EAP education in Iran: Where does the problem lie? Where are we heading?

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ABSTRACT

As a large-scale nation-wide triangulated project, the present study first aimed at investigating whether the perception of needs varied significantly from the viewpoints of EAP teachers, EAP students and syllabus designers. Second, the satisfaction rate of EAP students with EAP programmes was also surveyed. The study was additionally designed to observe (35) EAP courses to get a real picture of the status of EAP education in Iran. To these ends, two versions of the same questionnaire were distributed among the participants (i.e. 831 EAP students and 55 EAP teachers of the same classes) and their results were compared with the needs specified by thirty syllabi. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 students and 25 teachers. The data obtained were analysed both quantitatively using frequency, chi-square, and Kruskal-Wallis analyses, and qualitatively adopting content analysis. The results revealed the stakeholders involved had significantly different perceptions of needs. Reading comprehension, however, was perceived by all to be the main need of EAP students. Serious problems were raised by students and teachers regarding the sources, materials, students' general English proficiency level, duration and timing of the classes, motivation level of both students and teachers, etc. which are discussed in the paper.

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1. Introduction

ESP programme evaluation is a vital process which ensures materialisation of the goals of the course (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and its effectiveness (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Tsou and Chen (2014) emphasise the crucial role of programme evaluation in ESP arguing that the process "ensures adequate planning, implementation, and continuous improvement of the program" (p. 39). Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) highlight the social role programme evaluation plays in that all the parties involved (e.g., learners, teachers, syllabus designers, policy makers, etc.) could reveal ideas which might be of importance in the improvement of the course. Hence, it is essential to understand their views on what is needed or should be included in the programme and to compromise any discrepancies found in their views. Thus, the present study deals with evaluating EAP education programme, as a mainstream of English education, in general, in the context of

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Iran. However, before embarking on the issue, a definition of needs and an elaboration of needs analysis in EAP education, especially in partial fulfillment of the objectives of the study, are deemed essential.

1.1. What is meant by needs?

No unanimous consensus can be found in the literature of the field with respect to naming, conceptualising, defining, and interpreting needs, which might thus lead to different approaches to needs analysis. Berwick (1989), for instance, defines needs as "a gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state" (p. 52). Brindley (1989) also makes a distinction between the product-oriented view of needs in which needs are considered as what the learners have to do at the end of their language course (their job requirements for instance) and the process-oriented view of needs referring to what the learners need to do to learn the language.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) maintain there is a fundamental difference between target needs, by which they mean the activities learners have to do in the target situation (which is similar to the product-oriented perspective), and the learning needs being the things learners have to do to learn (which is in line with the process-oriented view above). They further divide the target needs into three groups of needs as necessities, lacks, and wants.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggest the three broad categories of target situation analysis (TSA), learning situation analysis (LSA), and present situation analysis (PSA), encompassing all the above-mentioned needs. They place objective, perceived, and product-oriented needs under TSA; subjective, felt, and process-oriented needs under LSA; and finally learners' strong and weak points in using a language as well as their learning experiences under present situation analysis. Given all these different definitions and conceptualisations, the direction of the present study is more congruent with the product-oriented or target needs type of needs analysis.

Brown (1995) defines needs analysis as the "systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation" (p. 36). It is a way of determining the learners' needs and then putting them in order of priority (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992). Likewise, for Bachman and Palmer (1996), needs analysis or needs assessment, as they call it, "involves the systematic gathering of specific information about the language needs of learners and the analysis of this information for purposes of language syllabus design" (p. 102).

1.2. The significance of needs analysis

The importance of needs analysis (NA) is now widely accepted by many scholars, and the literature abounds with studies accentuating the crucial role it plays in ESP (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002; Fulcher, 1999; Hyland, 2006; Read, 2008; Richards, 2001; West, 1984). Long (2005), for instance, notes that it is essential to design courses which are relevant to the needs of particular learners to make courses more efficient by directly addressing those particular needs, considering the limitations in the amount of time and resources available.

This paramount importance attached to NA may originate from several perspectives. First, as Brindley (1989) maintains, it is vital that in a learner-centred curriculum, students be consulted about their felt needs and interests, which, in turn, results in higher motivation on the part of the learners (Dooey, 2010). Belcher (2006, cited in Liu, Change, Yang, & Sun, 2011) argues that not only does this learner-centred perspective aid teachers and course designers to discern what learners' wants and wishes are, but it also gives learners a voice in choosing the content, thereby emboldening them to invest and participate more in the course. In addition, needs analysis can provide a basis for developing testing materials which are closely related to activities in real-world situations (Read, 2008). Fulcher (1999) also stresses the importance of needs analysis and the significant role it plays in language testing in that NA is considered to be highly related to content validity of tests. Further, NA is critical to task-based syllabi, since authentic target tasks can be identified through conducting an NA prior to the course (Long & Crookes, 1992). Finally, NA gains extra prominence particularly in ESP courses where there is especial concern for time, usefulness, and focus; or to quote Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 122) NA "is the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a very focused course".

1.3. Previous large-scale studies on needs analysis

It goes without saying that all language programmes and courses including ESP, EAP, or EGP are designed to gratify the various language needs of learners; hence, there are quite a few studies done worldwide to address the specific needs of the learners. For one, Liu et al. (2011) investigated the English needs of college students both in the settings of English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific/Academic Purposes. Adopting Hutchinson and Waters (1987) model of needs, they administered a questionnaire to 972 EFL college students from six different universities in Taiwan to identify their necessities, lacks, and wants in different language skills. Their results indicated that students had different views of these concepts in the language skills taught, and that there were differences between students' perceived needs and the course they took. In other words, as their results indicated "what students need is not always what they lack" (p. 276).

In another large-scale triangulated study including 4932 undergraduate students from 26 departments, Evans and Green (2007) investigated the language problems of Cantonese-speaking students at an English-medium university in Hong Kong.