Investigating the English Language Needs of Students at the University of Zilina

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Abstract: This paper focuses on investigating the needs of students of ESP courses at the University of Zilina via needs analysis questionnaire. The results of the research reveal the necessity to reconsider the content of the study material at language courses at the university to satisfy the students' subject needs as well as the needs of the international job market by implementing activities enhancing the communicative competence in ESP.

Key words: needs analysis questionnaire, ESP courses, the communicative competence.

A needs analysis plays an important role in any course design, whether for ESP or any kind of language course. It is believed that to ensure successful teaching outcome, it is essential to involve the needs and goals of both teacher and student for mutual benefits of both parties. Ignoring the learners' needs, the effectiveness of the course is being diminished. At the university the teaching curriculum is established more on what the students need to learn rather than on what they wish to learn (learners' view of learning). In the Songhori's work (2008, p. 12) on needs analysis, he quotes R. L. Allwright who makes a distinction between needs, those which students believe to be relevant to themselves and those a student puts high priority on in a given time, and lacks as the difference between the students present competence and desired one. Apart from Strategy analysis, it is important to implement all the skills and systems of English in the teaching/learning process.

We believe that except the above mentioned, the ESP course should focus on the development of the communicative competence in all its sub-competences, including linguistic, pragmatic/sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence (Gondová – Šipošová, 2010, p. 35). Linguistic competence demonstrates knowledge of the

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language. Pragmatic (sociolinguistic) competence is the ability to perform a particular function or express an intention clearly. Discourse competence demonstrates the ability to understand coherent written texts or conversation and to produce them. Strategic competence is the ability of the speaker to use both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies which enable speakers to handle the breakdowns in communication and their lexico-grammatical inadequacies (Gondová – Šipošová, 2010, p. 35). All of the former facts should be taken into consideration when choosing or preparing materials for a classroom use.

We believe that the increasing necessity of the communication in English within the work process has changed the university students' needs and wants targeted on the demands of the work process. If so, these changes need to be done in designing the teaching curriculum of the foreign language courses at the university which has eventually become the idea of the presented research findings generally known as needs analysis questionnaire.

1   Current situation

The main objective of the English language courses of the technical study programs at the University of Zilina is to develop and expand vocabulary within the technical context supported by the development of reading and writing skills. The course includes translations of texts on technical topics as well. Our experience shows that this conception is not effective and we often have to face the discrepancy between the objectives of the course and students' expectations and wants. The expansion of the vocabulary range does not ensure the success in communication at a workplace. Therefore, it is important to implement all the skills and systems of the English language in the teaching/learning process of technically-oriented or management-oriented students as mentioned in the introduction. At present, various materials and communication techniques serving the purposes of communicative learning are available. However, our students do not get in touch with them in the classroom management process because they are overloaded with the materials containing technical vocabulary for memorization and texts for translation. Some of the courses have already been "modernized" by incorporating course books that enhance speaking and communication. Currently, there are the attempts to adapt the out-of-date materials so that they satisfy the above mentioned desires for communication.

2   The objectives of the questionnaire

Having followed the theory about the strategy needs analysis and the development of the communicative competence, we have conducted the research to find out to what

extent the English language courses satisfy the needs of students of technical and management programs at the University of Zilina, that would provide us with the information about the necessary changes within the curriculum to be taken. The data for the research were collected via a subject needs analysis questionnaire distributed to 561 students from all the faculties of the University of Zilina at the end of the summer term in the academic year of 2009/2010. In this paper, only the responses of students in technical and management programs have been taken into consideration. The evaluation was carried out on the basis of responses of 506 students, out of which 261 represent the undergraduates of the management-oriented bachelor study programs and 245 undergraduates of technically-oriented bachelor study programs.

We compiled the information from the targeted technically-oriented undergraduates of the faculties listed below:
- Faculty of Civil Engineering;
- Faculty of Mechanical Engineering;
- Faculty of Electrical Engineering;
- Faculty of Management Science and Informatics;
- Faculty of Operation and Economics of Transport and Communications (Railway Transport, Waterway transport, Road and Urban Transport, Air Transport, Postal Services).

From the management-oriented fields, undergraduates of the following faculties were involved:
- Faculty of Special Engineering
  (Security Management, Crisis Management);
- Faculty of Operation and Economics of Transport and Communications (E-commerce, Business Economics and Management).

