

English Language Education : An Exploratory Needs Assessment

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Abstract

A comprehensive and successful language program, even for non-liberal arts universities look to a systematic needs assessment as a basis for stating goals and objectives for developing a curriculum that meets the needs of the language learners. Although subjective in nature, this study identifies some of the English language needs of students currently enrolled in our university. Observations and suggestions are made to bring attention to some ways we can begin taking steps toward creating a well-rounded program for nurses, doctors and pharmacists in training at Toyama Medical and Pharmaceutical University. Further research areas are also suggested.

Introduction

In the field of language teaching, the dramatic shift from grammar-focused models to more communicative ones makes it increasingly important for comprehensive reevaluation of language curriculums in order to help learners become “communicatively competent” (Canale, 1983). One of the important activities that play a key role in the reevaluation and goals or objective setting is needs analysis. Basically, a needs analysis is a systematic gathering of information that defines and validates curriculum objectives that satisfy the language learning requirements within academic institutions (Brown, 1995, p. 36). Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) and again Brown (1995) suggest making use of objective as well as subjective information to determine priorities for language education. Ideally, the source of data should come from at least four different groups: the target group (learners), the audience (those involved in the administrative and educational decisions), the needs analysts (those conducting the needs analysis) and the resource group (others who can provide information about the target group) (Brown, p. 37). In recent years, the target

community or the environment outside of the academic arena, namely the workplace has also been incorporated as another important source in gathering information about how language is used beyond the classroom. (Najar, et al., 1997)

For our university, therefore, the sources of information for a comprehensive needs analysis should include: the students currently taking English as part of their requirements, the language instructors, both full and part-timers (Japanese and native speaking), non-language related professors (those teaching courses within the specialty), administration staff (mostly for records) as well as target professional environment. For medical, nursing and pharmaceutical students, this would include hospitals, clinics and other workplaces.

Since coming to this university, I have been confronted with the question of improving the English language abilities of our students. Most agree that communicating in English is an integral part of professional development for those pursuing studies in health related fields. Many faculty members have expressed disappointment in the overall language abilities of our students despite the fact that they have been exposed to over six years of English language study in secondary education. Students themselves are concerned, lacking confidence in understanding both written and spoken text. They want something "more" from their English classes, and feel frustrated that they still cannot "communicate" in the language. In casual discussions with doctors and researchers working at our university, I have found that they too feel the need for refining their own language skills. In my short tenure here, I have helped many of them with final drafts of research papers, speeches, correspondence, as well as difficult reading materials they need to understand for their work.

Despite this obvious need for improvement, to date there has not been any attempt at conducting some form of information gathering and analysis, although it can be assumed that individual instructors have been conducting some form of needs assessment to make changes within their own teaching strategies. A quick perusal of past in-house journals (at least within the last five years) shows that English language needs have not been brought to attention. Since English language courses are an integral part of the curriculum here at this university, it is imperative that we examine the language needs of our students.

This exploratory study was conducted to help define the parameters of the English language needs of our students. Through the use of a questionnaire, individual interviews with students and several faculty members (outside of the liberal arts department), several areas of concerns have been identified. In addition, personal observations of what

students at this university need and what can be done to address these needs are offered.

Method

This spring semester (spring, 1998), a questionnaire written in English was passed out to students taking my classes (see appendix A). The students were asked to check whether English would be important, of little importance or unimportant to them in certain activities. A total of ninety-nine (97) questionnaires were distributed to the students; eighty-three (83) students responded (86% returned). Twenty six subjects (26) were second year medical students, twenty six (26) second year nursing students, four (4) transfer nursing students, and twenty seven (27) first year nursing students. Since my class schedule did not include any pharmacy students, there were no representative samples for this particular group.

Interviews were conducted on an informal basis and recorded as part of my personal teaching journal for information to be used when developing my courses for the students here at TMPU. Sources of these interviews included several professors in the department of nursing and medicine. No professors specifically in charge of pharmacy students were available.

Personal observations were done on a weekly basis while conducting classes with the students and also recorded in my journal as part of an ongoing informal assessment of the difficulties students experienced in my classes as well as information they shared with me directly regarding their own personal goals for language development.

