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# A language needs analysis research at an English medium university in Turkey

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## Abstract

This study aimed to conduct a need analysis to examine the university students' needs for the innovation of the ELT curriculum of the preparatory-school of an English medium university in Istanbul. A triangulation research method was followed in the present study. The educational approach underpinning this method is constructivism. Data was collected by using two different instruments: semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The items in the questionnaires and interviews addressed different issues related with constructivism, in other words the focus was basically on the importance and effective use of learning strategies related to four basic language skills in second or foreign language learning.

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## 1. Literature review on needs analysis

The answer to how educators or practitioners develop effective curricula often lies in needs analysis. Needs analysis (NA) is a powerful tool that helps clarify and validate true needs. It enables educators and practitioners to shape the curriculum development that bases the content of language courses on the communication needs, wants and interests of the learners (Lepetit & Cichocki (2002). It ties learning as closely as possible to teaching (Grier, 2005), it leads educators and practitioners to provide better and more accessible sources for the students of the program concerned (Long, 2005).

It is surprising that, a small number research has been reported in the literature on NA itself, although its importance and usefulness has been acknowledged in the field of education. For instance, Grier (2005:65) attempted to integrate needs assessment with curriculum development. He states that :

“In order to develop curricula of quality, developers must have valid information on which to base their curricular decisions. The various methods of needs assessment are valuable tools that provide curriculum developers with this information. By incorporating needs assessments in their curricular decisions, curriculum developers can select options that benefit both the learners and society”.

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Lepetit & Cichocki (2002) conducted a needs analysis study with university students who were attending a language course and preparing to work as health professionals. The researchers have also emphasized that needs analysis/assessment is a potential and valuable source of information for designing curricula for health professionals based on learners' needs. In a different study, the English language needs and attitudes of a large population of students and faculty in Kuwait University's College of Petroleum towards English language, were investigated by utilizing needs analysis/assessment (Basturkmen, 1998). The results of this study supported the above results that needs analysis/needs assessment was a useful tool to collect information on students and/or faculty perceptions on students' language needs and on the relative importance of skills and sub-skills, faculty expectations of students' English language proficiency. For similar purposes, Beatty & Chan (1984) used needs analysis for their investigation with a group of graduate students in PRC (People's Republic of China). They investigated the students' English language needs before leaving China and then again after spending a year at US universities. The researchers suggested that NA could be a useful tool for collecting information from the subjects who could be excellent informants about the content of the language course or field of study.

In the NA literature, despite its fewness, the triangulation process has started to take different forms and received attention from the NA researchers recently (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; Grier, 2005; Basturkmen, 1998). In the present study, triangulation of different methods was used to obtain information from a large number of university students and to validate the data. Within the light of results of the previous studies in the NA literature, and following a multi-method approach to data collection, we aimed to get a better understanding of the language needs for academic needs of a Turkish university students in an English medium university, in Istanbul, Turkey.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Research design*

The educational approach underpinning the methodology of the research is constructivism. From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is the result of an individual subject's constructive activity, not a commodity that somehow resides outside the knower and can be conveyed or distilled by diligent perception or linguistic communication (von Glaserfeld, 1998). The approach also suggests that learners bring their personal emotions, and certain amount of knowledge based on their previous learning experiences to the learning context. They also possess some strategies which they have used in their previous learning. In other words, learning strategies are conceptual structures which develop over time as a result of constructive past experience (Erten, 1998). According to Williams and Burden (1997) another implication of taking constructivist perspective for FL learning is the active involvement of learners in making sense of the language input they receive and the tasks presented to them. We designed our research instruments based upon these viewpoints. Following a triangulation research method, we used two different instruments: semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The items in the questionnaires and interviews addressed all the above issues related with constructivism, in other words the focus was basically on the importance and effective use of learning strategies related to four basic language skills in second or foreign language learning.

### *2.2. Sample*

#### *2.2.1. Participants of questionnaires*

The questionnaires were conducted with 2328 students in the 1., 2., 3. and 4<sup>th</sup> years of 6 different departments of 5 undergraduate and 1 graduate schools of the university, and with 125 lectures who were randomly selected from different departments in those schools.

#### *2.2.2. Participants of interviews*

The participants for the semi-structured interviews were also selected randomly. 14 university instructors working at various faculties and institutions of the university, and 9 students at different undergraduate and graduate schools participated to the interviews.

