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NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN

Ana Bocanegra-Valle

Introduction

Needs analysis (or needs assessment) refers to the systematic investigation of needs for the design of a language course and the optimisation of language teaching and learning, and has been identified as a defining characteristic in the field of languages for specific and academic purposes from the start (Upton, 2012). Needs analysis has a long history and, still today, “[a] confusing plethora of terms exists” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.123) to refer to the concept of needs: demands, motivations, deficiencies, goals, gains, wishes, concerns, necessities, lacks, wants, requirements, desires, expectations, constraints, difficulties, preferences, communicative reasons, or communicative situations.

Different sources will provide the analyst with the necessary data and information to conduct the assessment. These may be documentary, like (un-)published literature provided by organisations or corporations that mainly contains job descriptions or occupational tasks, or concern different groups of individuals or stakeholders. In the particular context of English for academic purposes (EAP), there are three levels of participants: primary stakeholders are present and past students, and EAP teachers; subject-matter instructors and subject tutors, faculty and administrators, applied linguists, language experts, domain experts, educational authorities, policy-makers and decision-takers perform as secondary stakeholders; on a third level, professionals, sponsors, employers, company representatives, and society in general may also become interested in a needs analysis and its outcomes, given the social concern with accountability and the increasing demand for accountable educational policies.

Needs can be collected and analysed by means of quantitative or qualitative and inductive or deductive research methods, and with the use of specific data collection instruments or techniques – Jordan (1997), Long (2005), and Brown (2009) list 14, 17 and 26, respectively. Indeed, the available instruments for eliciting and gathering data pertaining to needs are varied and they all show benefits and disadvantages. The most popular are questionnaires and interviews which may be supplemented with other choices like text- or materials-analysis, tests, or participant observation.

Needs analysis should be ideally conducted in three stages and a number of steps (see Figure 42.1). As shall be discussed, it is a necessary procedure for curriculum evaluation and course and materials design and development; it allows for the refinement of a course
A brief history of needs and needs analysis

Needs have been studied extensively in language teaching, and particularly in English for specific purposes (ESP), since Munby’s (1978) seminal work on the communication needs processor model and its application to the design of purpose-specific language programmes. But the concept of needs and its assessment has evolved significantly since then – even earlier, with the beginning of language for specific purposes (LSP) research – and these past decades have witnessed a progressive change in researching techniques and focus (Basturkmen, 2010; Belcher, 2009; Braine, 2001; Upton, 2012). The available literature provides a good historical overview of needs analysis in ESP/EAP from its origins as a formal concept to its more recent approaches with the peculiarities, complexities, and challenges of the process (see Basturkmen, 2010, 2013; Belcher, 2006, 2009; Braine, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Flowerdew, 2013; Hultta et al., 2013; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2006; Jordan, 1997; Upton, 2012, among others).

Needs analysis is a complex process that involves six types of sub-analyses, each of which is concerned with the establishment of different overlapping elements (see Figure 42.2). Taken together as a whole, it is possible to capture the redefinition of the term, its evolution, and the broadening of the concept throughout the years. Following Munby’s (1978) work, two main needs analysis trends emerge in the literature, and a distinction is made between what the learner needs to know in a target situation (“target needs”) and what the learner needs to do to attain effective learning – “learning needs”, in the terms of Hutchinson &
Waters (1987). These two main trends (target situation and learning situation analyses) have gradually evolved and been woven together. As a result today’s needs analysis is a process in which the demands of the target situation (necessities), the determination of the learning gap (“present situation analysis”), and the learners’ views, lacks and wants together with learning needs (“learner factor analysis”) interplay along with (i) the teaching context and local situation – “means analysis”, according to Holliday & Cooke (1982); (ii) target language descriptions – “discourse analysis”; and (iii) target tasks – “task-based analysis” which is strongly advocated by Long (2005) and also referred to as “second-generation analysis” by Huhta et al. (2013) in contrast with the preceding language-centred approaches or “first-generation analysis”. Today, ethnographic- and critical-oriented approaches pose the latest challenge to traditional needs analysis (Flowerdew, 2013).

