needs of the target students, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) model has been applied in the current study—which discusses three kinds of learning needs (necessities, lacks and wants).

The study is delimited to the perceptions of the researchers/teachers about the needs analysis of the all the English undergraduate students (majoring in English Literature and Linguistics) of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University Sheringal, Pakistan.

Analysis and Discussion

The current study follows Hutchinson and Waters (1987) model of needs analysis in order to analyze and discuss the language needs of the undergraduate students of SBB University Sheringal, Pakistan. The data is based on the researchers' personal experience and a first-hand observation of the target population. In addition, the data is based on the informal discussions and meetings happened between the researchers, colleagues and their students. The following section demonstrates a detailed analysis and discussion of the language needs of the students of the target setting.

Learners' needs have been divided into Target Needs and Learning Needs by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The Target Needs—what the students need to do in the target situation has further been classified into "necessities, lacks and wants". Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define necessities as "the type of need determined by the demand of the target situation; that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation". In the current study,

as observed by the researchers (being teachers of the students), the demand of the target situation is that students need to study English literature and linguistics in the department which is the major focus of their degree. During their academic life, they need to write assignments, term papers, answering exam papers, give oral presentations, write general essays, thesis writing, listen to lectures, and attend workshops/seminars etc. All these needs to be written/produced in English language. Similarly, the medium of instruction is English. In order to perform well in all of the above functions, the students are required to have good command on all four skills of English language with exposure to academic/general vocabulary, technical writing skills, grammar, presentation skills, assignment writing, strategies to develop listening and speaking skills, and academic reading /writing skills.

Students' language "lacks" include the language skills needed by the students; what they already know and what they need to know and deficient in (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Assessing students' assignments, exam answer sheets, essays, activity participations and class presentation provide sufficient data about the language lacks of students. Moreover, the researchers in their observation, discussions with colleagues /students, and learners' written-work-assessment found that some of the students were weak in all four skills of English language. They lack well grammatical sentences, have poor spellings, capitalization problems, limited vocabulary, unaware of collocations, poor/slow reading comprehension, and lack of effective presentation skills. Furthermore, the researchers perceive that the students have lack of involvement in classroom activities and feel shy in speaking the target language. Similarly, the students were reported to be good at the content knowledge of English literature and linguistics.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define "wants" as the skills and knowledge wished by students to learn in a particular language program. It tries to seek students' personal views and expectations about the language acquision in a course. As observed and discussed with the students by the researchers, the students wanted a course which may help them in all their academic and language skills. The only course that is available in the department to help the students in their academic and language learning is English for Academic Purposes—which is the sub-category of English for Specific Purposes. This course was valued much beneficial by the students. The students considered the overcrowded number of students in the teaching of this subject as one of the major drawbacks; a teacher needs to give attention to every single student participating in the activities which almost does not happen and is impossible in an hour class. Furthermore, some of the students gave more importance to the grammatical knowledge of language while others wanted activity based learning where there is no/less focus on grammatical knowledge. These students wanted an artificial environment to help them learn the language like their mother tongue which is possible through role plays, language games, problem-solving-situations and simulations etc. The students wished to learn a sufficient number of target language words—the words most frequently occurring in their academic and routine language use.

In addition, a number of the students were of the opinion that provision of authentic material, interesting activities, suitable audio-visual aids, relevant texts, language labs and other logistic arrangements can better help them in learning English language. Similarly, these students wanted a learning environment which is learner-centered providing ample opportunity to students to converse and practice in the target language. The students appreciated the extent of use of English language in the delivery of class lectures by their teachers and the skills they have in all aspects of the language.

Other factors that may affect the learning process of the students include motivation, interest, society, previous failure, learning styles, awareness, attitude and strategies etc. It was noticed that the target students are highly motivated /interested in the courses; they are much eager to study literature, linguistics and English language. They have different learning styles (mostly preferred social and learn by doing) and a positive attitude toward the learning, importance and role of English language.

Conclusion

The current study presents the language learning needs of the English undergraduate students of SBB University Sheringal. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) inventory of needs analysis was used in order to analyze the data.

The following are some of the main findings of the study:

1. Students lack well grammatical sentences, have poor spellings, capitalization problems, limited vocabulary, unaware of collocations, poor/slow reading comprehension, and lack of effective presentation skills.
2. Most of the students have lack of involvement in classroom activities and feel shy in speaking English language.
3. Provision of authentic material, interesting activities, suitable audio-visual aids, relevant texts, language labs and other logistic arrangements can better help them in learning English language.

The study concludes that a learner-centered-course is required to be developed while addressing the academic needs and wants of the students. Based on the findings of the research the following recommendations are suggested:

The learner-centered-course needs to:

1. Focus on enhancing all the major and minor English language skills.
2. Appreciate students' involvement in the teaching learning process.
3. Provide opportunities to practice English language in an artificial environment.
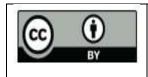4. Integrate authentic material, audio-visual aids, language games and activities.

5. Develop vocabulary, grammar, spellings, pronunciation, and presentations skills

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