### 2.3. Research instruments

The interviews and questionnaires were prepared based on the objectives of the present study, the findings of the previous studies, and information gathered from various sources (Basturkmen, 1998, Richards, 2001; Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Weir, 1990). Furthermore, students' and teachers' questions in the interviews and questionnaire were shaped by the instructors working in the Materials Development Office of the School of Foreign Languages. The instructors contributed to the present study by cooperating with the researchers with their vast experiential knowledge in TEFL and their familiarity with the school system and with the academic staff in this particular university. In addition, they provided logistic support i.e, making the arrangements of the interview protocols and conducting them with subjects.

The questionnaires consisted of 83 items. The items in the students' and teachers' questionnaires were the same. Yet, the wording was different, for example, while the third item in the questionnaire "How often are you required to perform the following tasks for your studies at your university?" was addressed to students, "How often do you require your students to perform the following tasks for their studies at their university?" was included in the teachers' questionnaires. The items represented three main categories related to the needs of FLL. Following the part requiring some demographic information, such as students' registration, department and degrees, the students were asked to evaluate the importance of four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) in relation to their academic studies.

The items in the following part examined the frequency of the use of learning tasks and activities by the students during their academic studies. In the last part, the frequency of the difficulties that the students had in using learning strategies related to four basic language skills was investigated. A five point Likert Scale was used to evaluate the items in all parts, except for the first one (Appendix A).

The semi-structured interviews consisted of 24 questions that were in general parallel to the questionnaire items. They represented four different categories, writing, listening, speaking and reading skills (Appendix B). The items under these categories tapped the students' language learning habits, their language learning strategy use, and any related difficulties. Yet there were some differences in the questions related to: a) "*academic writing center*" (the participants were asked whether they need to have a writing center on the campus to get support for their academic writings), b) library/internet-based searching techniques (the subjects were asked whether they use some techniques while using library or internet based resources effectively), c) academic writing styles ( this item examined the students' academic writing styles, ie. APA, MLA).

### 2.4. Validity and reliability

*The validity and the reliability of the analyses of questionnaires.* A pilot study was conducted before the main study in order to measure the reliability and validity of the questionnaires and interviews. Both instruments were administered to teachers and students at the university. The questionnaires were administered to 2 students and 7 instructors at the Preparatory School. The result of the reliability test for the students' questionnaires was found as  $\alpha = 0,75$ , and for the teachers  $\alpha = 0,70$ .

*The validity and the reliability of the analyses of interviews.* A week after the questionnaires administration, the interviews were conducted with 2 university instructors in two different undergraduate schools of the university. The instructors at the Materials Development Department in the School of Foreign Languages were assigned to conduct the interviews with all subjects in the pilot study. The instructors were experienced in TEFL but not in educational research. Thus, they were given some orientation sessions comprising lectures and discussions about the data collection procedure. The researchers also organized role-play sessions to give the instructors some practice in semi-structured interviews.

Some necessary modifications on the questionnaire and interview items, and arrangements related to timing and setting were made based on the feedback obtained from the participants.

#### 2.4.1. Procedure

The main study was conducted one month later after the final version of the research instruments were prepared. The questionnaires were administered to students during lesson hours and/or after their final exams during the

semester. They were given an hour to complete the questionnaires. The same questionnaires were also administered to the teachers at their convenience. Semi-structured interviews were carried out during the same period. The interviews were conducted by the instructors again and lasted for two weeks. Each interview protocol was carried out face-to-face with the instructors and took about an hour. The subjects participated in the interviews at their convenience, as they agreed with the instructors beforehand. Two interviewers were assigned for this process. After each session, the interviewers compared their notes and made clarifications when necessary.

### 2.5. Data analyses

The questions of the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed by using SPSS 14.0 version. The data were analyzed by using some statistical tests such as, descriptive statistics, multiple response item analysis and reliability analysis. In order to find out whether the outcomes of the interviews and questionnaires were consistent with each other, the questions of the interviews and questionnaires were grouped under the same categories.

### 3. Findings and Results

The results of the reliability test for the students' questionnaires were found as  $\alpha = 0,89$  (Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha). The results of the inter-item reliability analysis were  $\alpha = 0,88$  for reading part,  $\alpha = 0,47$  for writing part,  $\alpha = 0,61$  for listening part and  $\alpha = 0,67$  for speaking part. The  $\alpha$  values for the 4<sup>th</sup> question were as follows:

*reading part  $\alpha = 0,88$ ,*

*listening part  $\alpha = 0,85$*

*writing part  $\alpha = 0,94$*

*speaking part  $\alpha = 0,82$ .*

The overall result of the reliability test for all teachers was found  $\alpha = 0,95$ . The alpha figures obtained for reading, writing, listening and speaking parts were respectively  $\alpha = 0,73$ ,  $\alpha = 0,49$ ,  $\alpha = 0,58$  and  $\alpha = 0,72$ . The  $\alpha$  values for the 4<sup>th</sup> question were as follows:

*reading part  $\alpha = 0,93$ ,*

*listening part  $\alpha = 0,95$ ,*

*writing part  $\alpha = 0,96$*

*speaking part  $\alpha = 0,99$  (Appendix C).*

The findings of the questionnaires and interviews indicated that university instructors primarily pointed out "English reading and listening" as the most important skills for students' academic achievement, students emphasized the importance of "speaking and listening" (Figure1).