Critical issues on the basis of current research

In her overview of ESP needs analysis, Flowerdew (2013, p.332) found that “[n]eeds analyses conducted in the academy usually take a skills-based approach at the macro-level”. It is certain that a broad inquiry into the research published on needs for study purposes in higher education shows that skills-based studies feature in the EAP literature. However, there is also some leeway for very interesting and enlightening research that pins down relevant issues and topics in EAP needs analysis, this time at the micro-level.

What follows is a discussion on current needs analysis research in varied academic settings worldwide (see Table 42.1). It has been organised around five key issues and although it takes into account preceding research (for a complementary discussion of earlier studies see Flowerdew, 2013, pp.332–337, or Huang, 2010, pp.518–519), it is mainly focused on the findings from 20 empirical works published in the last decade in different parts of the world, and contextualised in diverse disciplinary contexts – students following EAP courses and majoring in computing, economics, pharmacology, etc.

An efficient needs analysis should involve different stakeholders

Different parties may be concerned with different needs; therefore, data should be gathered from different stakeholder groups in order to streamline a needs analysis procedure. Today, it is widely acknowledged that diverse participant sources will provide a more complete picture of the whole set of needs that should be addressed in a particular situation and will serve to complement each other. The involvement of different stakeholders and sources facilitates the alignment of each group’s diverse self-interests which, together with the triangulation of research data collected by different instruments, contributes to the validity and reliability of the whole process. The case may arise where two different groups are in conflict with each other or where some groups are more representative than others in the need for change and demand of remedial actions – for Brown (2009), students alone may not be a reliable source of information because they are not fully familiar with the teaching context. Even participants in a particular group may provide complementary views and perspectives that, together, inform course content and enhance the final outcome (e.g. undergraduates and postgraduates, or students in different academic years).

The fact that needs are “jointly constructed between teachers and learners” (Hyland, 2006, p.74) is evident in the sample studies detailed in Table 42.1: with the exception of Gilabert (2005), all of them take students (undergraduates, graduates and master students) into account, and most of them (exceptions are Cai, 2013; Elisha-Primo et al., 2010;
Figure 42.2 The needs analysis process, based on discussion in Basturkmen (2010, p.19; 2013, p.4211) and Long (2005)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study/Country/Degree</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
<th>Research instrument(s)</th>
<th>Lessons learned</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gilabert (2005)</td>
<td>3 scholars, 8 company representatives, 11 experts, 59 journalism companies</td>
<td>Scholars: Interview Representatives and experts: (un-)structured interviews Companies: questionnaires Non-participatory observation Discourse samples</td>
<td>Use of multiple sources and methods helps to obtain more reliable and validated findings Domain experts provide the most accurate information about the required tasks and language needs in the domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holme &amp; Chalauisaeng (2006)</td>
<td>37 students</td>
<td>Participant observation Semi-structured interview Five-part questionnaire</td>
<td>Particpatory Appraisal enhances the development of learner-centred classrooms By finding their own needs, students help to set learning targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans &amp; Green (2007)</td>
<td>4932 undergraduates, 32 programme leaders from 20 departments</td>
<td>Students: questionnaire Leaders: questionnaire and group discussions</td>
<td>Students’ problems centre on academic writing and speaking Programme design should stress subject-specific lexis instruction and promote greater learner autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taillefer (2007)</td>
<td>126 postgraduates, 125 undergraduates, 28 language teachers, 30 subject teachers</td>
<td>30-item questionnaire</td>
<td>Language learning targets should be linked to the profession Oral communication is perceived as the most difficult skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacha &amp; Bahous (2008)</td>
<td>324 students, 37 instructors</td>
<td>Students: 6 item-questionnaire Faculty: 6 item-questionnaire and interview</td>
<td>Faculty and students do not hold similar views of students’ business English needs Courses would improve by adding more discipline-specific writing tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazdayasna &amp; Tahririan (2008)</td>
<td>681 undergraduates, 168 subject-matter instructors, 6 English language instructors, Heads of deps</td>
<td>Student: 35-item questionnaire and interview Faculty: 47-item questionnaire and interview</td>
<td>Opinions are consistent among instructors across different universities Present course does not fully prepare students for their studies and should be revisited</td>
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</table>
### Needs analysis for curriculum design

