International Conference on Current Trends in ELT

A Triangulated Study of Target Situation Needs of Iranian Undergraduate Students of English Language and Literature

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the academic target needs (i.e., lacks, necessities, and wants) of Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature. To this end, a triangulation of needs analysis questionnaire and semistructured interview was used for data collection at three Iranian state universities. First, a preliminary interview was conducted with different stakeholders namely, undergraduate students, recent graduates, English literature instructors, and language instructors in an attempt to arrive at the target needs of the undergraduate students. The results of this exploratory interview were fed into the design of a needs analysis questionnaire, which as the main data collection instrument, was distributed among 270 of the above-mentioned stakeholders as the participants of this investigation. Correspondingly, some follow-up interviews, which were conducted with a group of these stakeholders \( n = 35 \), complemented the data collection procedure. The results revealed that undergraduate students demanded some extracurricular general English courses, development of their writing and speaking skills, familiarity with their major before admission to the university, up-to-date textbooks as well as communication-based classes. These findings may promise implications for updating the current curriculum and materials as practiced for Iranian English literature students at the tertiary level in an attempt to keep up with the latest changes in English language teaching methodologies.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Urmia University, Iran.

Keywords: English Majors; Graduates; Instructors; Needs Analysis; Target Needs; Undergraduates

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doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.555
1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as an important area within the field of applied linguistics in general and English language teaching in particular (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP, as a learner-centred approach to language teaching, has paid a significant attention to the identification of language needs of learners and, consequently, to the provision of specific content materials as the focus of teaching and learning process (Robinson, 1991). Needs analysis, as the foundation of ESP courses, has received the attention of researchers subsequently since the 1970s (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). This high significance is partly due to the use of results of needs analysis studies as determining factors in making decisions about course intensity, course duration, syllabus content, effectiveness of teaching and learning materials, efficiency of teaching methodologies, and retention or resignation of instructors (Kormos, Kontra, & Csolle, 2001; Richards, 2001).

Regarding the importance of learners’ learning process, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) proposed a learning-centred approach to needs analysis which partly includes target situation needs. In this respect, target situation needs are defined as “what the learner needs to do in the target situation” (p. 54). It includes necessities, lacks, and wants. The former is defined as “what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation” (p. 55). Lacks are described as “the gaps between what the learner knows and the necessities” (p. 56). Finally, wants involve the learners’ personal views towards their needs.

Based on the target situation needs, Kormos, Kontra, and Csolle (2001) examined the present and future language wants of Hungarian English major undergraduates and graduates. While majority of the participants indicated their present needs for study skills in English, regarding their future career, they demanded English language for expressing their ideas, reading Web-based materials, speaking with nonnative colleagues, writing emails, instructing, and translating. The results suggested a revision of the present practicing curriculum and the university exit proficiency test along with the provision of some courses in reading, speaking, and study skills in order to better equip the students with their required present and future academic needs.

Furthermore, Atai and Nazari (2011) explored the target reading comprehension needs of Iranian English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students of Health Information Management from the viewpoints of some content instructors, EAP instructors, graduate students, and undergraduate students. The results revealed that the students need to improve their General English Proficiency (GEP), to develop their reading sub skills such as skimming and scanning, and to become familiar with different genres in order to succeed in their academic courses. Furthermore, they identified their major problematic areas in terms of reading skills, as slow reading speed, limited knowledge of technical and general vocabulary, outdated and difficult ESP textbooks, low GEP, unfamiliarity with the future objectives and language use situations of ESP courses, teacher-centred classes, and large number of students in ESP classes, among many other recognized difficulties.

To date, a few studies have been conducted to examine the target situation needs of English majors worldwide. In order to broaden the existing literature, the present study aims at providing a comprehensive profile of the target situation needs of Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the lacks of Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature as perceived by different stakeholders (i.e., undergraduate students, graduate students, content instructors, and language instructors)?
2. What are the necessities of Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature as perceived by the above-mentioned stakeholders?
3. What are the wants of Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature as perceived by the preceding stakeholders?
2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study included 230 undergraduate students, 28 recent graduates, 6 English literature instructors, and 6 English language instructors from three Iranian state universities (i.e., Yazd University, Shahid Beheshti University, and Isfahan University). Majority of them were females (71.5%) and the remaining participants were males (28.5%). More specifically, 70.7% of the undergraduates and graduates were between an age range of 18-22 years; 24.7% were 23-27 years, and just 4.6% were more than 28 years. Tables 1 and 2 offer the distribution as well as the percentages of the participants who took part in this study, respectively.

Table 1. A profile of the Participants of This Study

| University     | Undergraduate students | Graduates | Instructors | Total |
|----------------|------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|
| Yazd           | 123                    | 26        | 5           | 151   |
| Shahid Beheshti| 63                     | 0         | 3           | 66    |
| Isfahan        | 44                     | 2         | 4           | 50    |
| Total          | 230                    | 28        | 12          | 270   |

Table 2. Percentages of the Participants of This Study

| University     | % Undergraduate students | % Graduates | % Instructors |
|----------------|--------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Yazd           | 53.5                     | 96.4        | 41.7          |
| Shahid Beheshti| 27.4                     | 0           | 25            |
| Isfahan        | 19.1                     | 3.6         | 33.3          |
| Total          | 100                      | 100         | 100           |