Results

Questionnaire items were tallied and ranked according to the number of responses for each item (see appendix B). Due to limited space, only those with at least 42 responses in the "important" column will be reported at this time. Of all items on the questionnaire, 55 students, or 66% responded that *understanding lectures given by visiting professors / specialists in medicine* was considered important to them. The next activity receiving significant importance is *conversing with people from other countries that speak English* (54 respondents or 65%) followed by *conversing with people in the medical profession about medicine* (50 respondents; 60%). Additionally, the following were considered important: English for *traveling abroad for pleasure* (49; 59%), *reading for pleasure in English* (46; 55%), *to travel abroad for work or further education, to be able to make presentations in English*

at conferences, to have English speaking friends (each 45 respondents; 54%), *to work abroad, to speak like a native speaker of English, to become more clever* (each 44 respondents; 53%), *to be able to read for professional growth* (43; 52%), *to be able to live in a country where English is spoken* (43; 52%) and *to be able to watch movies or videos without (the aid of) subtitles* (42; 51%).

Items with either the same number of respondents or more in the “unimportant” column include *to work in Japan* (31 respondents; 37%), *to pass the TOEFL* (29; 35%), *to earn plenty of money* (29; 35%), *to go to graduate school in an English speaking country* (26; 31%), *to pass the TOEIC* (25; 30%), and *to pass the STEP (Eiken) exam* (24; 29%).

For concerns such as being regarded as sophisticated, getting promoted, succeeding academically, getting good grades, communicating in English using email with others in the same profession, students responded that English was of little importance.

When asked about the four broad skills of communication which are loosely defined as reading, writing, speaking and listening, at least 63% of the students responded that speaking and listening in English were important for their activities outside of the university in order to communicate with students from other universities (domestic and abroad). No data exists with regards to speaking/listening within the university. Reading, especially comprehending materials within their field of specialty was considered important (72%). Writing was considered the least important skill (38%), at least within the academic setting since students believed most of their professors would not require them to turn in work written in English.

Discussion and Implications

The results from the survey indicate that the students value English as a means of understanding other speakers of the language as well as being understood in academic and non-academic situations. Students often claim that they want to communicate in English but are often frustrated with not being able to express themselves clearly to others. Pronunciation problems and appropriate usage of English for general communication often led to misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the message.

According to informal interviews with professors and researchers here at this university, speaking, especially speech making in front of both native and non-native speakers of English at conferences was a major concern. Several of them have expressed being self-conscious of their pronunciation of non-technical and sub-technical terminology.

Furthermore, during the question and answer times allotted at conferences, researchers found that they often had difficulty understanding the questions posed by other participants of the conference although the questions specifically concerned the research presented. Similarly, answers from other researchers, both native and non-native presenters during the question and answer periods also were considered somewhat hard for them. The speed, enunciation and pronunciation (especially non-native but not Japanese speakers of English) often accentuated the problem of not understanding what was being presented.

From personal observations recorded in the three semesters here at this university, I found students having a lot of problems with basic grammatical structures, often using “grammatically correct” sentences in incorrect situations. Despite the number of years of grammar study, simple grammatical mistakes, especially in writing and even in comprehending reading materials were prevalent, especially with nursing and pharmaceutical students.

Reading English text, a skill considered by the students to be valuable, partially confirms Fujimoto’s claim (1998) of its importance, especially since “academic knowledge (is) primarily conveyed by written words.” When asked to find the “correct” answer (scanning) to questions about the material, students have little difficulty. However, students engaged in critical reading or reading for a deeper understanding find this higher level reading skill hard, even for medical students. Additionally, students who resort to translating reading materials into Japanese and vice versa as a compensation strategy for understanding English text find difficulty with phrases that cannot be translated word for word. The results of such translations are often more confusing than helpful and further deny them an accurate understanding of the text.

Upper grade students have asked me to help them with reading materials that their professors pass out to read and understand. These are not only difficult to understand, but also time consuming, especially when the students feel they must understand the entire text. A quick lesson in finding the main idea and scanning over the text for only key information are skills I found helpful in reducing some of the stress that comes with this need to read thick reading material.

There are also some administrative concerns that I have observed although these are not necessarily unique to our university. Currently, class size ranges from two to close to fifty-five depending on how the students are divided up and whether the time slot is for a “required” or “elective” course. This poses problems in planning and selection of what should be taught. Since instructors are given relative freedom to choose what they want

to teach and when, there is no systematic teaching of the skills. For some students, therefore, they may end up having more reading and writing courses while others in more communicative ones (listening and speaking) depending on scheduling constraints rather than a planned scope and sequence of courses for all students. They are placed in classes based solely on their identification number rather than their language abilities. Thus classes can have a varied range of abilities, often causing frustration for both the able and less able students. Lastly, all classes meet only once a week for no less than eighty minutes (for pharmacy students) and no more than ninety minutes (for nursing and medical students) and lasts only a semester, thereby requiring the instructors to either rush through the material or cover only a small portion of textbooks that students are required to buy for many of the classes.

