

Determining Students' Language Needs in a Tertiary Setting

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This article reports on part of the findings of a large-scale investigation into the English language needs of students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The three main objectives of the research were to (1) identify students' perceptions of their language needs and wants, (2) discover how students rated their own competence in particular skills in the academic, professional, and social domains, and (3) determine the extent to which their opinions matched those of their English teachers. The study is based on a questionnaire survey of 701 tertiary learners and 47 English teachers at the university and forms a major part of the continual enquiry into the specific language needs of the university student population.

This article describes the research study and reports some of the significant findings. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings in the dynamic process of English language curriculum planning, syllabus review, and materials writing.

Background

Language curriculum development often starts with determining how syllabus design can address the specific needs and wants of learners. The learners are often seen as the best judges of their own needs and wants because they know what they can and cannot do with the target language and what language skills are most essential.

In 1996 a large-scale English language needs analysis was undertaken at the Department of English of Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The study responded to the need for up-to-date descriptions of students' language needs and the provision of English programs that were relevant to the students' academic study and future careers. The study was designed to identify the language needs of undergraduates and to inform the syllabus rationalization and curriculum renewal of the department's English programs.

Courses taught by the Department of English

Since its formation, the Department of English has been offering English programs to all students (degree and nondegree) from the 25 different academic departments at the university. These departments are grouped into six faculties: applied science and textiles, business and information systems, communication, construction and land use, engineering, and health and social studies. The department's English language teaching is unique in that it is spread across the entire university. Students in all departments have to take one of the English programs offered by the Department of English sometime in their university study. It is precisely this university-wide provision of English language support that makes ongoing enquiry into the specific needs of students from different disciplines so important. Such research helps to inform continual curriculum review and materials writing.

Throughout the years, the English language curriculum has been regularly updated and revised, based on feedback obtained from both the students and the teachers. There have also been regular consultations with the other university departments on their expectations of the types of English programs that are practical and relevant to students in their specific disciplines.

English courses become credit-based

In 1996 the Department of English conducted a university-wide investigation of the English language needs of the undergraduate study body. The study was conducted in response to the university decision to move towards a credit-based system. Under a credit-based system, English courses would be compulsory to all students at the university. These courses would become credit-bearing, contributing to the final award of diplomas and degrees. In addition, different English programs would be offered to students from different years of study. It was also proposed that the English syllabi, the number of hours of English classes, and when the English programs took place in the course program would all be standardized to ensure parity.

The Department of English saw this as a useful opportunity to carry out a broad review of all its English language courses. Because the credit-based system would standardize curricula and assessment throughout the university, it thus required the university to introduce common core language materials. Three draft English programs were proposed and developed. They were English for academic purposes, English at the workplace, and English for professional purposes, which students would take in their first, second, and final years of university study, respectively.

These English programs were designed to accommodate the different language needs of students at different levels of study. The syllabi drawn up provided the framework for teaching, learning, and materials writing specific to students' academic disciplines. Furthermore, the Department of English set up a materials development unit whose brief was to (1) investigate syllabus rationalization, (2) streamline the writing of course syllabi, and (3) co-ordinate the writing and development of relevant teaching and learning materials.

The research study

This study was one of a series of full-scale syllabus and materials validation projects conducted by the Department of English in 1996. The other studies included a materials evaluation study, a learner preferences study, a peer assessment study, and a written corpus study. These studies, taken together, aimed at eliciting information on students' needs and preferences to contribute to syllabus design, materials development, and renewal of the English language curriculum in the university. It was felt that the data collected was also likely to be useful for English course designers and teachers at other Hong Kong tertiary institutions.

Design of the questionnaire survey

The present study used a questionnaire survey of 701 undergraduates from all departments in the university and 47 teachers from the Department of English. There were two questionnaires, one for the students and a parallel one for the English teachers. Together they identified the gaps between the teachers' views of their students' language needs and the students' views of their own needs.

The student questionnaire was first piloted on 71 first-year students from four university departments: accounting, clothing studies, electrical engineering, and social work. After the students had completed the questionnaire, they commented on the questionnaire design, content, wording, and layout. Their comments, together with the feedback from the English teachers, was fed into the preparation of the final questionnaire. Follow-up interviews with both groups yielded further input for the analysis of the research findings.

Structure of the questionnaire

The pilot student questionnaire took 15 minutes to complete. It focused on five areas: (1) the student's background, (2) the student's reasons for studying English, (3) the importance of particular language skills in the personal, academic, and professional domains, (4) a self-rating of perceived ability, (5) a rating of how much emphasis should be given in class to particular language skills, and had an open-ended section. The teacher questionnaire contained the same categories as the student questionnaire, but the item stem was different. For example, instead of "I need English for...", the stem read, "Students need English for...."

Each section of the questionnaire served a unique purpose. The background section established a student profile for the study. In the second section, students were asked to rate nine common reasons for studying English as "not important at all," "quite important," "important," and "very important."¹ Some of the reasons reflected an instrumental motivation (for example, for one's career) while others suggested an integrative motivation for language learning (for example, for interacting with English-speaking people). Students were then asked to rate the importance of the four language skills. The stem read, "How important are the following skills to you (personally, academically, and professionally)?" See the sample in figure 1 below.

The next question asked respondents to rate the importance of a range of specific tasks in the personal, academic, and professional domains. In the section on self-rating of language ability, the stem read, "How would you rate yourself in terms of the following skills?" See the sample in figure 2 below.