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Molle &amp; Prior (2008) USA Varied</td>
<td>20 students 7 instructors</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with faculty and some students Text-based analysis of course materials</td>
<td>Teaching resources privilege the linguistic features of texts rather than the practices of genre systems Genres should be used to help students better understand discipline-specific discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah (2009) UK TESOL</td>
<td>197 Malaysian students 35 teachers from 11 institutions</td>
<td>Students: questionnaire, IELTS test and reading workshop Teachers: questionnaire</td>
<td>Academic reading profile can be attained on the basis of present wants, lacks and difficulties, and target situation needs Little mismatch between students’ and teachers’ perceptions and views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eslami (2010) Iran Technology, Sc., Medicine</td>
<td>693 students 37 instructors</td>
<td>53-item questionnaire</td>
<td>Perceptions of learners and instructors differ Differences exist among groups and based on their field of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisha-Primo et al. (2010) Israel All academic disciplines</td>
<td>460 undergraduates</td>
<td>18-item questionnaire</td>
<td>Current emphasis on writing and reading should be re-evaluated to favour oral skills Curricular changes should cater to students' tracks (thesis/non-thesis) and specialised fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang (2010) Canada Varied</td>
<td>337 undergraduates 95 graduates 64 instructors</td>
<td>43-item (undergraduates) and 45-item (graduates) questionnaires Instructors: any of the two</td>
<td>Students’ and instructors’ assessments show a great divergence in terms of skills status Support service is needed at the discourse discipline-specific and local levels of writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambert (2010) Japan Business Education</td>
<td>198 students</td>
<td>Job placement records Interview Open-item, follow-up and closed-item questionnaires</td>
<td>Multiple rounds of data collection are important to identify and balance findings Little difference in priorities for tasks across workplace domains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atai &amp; Nazari (2011) Iran Health information management</td>
<td>15 graduates 180 undergraduates 10 EAP teachers 15 content teachers</td>
<td>59 item-questionnaire (adapted per group) GEP test &amp; Self-assessment Semi-structured interviews Non-participant observations</td>
<td>Course should be renewed to favour reading comprehension instruction Teaching should be based on students’ needs and not on utopian goals prescribed by syllabus designers</td>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liu et al. (2011) Taiwan EFL in 6 universities</td>
<td>972 students</td>
<td>95-item questionnaire</td>
<td>Necessities, wants and lacks may be similar or different depending on the target skill. Discrepancies arise between courses and students’ perceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chowdhury &amp; Haider (2012) Bangladesh Pharmacy</td>
<td>40 undergraduates 4 EAP teachers at the same university</td>
<td>Students: 10-item questionnaire Teachers: interviews</td>
<td>Course should be redesigned to foster writing, reading and speaking skills. Course materials should be customised with core subject in mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yürekli (2012) Turkey Computer Sc.</td>
<td>1005 students 17 EAP instructors 35 subject teachers</td>
<td>Questionnaires Subject teachers: semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Teaching should integrate task-based and content-specific approaches. Needs analysis is a pre-requisite for the identification of course objectives and curriculum renewal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Khairy (2013) Saudi Arabia English</td>
<td>75 students 5 English teachers</td>
<td>Students: questionnaire Teachers: interview</td>
<td>Course should strengthen writing skills. Course contents should be tailored to the students’ identified needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinda (2013) Mozambique Varied</td>
<td>28 students EAP/ESP practitioners at different faculties</td>
<td>Students: reading comprehension test Teachers: questionnaire Text-based analysis</td>
<td>Textbooks fail to provide the skills and strategies needed to succeed in academic settings. Textbooks are outdated and should take the discourse level into account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cai (2013) Mainland China Arts</td>
<td>50 Master students</td>
<td>All students: 15-item questionnaire Focus group (6 students): Follow-up interview</td>
<td>Academic writing course does not face students’ perceived difficulties. EAP genre-based pedagogy could solve problems in academic writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Önder Özdemir (2014) Turkey Medicine</td>
<td>510 students 10 academics 5 doctors</td>
<td>Ethnography (sustained observation &amp; participation) Reflective journals Questionnaire based on students’ essays Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Administrators and instructors may provide wrong diagnoses of learners’ needs. Listening, reading and speaking are salient learning needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006; Lambert, 2010; Liu et al., 2011) consider EAP teachers as a reliable source of information. Together with students and EAP teachers, other stakeholders contribute to the efficacy of the assessment: domain experts and subject-matter teachers, language teachers, faculty, administrators, company representatives, and in-service professionals, either from the same institution (e.g. Bacha & Bahous, 2008) or outside (e.g. Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Only a few studies go beyond the educational context to survey third-level stakeholders (Gilabert, 2005; Önder Özdemir, 2014).