In summarizing my findings from the questionnaire, interviews and personal accounts, I have found the following :

1) The students and professionals (those not in training) seem to value the skill of speaking as a means of communication among colleagues within the professional and academic settings. Since the students are primarily freshmen and sophomores at this university, they are not seeing the need from a first hand basis but they “feel” or “intuitively” believe that speaking in English is an important skill to have.

2) The students and professionals indeed have similar difficulties in spoken and written text (producing and comprehending). In spoken context, the additional problem of not being able to “re-listen” make it doubly hard. In written text, the advantage is the time and resources available such as dictionaries to help unlock some of the information although they encounter difficulty with words / phrases that are not necessarily translatable.

3) Reading is a skill that is important, especially in the upper divisions (3rd-6th years of studies) when students are given copied texts from their professors to comprehend the lectures. The texts are often highly technical and pose problems based on the subject matter as well as the sheer volume of the texts. Skills such as skimming, scanning, comprehension, critical reading and summarizing are important aspects that should be incorporated into reading classes and not just “read and translate.”

4) Administrative and scheduling concerns can be partially solved if there was a more comprehensive program that will reduce the amount of wasted resources with small classes of less than five students and also reducing the stress and management problems by dividing up the students by proficiency levels, making the classes a reasonable size for both foreign and Japanese faculty in order to provide maximum attention to the

students. Personally, I believe that classes that are between 15-25 are ideal for the teaching of all the skills involved in language learning.

Conclusion

What I have presented here is still exploratory. An investigation at the beginning stages is always filled with problems that need to be addressed in future studies of such nature. One such problem is the survey instrument itself. Since it was all written in English, it can be assumed too that though the students made an effort to understand what was being asked of them, the language may have been too difficult for them to fully comprehend each question. Furthermore, the subjects were students of mine and it could be argued that they wanted to answer the questions in such a way to “validate” the need for a native speaking English teacher’s role here at this university, thereby answering that speaking was indeed a very important skill. Third, since all the participants of the survey were freshmen and sophomores, they may not know of their real needs outside the language classrooms and can only make guesses to what they actually need both academically and professionally. The fact that no pharmaceutical students were part of this study narrows the efficiency of this study to apply to all three departments within our university. Since pharmaceutical students do not take English as part of their entrance exam and since many of them tell me that they will not be speaking with foreigners (personal communication from students in a previous pharmacy class), then it may well be that if they were included in the study, the ranking of the activities will change with reading being more important than speaking.

The interviews and personal observations as sources for needs assessment, although seen as valuable means of data collection also have limitations. They are, on the whole, subjective in nature and can prove to be erring on the side of reflecting personal beliefs and concerns of the professors, researchers and the investigator rather than real needs. It is important, therefore, to develop some sort of measurement to confirm or invalidate the data collected here using subjective needs assessment.

A full-scale needs assessment takes time, money and cooperation of all faculty in order to develop a clear understanding of the needs of our students at the personal, academic and professional levels. I’d like to make several suggestions for future investigations into this matter.

First, since the students are our first concern, a needs analysis should include a thorough investigation of what the students already understand and are able to do with

relative success. The six or more years of English language studies are not necessarily a waste. Even the worst students benefitted from their years in junior and high school studying English as a requirement for post-secondary school admission.

Second, a more comprehensive needs analysis of the target community, namely the students is important if we are to develop a curriculum that will not only be valuable to them in order to pass the minimum language requirements for the Ministry of Education (Mombusho), but to teach them English as a valuable tool for both academic and professional use. Students at all four to six years of education, and all fields (pharmacy, medical and nursing) should be included for future examination of language needs.

Third, the faculty expectations of the students' language ability should prove to be an interesting and important area of study. Faculty members perception of students abilities and needs can provide information for the language department to plan and implement modifications for the curriculum.

Fourth, the faculty members' language needs or what they need in order to be successful in the professional setting should also be conducted. A study of this nature will enable us to make a comprehensive program that will allow us to provide "continuing education" for researchers and faculty members interested in refining and sharpening their English language abilities.

