

English Learner Needs Analysis: A Case Study of Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (BIPT)

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Abstract

This is a case study of Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (BIPT) on the subject of English learner needs analysis. The aim of this study is to investigate the English learner needs of Chinese college students, trying to find out their learning style, skills priorities, current deficiency, and alternative methodologies. A total of 141 college students from 6 departments studying at BIPT participated in the questionnaire. 12 of them participated in the structured interview. The methods of this needs analysis are as follows: the tests of placement, observation of classes, questionnaires, structured interviews, and network based interviews (i.e. chatting with the interviewees on internet).

Keywords: need analysis, target-situation analysis, deficiency analysis, strategy analysis

1. Introduction

The term “analysis of needs” was originated by Dr. Michael Philip West (1888 – 1973), who was an English language teacher and researcher working extensively in India in the mid-1900s. He asked why learners should learn English and how they should learn English. His answer was that the learners should learn English through reading and the purpose of learning English was to read. The concept of needs analysis was developed because of the works of the Council of Europe and works in ESP (English for Special purposes) in 1970’s¹. Since 1980’s, different concepts of needs analysis have emerged, including target-situation needs analysis, deficiency needs analysis, strategy needs analysis, means analysis, language audits, set-menu needs analysis, computer-based needs analysis, etc. The methods of needs analysis are also of variety, i.e., pre-course placement /diagnostic tests, entry test on arrival, self-placement/self-diagnostic tests, observation of classes, questionnaires, structured interviews, learner’s diaries, case studies, final evaluation/feedback, and previous research, according to Jordan².

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2. A Case Study of BIPT

2.1 Target-situation needs analysis

There is a consensus in that the target situation represents the destination of the learners’ language-learning journey. These needs can also be called “necessities” or “objective needs”. In China, *College English Curriculum Requirements* is taken as the basic rules according to which the language requirements of the target situation can be identified.

¹ Ron Howard, Gillian Brown (eds) (1997) *Teacher Education for Languages for Specific Purpose*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

² Jordan, R. (1997) *English for Academic Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

In accordance to this document, “the objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges.”³

As we all known, China is a country with the largest population in the world and conditions of economic and educational development vary from region to region and from college to college. It is rather impossible to force the teaching of College English should follow the same principle. The universities/colleges therefore need to provide different guidance for different groups of students and instruct them in accordance with their aptitude so as to meet the specific needs of individualized teaching.

Taking into consideration the new developments of higher education in China, the government establishes the requirements for undergraduate College English teaching, which set at three levels, i.e., basic requirements, intermediate requirements, and higher requirements. Every non-English major has to attain to one of the three levels of requirements after studying and practicing English at school. In the light of the specific circumstances of BIPT, what are the objectives should be set and what kind of conditions should be create to enable the students to meet the basic requirement, intermediate or even advanced requirements? These are the questions to be answered in this study.

Before the participants began their English course in college, they had to take a test of placement, evaluating their English proficiency and capacity. The students would be placed to two different classes of two levels (level A and level B). Among the 141 participants, 97 of them scored at least 48 against the full score of 100 in the pre-course placement /diagnostic test. And 9 of them got more than 60. These 97 students were placed to A-class. The other participants come from B-class. A-class students are required to study college English for one year and a half, while B-class students are require to study college English for two years. Both class students are required to meet the basic *College English Curriculum Requirements* issued by Ministry of Education of P. R. China after their studying at school (See the appendix).

2.2 Deficiency needs analysis

Deficiency analysis proposed by Allwright in 1982⁴, referring to the difference between the student's present competence and the desired competence. This concept was later developed by West and Jordan, who believe that deficiency analysis should provide data about both the gap between present and target extra linguistic knowledge, mastery of general English, language skills, and learning strategies⁵. With the help of the test of placement and the teachers’ observations, we have got a relatively clear picture of the BIPT students’ present language proficiency. The following task is to find out what the learners lack and thus, estimate the “learning gap”.

In this study, we made structured interviews and network-based interviews about what the students lack in learning English. The students participating in the interviews come from 6 different majors and should be divided into two groups. Group 1 is composed of 6 A-class students and Group 2 is composed of 6 A-class students. We purposefully chose the students from different levels because awareness of needs could vary depending on students' level and advancement in the major. The result of the interviews suggests that there was a variation in student participants’ responses as to English learning.