**Needs are neither universal nor everlasting**

Although similar groups of students (e.g., students from countries where English is the most popular foreign language) in similar language learning situations (e.g., social sciences students at university level) may share similar needs, these may vary across educational contexts, disciplines and student groups, and be influenced by society. A needs analysis cannot be generalisable, not only because sources are different but also because different views on teaching and learning, differing institutional practices, local attitudes, and socio-cultural practices are highly likely to produce a different set of needs (Jordan, 1997; Long, 2005). Even similar situations will portray dissimilar needs and these may change over time; however, if the settings and conditions are roughly comparable and it is possible to identify a set of “shared needs” (Basturkmen, 2013, p.4210), teachers can use those needs analysis reports “as a starting point for conceptualizing needs” (Basturkmen, 2010, p.26). Also, the far-reaching expectations of today’s globalised society contribute to the identification of “glocal needs” that bring about the global needs that are shared by internationally demanding educational policies and the local needs of particular EAP settings and courses.

The sample research in Table 42.1 evidences the existence of shared and glocal needs, but also the fact that perceptions, expectations and opinions may vary significantly between and across stakeholder groups (Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Huang, 2010; Önder Özdemir, 2014). Differences may also appear within the same parties on the basis of the study programme (Eslami, 2010), and even the analysis of the many faces of the construct “needs” as necessities, lacks and wants may provide an inconsistent outcome (Liu et al., 2011). Exceptions also attest that viewpoints may be consistent across groups even though participants belong to different institutions (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008) or that the mismatch between stakeholders may be irrelevant – see Abdullah (2009) who found similar perceived elements of reading needs between students and staff. Last, needs may be subject to change over time. A good example is Evans and Green (2007), who found that over a span of a decade, issues related to EAP course and materials design needed to be redefined “in light of the changing tertiary-education landscape” (Evans & Green, 2007, p.3), therefore bringing to the fore the continual evolution of EAP requirements together with glocal needs.

**An efficient needs analysis should be systematic and based on a triangulation of research methods, data gathering techniques and sources**

For many years, needs analyses have suffered from a lack of empirical work. Most needs assessments were carried out by course teachers, once in a course life, based on their intuitions or observations and/or a basic questionnaire delivered among students, and as the situation of a particular course required; then, findings were extended to similar courses.
Despite changes in student groups or educational settings. For the efficiency of the teaching and learning process, these slipshod techniques should be avoided, and needs analyses should be conducted with a “mixed-methodology approach” (Huhta et al., 2013) that makes use of systematic data collection procedures, takes into account the views of different stakeholders, and is based on a triangulation of data collected from multiple research methods and sources. This would present course designers and materials developers with a more complete picture of the needs to be addressed by an efficient course. As main conclusions from the sample studies in Table 42.1 show, the use of multiple sources, multiple methods and multiple rounds of data collection are important to build consensus and support the reliability and validity of the needs analysis (Gilabert, 2005; Lambert, 2010; Önder Özdemir, 2014).