The questionnaire consisted of 11 multiple choice questions with the intention to find the areas of language students feel they have problems with (skills and systems), then to draw out any kinds of activities they neglect most in lessons or of which they would like to implement more. Additionally, students were provided a choice of future applications of the English language to choose from formulated in target-orientated statements such as what areas of their work would require the use of English language knowledge and skills or whether students are satisfied with the number of English lessons per week. To ensure that no other needs relevant to the respondents were left out an open question asking for any suggestions or recommendations for changes in the English language courses was included at the end.

3   The hypotheses

Prior to conducting the research, our hypothesis had been formulated as follows.

1. As far as language skills are concerned, we presume that students will mostly report the greatest problems with speaking followed by listening.
2. We expect that students will place grammar as the most problematic one out of systems.
3. We suppose students will realize the necessity of the English language for their future employment.
4. We strongly believe that students will state the application of their language skills mostly in oral communication with customers and business management, in business negotiations and in everyday communication.
5. We suppose that most students wish to increase the amount of speaking activities of various kinds, such as conversations with the focus on professional vocabulary practice for the needs of future professions or conversations on general vocabulary practice.
6. We expect the students' satisfaction with the number of English language lessons per week.

4   Research findings

After the analysis of the answers from the questionnaire, the overall results of all the respondents as a group who represent the greatest problems with English language skills are presented first, followed by the results for two subgroups representing the management-oriented students and the students of technical courses as displayed in Table 1. The contents of the questionnaire and the results are as follows:

Question 1
From the following English language skills, I have the greatest problem with
    a. writing
    b. reading
    c. listening
    d. speaking

From the statistical results it is seen that 47.8 % of all students report speaking as the skill that causes the greatest problems to them. The second place was taken by listening (24.6 %) and the third one by writing (16.9 %). Among the management-oriented courses, the final figure was slightly lower than among students of technical courses which may have been influenced by better communication competence which the

management-oriented students adopted from their secondary school. Although in both groups it was the highest number. Refer to Table 1.
The figures have supported our hypothesis no.1.

	Students of management-oriented courses [%]	Students of technical courses [%]	$\sum$
writing	14.9	20.4	16.9
reading	13.8	7.3	10.7
listening	30.3	18.0	24.6
speaking	41.0	54.3	47.8

Table 1   *From the following English skills, I have the greatest problem with*

Question 2
From the following, I have the greatest problem with
    a. grammar
    b. vocabulary
    c. pronunciation

Question 2 reflects on the overall results and the comparison of the figures of both subgroups in identifying the subjective problems of the students with writing, reading, listening and speaking. The figures are summed up in Table 2. There are 47.2 % of all students who chose grammar as the most problematic area from the systems (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation). However, we can see the difference between the two groups of students. Whereas the technical students reported the greatest problems with grammar, the management-oriented students stated vocabulary as the most problematic area (see Table 2). Hence, we can conclude that assumption no. 2 has not been confirmed.

	Students of management-oriented courses [%]	Students of technical courses [%]	$\sum$
grammar	39.5	52.7	47.2
vocabulary	52.9	36.7	45.3
pronunciation	7.7	10.6	7.5

Table 2   *From the following, I have the greatest problem with*

We can claim that the assumption no. 3 has been confirmed because 47.2 % of all students stated they would 'often' need to use English language in their profession and

hence we can say they realize that English language will be part of their professional life (see Table 3).

Question 3
How often do you think you will use English language in your profession?
      a. never
      b. rarely
      c. sometimes
      d. often
      e. very often, it will be an essential part of my work

	Students of management-oriented courses [%]	Students of technical courses [%]	Σ
never	0.4	0.8	0.5
rarely	2.7	1.2	2.3
sometimes	36.0	35.5	35.4
often	48.3	42.9	47.2
very often, it will be an essential part of my work	12.6	19.6	14.5

Table 3   *How often do you think you will use English language in your profession?*

Question 4
I suppose that in my profession I will mostly apply my English language skills

	Students of management-oriented courses [%]	Students of technical courses [%]	Σ [%]
a. in everyday communication	40.6	39.2	39.9
b. in written communication with customers and business management	47.5	37.6	42.7
c. in oral communication with customers and business management	51.7	44.9	48.4
d. in written expert communication	11.5	20.0	15.6

with colleagues from my field			
e. in oral expert communication with colleagues from my field	13.0	27.3	20.0
f. in writing reports	27.6	26.5	27.1
g. in reading professional journals	32.6	46.1	39.1
h. in giving presentations and taking part in conferences	29.9	29.4	29.6
i. in business negotiations	41.0	29.4	35.4
j. in technical support for customers	8.4	15.5	11.9
k. in communication with suppliers of goods and services	47.5	38.4	43.1