Listening: A-class students find listening vital to their English studies. They can generally be able to follow talks and lectures in English. They are interested in English radio and TV programs like Good morning America, VOA and BBC. If the topics are familiar and the speed is “reasonable”, (for instance, the speed of VOA special English is considered acceptable for them), they are able to grasp the main ideas, key points and relevant details. They are also fascinated by the Hollywood movies and pop-music in the West. B-class students find listening comprehension ability a big headache.

³ *College English Curriculum Requirements* (2007) issued by Ministry of Education of P. R. China,

⁴ Allwright, R. (1982). Perceiving and pursuing learners' needs. In M. Geddes and G. Sturtridge (Ed.), *Individualiation* (pp. 24-31). Oxford: Modern English Publications.

⁵ Jordan, R. R. (1997). *English for academic purposes: A guide and resource book for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

They are not able to follow talks and lectures in English and express their lack of interest in English radio and TV programs. “Without the scripts, I can understand nothing. English TV programs and movies can be entertaining, but they will not be helpful to improve my listening.” A student from B-class said in dismay.

Speaking: A-class students express their strong eager to speak fluent English. They want to clearly express their personal opinions, feelings and views, to state facts and reasons, and to describe events in English. They are ashamed of “Chinglish” (i. e. English with a strong Chinese dialect.) They want to speak English with clear articulation and basically correct pronunciation and intonation. Though fully aware of the importance of spoken English, B-class students show relatively lower interests in it. They can accept “mute” English (i.e. lack of ability to speak English) since oral English will not be in College English Test in China.

Reading and Writing: Both A-class students and B-class students find reading and writing significant in their English learning. Still, differences can be distinguished between the two groups. A-class students are not satisfied to read materials in the text books. They are more interests in English articles in newspaper, internet and even some best sellers which are now accessible in big bookstores in Beijing. B-class students still read English articles and passages from their text books or test papers. A-class students have commanded basic writing strategies and are able to write well-knitted composition to express their ideas or describe their feeling, experiences and etc. They are willing to write and practice under the instructions of their teachers. B-class students feel writing a big burden for them. “Normally, I will first write the article in Chinese and then, translated into English.” A B-class interviewee said so.

Vocabulary: Concerning the importance of vocabulary, student participants unanimously said that it is important to enlarge their vocabulary. A-class students are able to learn new words not only from their text books, but also from English radio and TV programs, newspaper articles and some other resources. B-class students mainly pick up new words and phrases from text book and vocabulary handbooks. They may be able to comprehend these words, but not competent to use them when expressing themselves in speaking or writing. In this sense, enlarging vocabulary is not equivalent to enriching word power.

While holding the conversations with B-class students, many of them stress on the importance of teaching management. Some students, through self-diagnosis, believe that they are lack of autonomy in learning English and suggest the teachers should be stricter with them. Teachers are suggested to check students’ oral and written assignments individually and “punish” those who could not finish on time. What’s more, many B-class students claim they still learn English in the textbook-based approaches, not in the autonomous approaches.

2.3 Strategy needs analysis

Strategy analysis is about the approaches to learning or teaching and sets out the learners’ preferences in terms of learning styles and strategies, or teaching methods. In order to get scientific data, we made a questionnaire among a total of 141 college students from 6 departments studying at BIPT, ranging from freshmen to senior students.

Questions and answers on teaching methods can be found in the following table:

Table of Teaching Methods		
Do you think College English classes should be delivered in English?		
Absolutely, College English classes should be delivered in English completely	50	36.2%
No, I can't understand if so	19	13.7%
College English classes should be delivered in English and in Chinese both	69	50.0%
What do you think is the most important element that attracts you in an English class?		
Active atmosphere in class	60	43.4%
Exquisite Multimedia Courseware	5	3.6%
Rich educational content	69	50.0%
No comments	4	2.8%
What do you think is the most acceptable and rewarding teaching style?		
Teacher-centered style	63	45.6%
Student-centered style	71	51.4%
No comments	4	2.8%
Which one of the following should be stressed in a reading and writing class?		
Vocabulary (pronunciation and usage)	24	17.3%
Text (content and structure)	25	18.1%
grammar (lexical and sentence)	18	13.0%
Actual ability	71	51.4%
The most acceptable teaching method in a listening class is:		
Autonomous learning	55	39.2%
Teachers play the recording and explain	85	60.7%