Hyland (2006, p.78) claimed that “there has been a heavy over-reliance on questionnaires on needs analysis, despite the rather restricted reliability and one-dimensional picture that this kind of data provides”; the sample research shows that although more research instruments are being gradually employed, this is still the case. Questionnaires are used in all cases and interviews rank as the second most preferred data collection technique (Molle & Prior, 2008 is the only exception). Cases like Atai and Nazari (2011), in which a wide combination of both quantitative (questionnaires, a GEP test and self-assessment) and qualitative instruments (semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations) are used, are scarce. Together with (open or closed) questionnaires with a low or high number of items, and (structured or semi-structured) interviews, other data-gathering instruments that prevail in this decade are: observations (Atai & Nazari, 2011; Gilabert, 2005; Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006; Önder Özdemir, 2014), self-assessments or tests (Abdullah, 2009; Atai & Nazari, 2011; Cabinda, 2013), text and materials analysis (Cabinda, 2013; Molle & Prior, 2008), discourse samples (Gilabert, 2005), group discussions (Evans & Green, 2007) and workshops (Abdullah, 2009), job records (Lambert, 2010) and reflective journals and ethnography (Önder Özdemir, 2014).

**Needs analysis is fundamental to curriculum renewal, course and syllabus design, materials development and methodology updating**

There is a strong consensus in the literature on the linkage of needs analysis to course planning, curriculum design and materials development (Basturkmen, 2010, 2013; Belcher, 2006, 2009; Brown, 2009; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Huhta et al., 2013; Hyland, 2006; Jordan, 1997; Long, 2005; Upton, 2012; among many others). In the case of EAP, the “needs-identifying responsibility” noted by Belcher (2009, p.3) is often borne by teachers who are required to assume multiple roles (course designer and needs analyst being two of them), and both teaching and learning will benefit from this circumstance. Findings from the sample research in Table 42.1 present needs analysis as a window of opportunity for course renewal, and also demonstrate that a course will not be successful if it fails to address the needs of learners and other stakeholders (Cai, 2013; Evans & Green, 2007; Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006; Liu et al., 2011; Mazdayasna & Tahirian, 2008). The following hints for implementation in EAP programmes are suggested:

- EAP courses should not only be skills-based but promote the development of subject-specific vocabulary and be customised with the core subject in mind (Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Chowdhury & Haider, 2012; Evans & Green, 2007).
- EAP courses should foster learner-centred approaches, self-direction and greater autonomy (Evans & Green, 2007; Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006).
• EAP courses should link learning targets to the disciplines and professions, particularly regarding oral communication and task attainment (Lambert, 2010; Tailléfer, 2007; Yürekli, 2012).
• EAP courses should be more focused on genres and disciplinary discourse rather than linguistic features (Cabinda, 2013; Cai, 2013; Molle & Prior, 2008).
• EAP courses should be re-evaluated and renewed on the basis of proper needs analyses, and changes regarding learning objectives, teaching method, materials, etc. should be applied accordingly (Al-Khairy, 2013; Atai & Nazari, 2011; Cabinda, 2013; Elisha-Primo et al., 2010; Evans & Green, 2007; Yürekli, 2012).
• EAP courses should supply support services for discourse discipline-specific tasks (Huang, 2010) and for internationalised classrooms (Abdullah, 2009 – also see discussion in the last section).

Needs analysis favours the integration of EAP with disciplinary programmes

Basturkmen (2012, p.63) has stressed that “[a] key challenge in the tertiary sector is the integration of EAP with disciplinary programmes”. Indeed, needs analysis provides a suitable approach for narrowing the gap between EAP and the teaching and learning of specific disciplines since many science and non-science degrees offer EAP courses – either as a part of it (Bacha & Bahous, 2008) or to support English-medium instruction (Chowdhury & Haider, 2012). A closer look at students’ needs reveals that there is a demand for a higher integration of EAP courses within the disciplines (Tailléfer, 2007), not only through the implementation of skills-based approaches but also through the strengthening of vocabulary and tasks that match core subjects (Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Chowdhury & Haider, 2012; Evans & Green, 2007). As perceived by Bacha and Bahous (2008), EAP courses can be enhanced if brought closer to discipline-specific requirements. Because little difference in priorities for disciplinary tasks across domains has been found to exist on the basis of needs analysis (Lambert, 2010), EAP courses may adopt an integrated approach to EAP teaching which is task-based and content-specific (Yürekli, 2012). Also, needs analysis demonstrates that each disciplinary programme requires a different emphasis on the skills that learners need to function successfully in their studies: pharmacy students in Chowdhury & Haider (2012) claim that more attention should be paid to writing, reading and speaking skills, while in other health-related areas students demand less writing and more listening (Önder Özdemir, 2014). Al-Khairy (2013) and Cai (2013) demand more attention to writing, and Tailléfer (2007) a greater focus on speaking and listening. Again, each EAP course requires its own needs analysis in line with its own disciplinary programme.