Table 4   *I suppose that in my profession I will mostly apply my English language skills*

The results (see Table 4) show that 48.4 % of all students stated they would need to apply their English language skills in oral communication with customers and business management. 43.1 % of the students thought they would apply it in communication with suppliers of goods and services and 42.7 % chose written communication with customers and business management option. As long as students were allowed to choose more options in this question, the hypothesis has only been confirmed in case of the option 'oral communication with customers and business management'. We cannot state perspicuous preference of any other option. Therefore we refer our readers to see Table 4 which contains the percentage of individual items. Still there are differences between the two groups which might be caused by the differences in the professional orientation of students.

Question 5
What are your expectations from the English language courses at the university?
In the course I would include more...

	Students of management-oriented courses [%]	Students of technical courses [%]	$\sum$ [%]
a. written tasks on general vocabulary	40.2	30.2	35.4
b. written tasks on professional vocabulary	23.8	32.2	27.9
c. tasks for practicing pronunciation	15.3	15.5	15.4
d. written grammatical tasks	22.6	30.2	26.3

e. listening activities	51.7	40.0	46.0
f. reading tasks on general topics	20.3	17.6	19.0
g. reading tasks on professional topics	17.6	29.4	23.3
h. conversations focused on general vocabulary practice	63.6	53.5	58.7
i. conversations on professional vocabulary practice for the needs of future profession	40.6	47.3	43.9
j. writing activities for improving writing skills	16.1	18.0	17.0

Table 5   *What are your expectations from the English language courses at the university? In the course I would include more...*

The results in Table 5 show that 58.7 % of all students would like to practice more conversations focused on general vocabulary practice, 46.0 % would like to practice more listening activities and 43.9 % would include conversations on professional vocabulary practice for the needs of their future profession. However, hypothesis no. 5 has been confirmed as long as the option h) was mostly preferred.

Question 6
Would you like the number of English language lessons per week to be
      a. increased
      b. reduced
      c. unchanged

As we assumed 54.5 % of all students did not report desire to change the number of language lessons per week. Surprisingly, the number of students who would like to increase the number of language lessons represented 42.3 % of all students (see Table 6). Therefore we cannot definitely state that the hypothesis no. 6 has been confirmed, yet there is just an insignificant number of students who would like the number of English language lessons per week to be reduced and that is a positive signal towards English language education at the university.

	Students of management-oriented courses [%]	Students of technical courses [%]	∑ [%]
increased	45.2	39.2	42.3
reduced	3.1	3.3	3.2
unchanged	51.7	57.5	54.5

Table 6   Would you like the number of English language lessons per week to be ...

In the open question, students suggested various changes to be taken in the English courses which are offered. Provided below are some of the suggestions which were mentioned repeatedly:

- to reduce the number of students in English classes (note: number of students ranks from 15-30 at present);
- to divide students into groups according to the level of language on the basis of placement tests;
- to teach English language from the first year of study (note: most study programs provide English courses from the second year of bachelor's study);
- to invite native speakers to lead part of the course;
- to support communication with teachers outside the class in English;
- to include watching documentary films or videos in English;
- to practice situational conversations and solve model situations;
- to use authentic materials instead of course books;
- to educate English teachers in the field the students study;
- to practice grammar in oral/speaking activities;
- to support making presentations at lessons;
- to teach more of everyday English;
- to implement games into teaching/learning process;
- to include writing essays or some compositions;
- to prepare more demanding entrance exams;
- to give more credits for passing the English language course.

Conclusion

The results of the questionnaire and the answers of students ensured us that the conception of the English language education of technically-oriented and management-oriented study programs at the University of Zilina needs to be reconsidered and it should be prepared in order to satisfy both the needs of the international job market and the subjective needs of university learners. The change must be complex and it includes the organizational changes as well as changes in the contents of individual

language courses. Moreover, the materials used in the courses will have to be up-dated. All of these have to go hand in hand with the enhancement of the development of the communicative competence. To be able to achieve the suggestions mentioned above, we have to conduct research based on the similar subjective needs analysis questionnaire among professionals and to find out the differences between subjective needs of undergraduates and professionals.

Furthermore, in order to get the objective information, we will have to test the students of the University of Zilina to figure out the level of language they are at, so that the courses are in line with it as well. To conclude, we can only say that we urgently feel the need to up-date the content of the courses and materials as well as the methods used within.

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