According to the results of the questionnaire, the students are lack of autonomy in language learning and still rely on their students to learn English; Up to 45.6% of the students take teacher-centered style as their most acceptable and rewarding teaching style. 60.7% of the students prefer teachers play the recording and explain the listening materials for them rather than autonomous learning. Moreover, the majority of the students do not expect teachers to deliver the course in English completely. 50% of them prefer teachers speak Chinese and English both in class. 13.7% of them even believe teaching English in English is not necessary. In addition, active atmosphere in class (43.4%) and rich educational content (50%) are the two key elements that attract students in class. Last but not the least, up to 51.4% of the students realize learning English is for the purpose of using it, not just passing exams.

As to learning strategies, the majority of the students show great enthusiasm in taking notes in lectures (78.2%), participating oral English activities (89.8%) and other in-class activities (91.3%). But they are quite reluctant to recite passages of the text, 34.0% of them will do the recitation from time to time and 17.3% of them will not recite at all. Only 14.4% of students will do after-class exercises, which also approve that students have certain difficulties in learning independently.

Table of Learning strategy					
	Taking notes in lectures	Reciting some passages of the text	Participating oral English activities	Participating other in-class activities	Doing after-class exercises
Yes	78.2%	48.5%	89.8%	91.3%	14.4%
No	3.6%	17.3%	10.1%	8.6%	1.4%
Sometimes	18.1%	34.0%			84.0%

3. Summary and Conclusion

The case study of BIPT has focused on students' learning destination, learning style, skills priorities, current deficiency, and alternative methodologies. In this research, three needs analysis has been made, i.e. situation needs analysis, deficiency needs analysis and strategy needs analysis. We found that students in BIPT, due to different level of language proficiency, need different time length and fostering/teaching plan to reach the learning destination which is the basic *College English Curriculum Requirements* issued by Ministry of Education of P. R. China.

A-class students and B-class students show different deficiency in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Many students (especially those with inferior language capacity) in BIPT are still lack of autonomy in learning English and their learning styles are still passive and textbook-based. Concerning the effective methods to foster autonomy, teachers still have a long way to go. Although we have made efforts to address the issue of needs analysis, we still know relatively little about what students' needs are and how to meet students' needs. The opportunities for researchers to contribute to this issue are many.

Appendix

The basic College English Curriculum Requirements issued by Ministry of Education of P. R. China in 2007

Listening: Students should be able to follow classroom instructions, everyday conversations, and lectures on general topics conducted in English. They should be able to understand English radio and TV programs spoken at a speed of about 130 to 150 words per minute (wpm), grasping the main ideas and key points. They are expected to be able to employ basic listening strategies to facilitate comprehension.

Speaking: Students should be able to communicate in English in the course of learning, to conduct discussions on a given theme, and to talk about everyday topics in English. They should be able to give, after some preparation, short talks on familiar topics with clear articulation and basically correct pronunciation and intonation. They are expected to be able to use basic conversational strategies in dialogue.

Reading: Students should generally be able to read English texts on general topics at a speed of 70 wpm. With longer yet less difficult texts, the reading speed should be 100 wpm. Students should be able to do skimming and scanning. With the help of dictionaries, they should be able to read textbooks in their areas of specialty, and newspaper and magazine articles on familiar topics, grasping the main ideas and understanding major facts and relevant details. They should be able to understand texts of practical styles commonly used in work and daily life. They are expected to be able to employ effective reading strategies while reading.

Writing: Students should be able to complete writing tasks for general purposes, e.g., describing personal experiences, impressions, feelings, or some events, and to undertake practical writing. They should be able to write within 30 minutes a short composition of no less than 120 words on a general topic, or an outline. The composition should be basically complete in content, clear in main idea, appropriate in diction and coherent in discourse. Students are expected to be able to have a command of basic writing strategies.

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