Future directions in EAP needs analysis

Today, the analysis of EAP needs is faced with a number of challenges: first, to gain insights into the academic needs of students that take university courses in English in non-Anglophone countries and are required to demonstrate an acceptable academic performance in that language. Second, to make full use of needs analysis approaches to bring EAP courses into line with the benchmarking framework in force in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Last, to instil the needs analysis component into the quality assurance approach system that is currently being implemented across many higher education institutions.
Mobility programmes and internationalisation of higher education institutions

The internationalisation of higher education institutions, fostered by the post-Bologna context and nurtured by structural factors such as a rise in fee income and higher visibility and credibility, has led to a greater mobility of students and teachers across countries and an increased demand for courses in which instruction in non-Anglophone countries is delivered in the English language – 252,827 students from 33 states participated in the 2011–12 Erasmus Programme, with English used in 22,889 teaching assignments according to the European Commission (2013). EAP class groups are today more heterogeneous than ever, with students coming from different cultures and educational systems, and in this new context special needs arise, new challenges are created for the institutions in addressing the students’ needs (Read, 2008), and problems that already exist are made “more acute and above all more explicit” (Shaw et al., 2008, p.279). Thus, EAP needs analyses are destined to take full account of this diversity, and EAP courses may become a feasible option to support the academic needs of learners and respond to the demands of English-medium tuition and research.

A general claim is that in many countries, “[it] is widely assumed that students will develop the relevant English language skills automatically when they are faced with tasks that require them” (Breeze, 2014, p.144); hence, no language support is necessary. In Sweden, for example, university authorities are consistently demanding more teaching in English, but as yet only “piecemeal responses to particular needs” have been received (Shaw et al., 2008, p.280). Finland is also facing the necessity to assess and support “the EAP learning needs of mobile students with varying levels of proficiency and academic study skills”, given the increasing role of English as an international academic language in higher education (Räsänen, 2008, p.249).

A step ahead in this regard was taken by Crawford Camiciottoli (2010) who anticipated the potential problems of her outgoing Italian Erasmus students and developed a pre-departure lecture comprehension course for business studies lectures to help them “to cope with the demands of attending lessons taught in English and settling into a new educational culture at the same time” (p.269). For this scholar, helping mobility students to address the needs of this new teaching context presents EAP instructors working in European universities with unique challenges. In Spain, Breeze (2014) surveyed 83 law and 63 medicine students, and listed a set of “difficulties” which impact on listening skills and lecturers’ performance. She found that teachers might be required to apply changes to their lecturing mode in order to support English-medium courses and satisfy the academic needs of, particularly, international students.

Internationalised English-medium classrooms, however, are not exclusive to European countries. International students in Australia and New Zealand have increased considerably in this past decade, and their particular academic needs have been respectively identified by Dooey (2006) and Butcher and McGrath (2004). Also, the University of Auckland has developed a Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) programme to identify those international students with academic language needs, and provide them with additional language support via EAP courses that specifically address such needs while at the same time preserving the academic standards of the institution (Read, 2008).
Needs analysis for curriculum design

Academic needs under the European Higher Education Area requirements

Needs analysis is considered a fundamental methodological principle of the Council of Europe’s educational model which for many years has promoted an approach to the methodology of language teaching that is based on the communicative needs of the learners (Munby, 1978; Richterich & Chancerel, 1977). Today, the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR or CEF in the literature) (Council of Europe, 2001) is the main instrument for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines under the EHEA requirements.