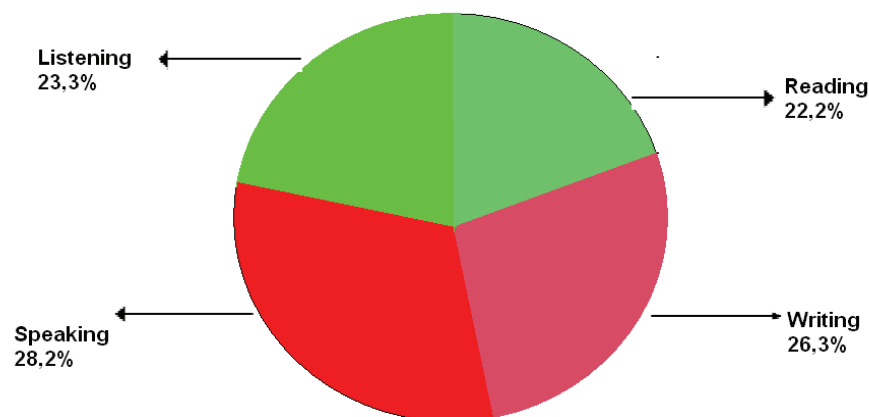


Figure 1. Importance of required language skills for student academic achievement from university instructors' point of view

According to the results of students' questionnaires, the program in The School of Foreign Languages neglected the importance of speaking skills (Figure 1).

Findings indicated that main course books (University instructors % 94, Students %34), periodicals (University instructors %85, Students %35), internet texts (University instructors %76, Students %47) and laboratory instructions (University instructors %66, Students % 47) were the most frequently used reading texts by the students and university instructors.

Regarding the results related to the writing tasks and activities, it was found that laboratory reports (university instructors %78, students %32), workbook activities (university instructors %87, students %68), term papers (university instructors %62, students %51) and essays-type questions (university instructors %28, students %63) were the most frequently cited tasks/activities by the students and university instructors.

According to the results, while for listening activities 'listening to the lectures' (University instructors %99, students %73) and for speaking activities 'oral presentation via multimedia' (university instructors % 88, students %54) were found to be the most frequently cited tasks/activities by the students and university instructors.

Questions on the fourth part, as it is mentioned before, are about the frequency of the times that the students have difficulties in using various strategies and skills related to four language skills. Therefore they are divided into four main parts.

According to the results, the students had *often* difficulties in applying the following skills and strategies related to reading, such as *to go through a text quickly and selectively, to find important information and ideas (% 56)*, and *to go through a text quickly in order to get the general idea(%42)*. However, the university instructors stated more strategies that the students had difficulties in using them during the lectures (See Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of reading skills and strategies which the students often have difficulties

Reading skill	Strategy and skill	Usage proportions
	To recognize words automatically	%37
	To guess the meaning of the unknown word from the context	%42
	To recognize the organization of ideas in the text to see their relations	%37
	To understand the information in a text when it is not openly stated	%45
	To read in order to respond critically	%49
	To distinguish facts from opinions	%37
	To ask questions about the text	%37
	To read carefully in order to understand the details of the text	%37
	To distinguish the main idea from the supporting details	%34
	To identify cause-effect relationships in a text	%36
	To understand a writer's attitude and purpose	%37

Regarding the listening skills and strategies, university instructors pointed out that students *sometimes* had difficulties in using some of the listening strategies. However, the results of the students' questionnaires reported that they did not *often* have difficulties in using these strategies (See Table 2).

Table 2 Percentage of listening strategy and skill using which students sometimes have difficulties

Listening skills	Strategy and Skills	Usage percentages
	To recognize the organization of ideas in a lecture to see their relationships	Students %37, Teachers %37
	To understand information when not openly stated in a lecture	Students %36, Teachers % 38
	To predict the contents of a lecture	Students % 44, Teachers %29

To distinguish the fact from opinion	Students % 27, Teachers %23
To follow question-answer sessions	Students 34, Teachers %22
To understand spoken instructions/directions	Students %26, Teacher %20

As for the writing strategies and skills, the university instructors stated that the students *usually* had difficulties while using almost all strategies (See Table 3). On the other hand; the results for the students indicated that they had no difficulties in using any of them.