Finally, a study on the needs of doctors and health related professions in the workplace should be conducted. Most studies about doctor (or nurse)-patient communications/miscommunication are currently in L1/situations where both doctor/nurse and patient share the same linguistic and cultural background. However, doctor/nurse-patient encounters within Japan involving Japanese doctors/nurses and non-Japanese patients whose first language is either English or a different language should prove to be a rich and important area. In many cases, non-Japanese speaking patients and their health care givers must communicate in English in order to get and give medical treatment, thereby making English the language of the health trade. With the increase in foreigners living and working here in Japan, even in Toyama alone warrants a study of this nature.

Data collection is a time consuming endeavor. Yet investing the resources available and making an effort to define the standards and the role language learning/teaching has on our students is well worth our efforts. It is our responsibility to our students and to their parents, as well as to the medical profession to develop a language curriculum that enables our students to function confidently in the field of medicine, understanding and being understood in English, a language that most of the professional world has designated as the language for intercultural communication. When we fail to clarify the

goals and objectives of any curriculum and yet continue to teach, we are then "forced to make judgments about the learner's deficiencies and the steps that should be taken to remedy them (Larson, 1979, p. 39).

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Appendix A

For which of these activities is/will English be important for you? Circle the appropriate letter : I (important), LI (little important), U (Unimportant) for your response. (Modified for this research).

To work abroad

I LI U

To travel abroad for pleasure (vacation, homestay)

I LI U

To travel abroad for work or further education (but not live there permanently)

I LI U

To live in a country where English is spoken

I LI U

To go to graduate school in an English-speaking country

I LI U

To go to graduate school in Japan

I LI U

To get specialized information via textbooks, magazines and/or email that are written in English

I LI U

To be successful academically

I LI U

To pass the TOIEC exam

I LI U

To pass the TOEFL exam

I LI U

To pass the STEP (Eiken) exam, Level 4-3-2-1

I LI U

To understand lectures given by visiting professors/specialists in medicine

I LI U

To get good grades

I LI U

To earn plenty of money

I LI U

To get a promotion at my workplace (in the future)

I LI U

To be regarded as sophisticated

I LI U

To work in Japan

I LI U

To converse with people in the medical profession about medicine

I LI U

To converse with people from other countries that speak English

I LI U

To be able to read for pleasure in English

I LI U

To be able to read for professional growth

I LI U

To be able to make presentations in English at conferences

I LI U

To be able to have English speaking friends

I LI U

To be able to watch movies or videos without subtitles

I LI U

To be able to communicate with email to others in the same profession

I LI U

To speak like a native speaker of English

I LI U

To become more clever

I LI U

Appendix B

For which of these activities is/will English be important for you? Circle the appropriate letter: I (important), LI (little important), U (Unimportant) for your response. (Modified for this research).

Ranked in the order of most responses (minimum 42). The number in () indicates the number of responses for Important.

To understand lectures given by visiting professors/specialists in medicine (55)

To converse with people from other countries that speak English (54)

To converse with people in the medical profession about medicine (50)

To travel abroad for pleasure (vacation, homestay) (49)

To be able to read for pleasure in English (46)

To travel abroad for work or further education (but not live there permanently) (45)

To be able to make presentations in English at conferences (45)

To be able to have English speaking friends (45)

To work abroad (44)

To speak like a native speaker of English (44)

To become more clever (44)

To be able to read for professional growth (43)

To live in a country where English is spoken (43)

To be able to watch movies or videos without subtitles (42)

Ranked in the order of least responses in the U (unimportant category) (top 8)

To converse with people from other countries that speak English (0)

- To understand lectures given by visiting professors/specialists in medicine (1)
- To converse with people in the medical profession about medicine (3)
- To be able to make presentations in English at conferences (3)
- To be able to read for pleasure (4)
- To be able to read for professional growth (4)
- To speak like a native speaker (4)
- To travel abroad for work or further education (but not live there permanently) (4)

Ranked in the order of most responses in the U (unimportant category) (Top 6)

- To work in Japan (31)
- To pass the TOEFL exam (29)
- To earn plenty of money (29)
- To go to graduate school in an English speaking country (26)
- To pass the TOIEC exam (25)
- To pass the STEP (Eiken) exam, Level 4-3-2-1 (24)