The CEFR considers that knowledge of the needs, drives, motivations and interests of individual learners in their social context will make informed decisions for setting the aims and objectives of language learning and teaching, and it is rich in references to the needs of both learners and society (i.e., the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe). The Council recognises herein that there exist different contexts of language use (e.g., the educational domain), but no decisive steps have been taken towards a detailed specification of needs in academic contexts beyond the study statements set by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (“ALTE study statements”) and contained in Appendix D (see CEFR, pp.244–257). The “educational domain” involves different locations (e.g., laboratories, seminar rooms), institutions (e.g. college, learned societies), persons (e.g., teaching or library staff), objects (e.g., writing material, computers), events (e.g., visits and exchanges), operations (e.g., debates, tutorials), and texts (e.g., reference books, journal articles).

The specific adaptation of CEFR descriptors to EAP courses has been scarcely explored, although some initiatives have been taken. An example is to be found in the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), where teachers of all academic languages (not only EAP) have worked together to adapt levels A2–C2 for language learners in academic settings, and provide descriptors for spoken interaction and production, reading, writing, and communication strategies (see https://kielikeskus.jyu.fi/opetus/englanti/proficiency-level-descriptions-1/assessmentcriteria). Also, Räsänen (2008, p.266) sketches the general and specific competences to be attained by graduates in terms of language and information management skills, and exemplifies how the CEFR contributes to the development of a macro-level approach that integrates language, learning and discipline-specific communication skills in academic contexts. Last, and still under development, is MAGICC (Modularising Multilingual and Multicultural Academic Communication Competence), a project of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme, which aims at providing “transnational tools for integrating academic and professional communication competences, intercultural and lifelong learning skills and competences as part of students’ academic profile” (www.unil.ch/magicc/home.html).

In Spain, Durán et al. (2009) have developed the Academic and Professional European Language (ACPEL) Portfolio, an English–Spanish version of the English Language Portfolio for use both in a higher education and in a professional environment. Its main contribution lies in the academic and professional bank of descriptors arranged by communicative skills that, as an appendix, supplement the work. Thanks to this bank of descriptors it is possible to list a number of needs and sub-needs that enhance the “can-dos”, competences and profiles established in the original CEFR and that are specific to the academic context.

The CEF Professional Profiles, an action-oriented evidence-based approach to needs analysis from the tenets of the CEFR developed by Huhta et al. (2013), are also significant to this chapter because, even though they do not address EAP needs directly, they can serve
as a model for providing hands-on assistance when conducting a needs analysis that deals with the demands of academic communication. The Profiles take the task to be performed by individuals as the primary unit of needs analysis (a way forward in the direction of Long’s (2005) claim) together with the needs of experienced professionals and society. The framework, guidelines and detailed instructions provided show the flexibility of the process and can be very purposeful if attempting to create CEFR-based profiles in the academic context (e.g., CEF Academic Profiles) which may be applicable across different cultures and educational systems under the EHEA scheme.

The contribution of needs analysis to quality assurance

Many scholars (Basturkmen, 2010, 2013; Belcher, 2006, 2009; Brown, 2009; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hyland, 2006; or Jordan, 1997) have for some time advocated the continuous examination of needs in ESP/EAP courses to assess learning, narrow down the focus of instruction, revise content and refine the existing course. This view of needs analysis as a dynamic, on-going process rooted in course and programme evaluation that is “negotiated by learners, other community members, and instructors” (Belcher, 2006, p.137) lies at the forefront of quality assurance procedures, and shows a window of opportunity for integrating quality assurance mechanisms into institutional quality frameworks and strengthening the accountability-driven performance of education.

The international association EAQUALS (Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services) shows particular concern about the identification of learners’ needs, and notes the diagnosis and revision of course participants’ needs as one of the main focus points in the inspection process (eaquals.org). It also emphasises that teachers should be professionally prepared to conduct needs analyses and provided with support to ensure that the teaching process addresses those needs – the role of EAP teachers as needs analysts or assessors and already discussed in Table 42.1. Also, LANQUA (Language Network for Quality Assurance) offers guidance on the ways quality assurance processes can enhance language learning quality (www.lanqua.eu).