Table 3. Percentage of how often students have difficulty in carrying out writing strategies and skills

Writing Skill	Strategy and Skills	Usage percentage
	To summarize information in their own words	Students % 64, Teachers % 25
	To use appropriate vocabulary	Students %61, Teachers % 25
	To organize ideas for argumentative purposes	Students %60, Teachers %24
	To organize writing to express major and supporting ideas	Students % 60, Teacher %22
	To combine information from multiple texts to prepare an assignment	Students %58, Teacher %20
	To write references and quotations	Students %57 and Teachers %22
	To organize ideas for compare and contrast purposes	Students %51, Teachers %23
	To organize the ideas to show cause and effect relationships	Students %52, Teachers %23
	To organize ideas to describe a phenomena	Students %49, Teachers %20
	To use relevant reasons and examples to support a position	Students %47, Teachers %25
	To extract the most important information from a text- précis writing-for study purposes	Students %44, Teachers %22
	To be aware of the expectations of the reader	Students %44, Teachers %21
	To write expanded definitions	Students % 41, Teachers 22
	To organize ideas for classification	Students %39, Teachers %20

Regarding the speaking skills and strategies, the results of the students' questionnaires indicated that they had difficulties while *asking relevant questions in class* (%23), *participating in discussions* (%26) and *giving oral presentations* (% 28). However, the university instructors stated that the students had often difficulties with skills such as *giving oral presentations* (% 65) and *participating in discussions* (% 60). These findings suggested that the students' listening skills were much better than reading and writing skills. In addition, while the students noted that they *sometimes* had difficulties in reading and writing, the university instructors pointed out that the students *often* met with difficulties in these skills. These results called for the reconstruction of the materials and methods related to all language skills in The School of Foreign Languages.

In addition to all these, some other findings were obtained from the interviews. For instance, Although most of the university instructors and students pointed out the importance of student initiation in the activities and frequent participation in the lessons especially in listening and speaking lessons, the students' responses during the interviews indicated that most of the lessons were teacher-centered not student-centered.

The results of other interview items regarding the need for having an "*academic writing center*", library and internet based searching techniques and academic writing styles are as follows: firstly, both the students' and university instructors' responses indicated that the students need support for their academic writings such as essays, reports or dissertations. Secondly, all subjects knew the library or internet based searching techniques. Most of the university instructors stated that they taught these techniques to their students via using direct method in their lectures. Thirdly, the university instructors and students responses regarding the writing styles were contradictory. While the university instructors indicated that APA was the most frequently used documentation and writing style by their students, the students stated that they preferred MLA writing style in their academic writings.



#### 4. Conclusion and recommendations

In this study, the appropriacy of the ELT program to the academic needs of the students the preparatory-school in an English medium university was examined by using a multi-method needs analysis approach. The results of the investigation indicated the need for encouragement of the students to use effective learning strategies in an English language education program of the Prep School. For this purpose, the program needed to foreground the application of different strategies and skills during the learning process, and the qualifications and competencies of the instructors in the implementation of the necessary instruction.

The results indicated that there was no discrimination between teaching or testing in teaching materials and methods. Specifically speaking, the instructional materials used for reading and writing, were designed to teach through testing. It is difficult to improve learners' reading comprehension and composing skills through testing. The findings of the interviews indicated that the teaching methods and materials should be process oriented. Moreover, both the university instructors and students pointed out that students should be given ample practice in reading and writing for their academic studies. The findings of both questionnaires and interviews indicated that the Prep School did not give much emphasis on the speaking abilities of the students. Therefore, both the university instructors and students pointed out that students had great difficulties in speaking English particularly on the first two years of undergraduate programs.

Along with the results and implications of this investigation, the program in the prep-school can be reconstructed based on the suggestions, such as a) the language skills and strategies which the students had difficulties with should be integrated into lessons. Thus, a program based on the application of various learning strategies should be designed and a great importance should be given to strategy training, b) there is a need to provide professional development activities for the instructors in the Prep School to implement strategy training component of the program, c) the researchers and the prep-school instructors agreed that a portfolio system could be established especially for active involvement of students in the learning process. They agreed that portfolios could form the (% 20) of the students' grade. Since the proficiency exam prepared by the university did not have an oral expression component including oral expression activities, it was decided that oral expression component can be included in the students' portfolios along with other requirements, d) for the writing section of the exams, students can be asked to draw the outline of their compositions or essays, and write the idea-generating and brain-storming processes on their papers.

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