Students were also asked how much attention each of 17 language activities should receive in the English class: "a lot of emphasis," "some emphasis," "little emphasis," or "none." Finally, in a section of open-ended questions, students were asked what they would like to see included in the English class and the types of problems that they encountered in learning English. They were invited to provide suggestions and comments on the design of the final questionnaire.

The full-scale questionnaire survey

After the pilot questionnaire was revised, the final questionnaire was administered to 701 students (in their first, second, or third year of study) and 47 English teachers. To obtain the views of other academic staff in the university, the department also sent the questionnaire to 30 program coordinators from the other departments. This third component attempted to find out the similarities and differences between the program coordinators' views of their students' English language needs, the views of their students, and the views of English teachers.

The students completed the questionnaire, which took 15 minutes, in one of their English classes. The questionnaire survey was followed up by semi-structured interviews with students, the English teachers, and the other departments' program coordinators to probe into the research findings.

Findings and implications

This discussion focuses on students' responses in two main areas: (1) their language needs and (2) their self-rating of competence in the four language skills.

Student perceptions of needs and competence

In the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to assess the importance of a number of subskills in the four language skills in these three domains: academic studies, future profession, and social and private life. They rated on a six-point Likert scale with the following descriptors: 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = very important, 4 = not very important, 5 = unimportant and 6 = don't know.

Table 1 below shows the subskills that the majority of respondents considered "very important" or "important" but in which they ranked themselves as either "not very good" or even "poor."

Teacher perceptions of needs and competence

Table 2 below shows the subskills that language teachers perceived as "very important" or "important" but in which they found the students' abilities to be "not very good" or even "poor."

Comparing students and teachers' views

It would appear from the above findings that there was some consistency of response between students and English teachers. Both groups perceived a number of subskills as important while rating the students' abilities in these areas lower than in other areas. For academic studies, these activities included reading magazines and periodicals and speaking at seminars and meetings. For use in future professions, activities included listening and speaking at conferences and listening on the telephone.

The post-questionnaire interviews with both students and teachers confirmed this. In their interviews, most students admitted that they could not easily express themselves in English, frequently failed to communicate effectively, and lacked confidence in using English. One of the major areas of concern for both students and the English teachers was to improve the ability to communicate orally for academic and professional purposes.

Students also identified several problems that constrained their learning of English, including thinking in Cantonese, the lack of opportunity to speak English, their lack of confidence when speaking English, weak vocabulary development (for example, in technical English), and difficulty in getting their meaning across to the listener.

From the teachers' and program coordinators' interview responses, similar problems were identified. They could be divided into the following eight areas. Quotations from the interviews are included.

- General learning preferences
"Fossilized learning habits from the local education system are a big problem."
- Total learning environment
"Students don't have the opportunity to interact with English speakers."
"Students lack the chance to use English outside the classroom."
- Mother-tongue interference
"Students tend to think in their mother tongue. This imposes substantial interference."
"They are still writing English using a lot of Chinese sentence patterns."
- Student motivation
"Students generally are not particularly motivated to read English newspapers and magazines or watch English TV programmes."
"Students are not diligent enough in learning English."
"Students lack motivation and awareness for self-improvement."
- Student autonomy
"They lack the skills to learn independently."
- Readiness for risk-taking in language learning
"Students are afraid of making mistakes in front of their peers."
- Confidence in using English
"Students find it hard to write concisely and confidently in English."
- General language standard
"Their English language standard is generally poor."

In light of the study findings, it is reasonable to suggest that priority should be placed on four broad areas: (1) improving listening and speaking skills for conferences and seminars, (2) building vocabulary especially within the students' academic disciplines, (3) building confidence, and (4) raising students' motivation in language learning. It is essential to continue to provide students with practice and training in these problem areas to help them develop their skills.

Conclusion

The needs analysis project revealed that students have definite opinions about their abilities in the various language skills, and they are able to assess the importance of related subskills to their academic study, future profession, and social life. The data helped to contextualize how teaching and learning should take place and thereby increased the likelihood that the English courses will be perceived as relevant and practical.

This type of study should be conducted continually, rather than only in the initial stages of course planning or curriculum renewal. Recently, the university's English Language Centre (the former Department of English) has conducted another full-scale needs analysis on English language use in the professional workplace in Hong Kong to inform its English in the workplace courses for the second-year student population. Obviously, the English language needs of the

student body of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University will continue to pose a considerable challenge to English teaching professionals at the university in the years to come.

Bibliography

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Figure 1

	Personally	Academically	Professionally
a. speaking	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
b. writing	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
c. reading	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
d. listening	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4

(1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = quite important, 4 = not very important)

Figure 2

	Poor	Not very good	Quite good	Good	Very good
Speaking English					
a. socially	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
b. in your studies	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Table 1

ACADEMIC STUDIES	FUTURE PROFESSION
Reading magazines, periodicals	legal documents company brochures company regulations
Listening to the radio	to the radio, TV programs to video, films at meetings, conferences on the telephone
Speaking with lecturers at conferences, seminars, and meetings	on the telephone at conferences, seminars, and meetings
Writing with lecturers at conferences, seminars, and meetings	letters, newsletters memos, minutes, agenda, notices, faxes, instruction booklets, user manuals, legal documents, company brochures

Table 2

ACADEMIC STUDIES	FUTURE PROFESSION
Reading newspaper, magazines, periodicals examination papers	e-mail messages, on the Internet faxes instruction booklets
Listening at meetings	while working overseas at conferences on the telephone
Speaking at seminars, meetings	at conferences
Writing notes	faxes

¹ In this article and the questionnaire, "quite" (e.g., quite good, quite important) is used to mean "somewhat". This diverges from the typical American use of "quite" as a synonym for "very"..