Quality means “client satisfaction”; therefore, quality management procedures “need to take greater account of client needs” and reconcile the needs of all stakeholders (i.e., clients) in language education (Heyworth, 2013, p.292). Quality practices are in line with the tenets of critical EAP (CEAP) and the “rights analysis” trend (Benesch, 2001) whereby education is more participatory, and students are active agents in an academic community who can challenge the conventions of EAP courses and collaborate in negotiating its development. A quality assurance approach supervises whether, to what extent, teaching materials etc. have been developed in relation to learning objectives, and whether, and to what extent, these learning objectives have been attained and, therefore, whether, and to what extent, students’ needs have been covered. If the outcome of a needs analysis is used as a basis for critical reflection about teaching (which indeed it is – see “lessons learned” in Table 42.1), this reflective practice contributes, by implication, to linking theory and practice, improving the quality of teaching and helping teachers to achieve professional growth (Heyworth, 2013).

There have been some attempts to link quality assurance to needs analysis in a coherent and profitable manner for ESP/EAP settings. The QALSPELL (Quality Assurance in Languages for Specific Purposes) project, for instance, aims at providing employers with the mechanisms for identifying employees’ specific foreign language needs (www.qalspell.ttu.ee/). For the particular case of EAP, Riley (2012) explores the ways needs analysis matches a quality culture. She contends that learners should voice their real needs because
they have “an important part to play in the quality model cycle” (p.57), and argues for (i) a continual dialogue with present and past students and language and content teachers; (ii) a reflective-practice quality model and, most importantly; (iii) a continual analysis of needs, before, during (in itinere) and after the course. Other initiatives such as Crawford Camiciottoli’s (2010), whereby post-sojourn interviews were held among out-going Italian Erasmus students who had attended a pre-departure English lecture comprehension course tailored to their particular needs, or Pérez-Llantada’s (2010) implementation of a small-scale management system for quality assurance in a Master’s EAP course, demonstrate that there is concern in the field with quality practices and that it is possible to develop a quality culture in EAP courses.

In their analysis of student perceptions of programme quality of a Master’s degree, Bardi and Muresan (2012, p.15) underscore that student evaluation of programmes is a key indicator of quality because “students have a chance to re-examine their learning objectives and to reflect on their own performance and development”. Additionally, this will provide teachers and course designers with the opportunity to change initial objectives, identify new goals and pinpoint changes to the programme. The process approach outlined is illustrated in Figure 42.3.

Needs analysis dynamics is a driver for (self-)evaluation, progress monitoring and decision-making both during and after the course in the EAP context (see Figure 42.3). Course and materials are re-evaluated in terms of on-going needs analysis procedures and the summative evaluation carried out during the life of a course can be used to modify and fine-tune what is being done. Bardi and Muresan (2012) decided to open channels for feedback and carried out semi-structured interviews that provided them with suggestions for future action and changes to the course programme. For one of these scholars, learners’ language learning needs, interests and expectations have undergone clear changes over the last ten
years, and this trend should not be overlooked by professionals involved in the management of the quality assurance systems (Muresan, 2011).

Small-scale studies or pilot initiatives, such as those above together with the latest research (see again Table 42.1), attest that “[e]ven after an ESP course ends, there is good reason for needs analysis to continue” (Belcher, 2009, p.6), and that the continual assessment of learner and target needs may be a valuable quality assurance tool to take informed decisions on the efficacy of EAP educational practices in higher education. Within this framework, needs analysis becomes a measure for accrediting quality in the EAP context, a timely instrument by which quality can be applied in language teaching, and clients’ (students’ and other stakeholders’) satisfaction fulfilled.

Further reading

Brown (2009); Flowerdew (2013); Long (2005)

Related chapters

40 EAP management
41 EAP teacher development
43 EAP materials and tasks

References

Needs analysis for curriculum design


Chowdhury, T.A. & Haider, Md.Z. (2012) A need-based evaluation of the EAP courses for the pharmacy students in the University of Asia Pacific (UAP), Bangladesh. *Asian Social Science* 8(15), 93–107.