2.2. Instruments

A triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative research methods (i.e., questionnaire and semistructured interview) constituted the data collection instruments of the current investigation. Though questionnaires are the most commonly used instruments for needs analysis studies (Robinson, 1991), the data from them are not precise and comprehensive enough (Hyland, 2006). Hence, in order to compensate for these inconsistencies as well as to increase the validity and reliability of the results, a triangulation of the instruments and sources was utilized in this study as it is recommended by Jasso-Aguilar (1999) and Long (2005). The major data collection instrument included a 14-item target situation needs analysis questionnaire. This target situation needs analysis questionnaire, which was on a five-point Likert Scale (strongly agree, agree, no idea, disagree, and strongly disagree), constituted three main parts including undergraduate students’ lacks (n = 6), necessities (n = 4), and wants (n = 4). The first part of the questionnaire (items 1-6) asked for the undergraduate students’ lacks in terms of the use of audiovisual facilities in literature classes, the ability to write academic literature papers, participation in literature class discussions, background knowledge of English literature before admission to the university, improvement of four language skills and general English knowledge, and up-to-date English literature textbooks and materials, respectively. The second part of the questionnaire including items 7 to 10 dealt with the necessities of the undergraduate students regarding general English and four language skills, specific reading skills, familiarity with different literary figures, and knowledge of different aspects of literature. Finally, the concluding section of the questionnaire (items 11-14) involved different items concerning students’ wants with respect to extracurricular general English classes, nature of literature classes, future job opportunities, and extracurricular literature classes. The second instrument utilized in
this study was a semistructured interview which comprised three questions regarding the undergraduates’ lacks, wants, and necessities.

2.3. **Procedure**

Data for the current study were collected in the fall and spring semester of 2012-1013. First, a preliminary interview was conducted with some of the stakeholders (i.e., 10 undergraduate students, 7 graduates, 2 content instructors, and 1 language instructor) regarding their opinions as to the target needs of the undergraduate students, the shortcomings of the current English literature courses as well as the areas of difficulties which students most encountered. The results of this exploratory interview were fed into the design of a needs analysis questionnaire. The resulting questionnaire was then examined through a pilot study with undergraduate students (n = 5), graduates (n = 7), and content instructors (n = 2). Based on the obtained feedback, the final version of the questionnaire was designed which was subsequently distributed among the participants. The questionnaire was administered to the undergraduate students and graduates during their class sessions in order to secure maximum return rates. The remaining number of other graduates, who were unavailable, completed their questionnaires via e-mails. The instructors’ questionnaires were distributed among them during their office hours and collected after their completion.

Finally, a semistructured interview was conducted with some of the undergraduate students (n = 15), graduates (n = 15), content instructors (n = 3), and English language instructors (n = 2) at Yazd University, Iran. Each interview, which lasted for 20 minutes, was conducted with the corresponding participants during their free time.

2.4. **Data analysis**

The data obtained from the questionnaires were run through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 17) and analyzed consequently by using descriptive statistics (i.e., percentages). More specifically, the nominal categories ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ were reduced to ‘agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’ were reduced to ‘disagree’ in order to facilitate the data interpretation process. Then, the cumulative percentages of the resulting categories were calculated, respectively. The percentages of the ‘no idea’ options were estimated and interpreted separately. Moreover, the verbal data obtained from the semistructured interviews were categorized into main themes and topics and then analyzed through qualitative content analysis.

3. **Results**

The first research question explored the participants’ perceptions regarding the lacks of English literature students. The findings of the needs analysis questionnaires indicated that there is not adequate use of audiovisual facilities in English literature classes (70.7%). In addition, it was revealed that the undergraduates have difficulty in writing academic literary research papers (70.4%) and participating in English literature class discussions (69.7%). Additionally, the results were indicative of the fact that the undergraduates did not have background knowledge of English literature before getting admission to the university (66%). Likewise, the results indicated that they have not adequately improved their language skills and general English knowledge (63.7) which might be due to the insufficient use of up-to-date English literature textbooks and materials (53.3%).

Furthermore, the results of the semistructured interviews revealed that a solid number of the undergraduates lack the adequate mastery of speaking and writing abilities. In addition, they reported their deficiencies in terms of the use of up-to-date authentic literary textbooks, the sufficient mastery of study skills, and clear background knowledge of English literature before entering the university. Besides, they mentioned that they do not have enough chance to participate in English literature class discussions due to teacher-centered and lecture-based nature of these classes.

With respect to the second research question, which dealt with the necessities of the undergraduate students, majority of the stakeholders (95.1%) reported through their questionnaires that English literature students need to
have a good command of general English and to develop their four language skills. In addition, another 90% of the stakeholders indicated that the undergraduate students need to develop their critical analysis skills. While a solid number of the participants (75.2%) mentioned that being familiar with different English authors, poets, and critiques are among their prior needs, another 70.7% stated that they must have fair knowledge of English mythology, philosophy, and schools of thought in order to succeed in their academic studies.

Besides, the participants who took part in the semistructured interviews indicated that English literature students strongly demanded a good command of general English knowledge, well mastery of the four language skills especially speaking and writing, and a full development of the study skills especially before admission to the university in order for them to succeed in their academic courses. Furthermore, they found it necessary to be equipped with sufficient background knowledge of English literature before admission to the university and with sound knowledge of English mythology, philosophy, history, and criticism during their academic courses.

The third research question sought to elicit the English majors’ opinions concerning their wants. The results of the questionnaire indicated that while a significant percentage of the participants (71.9%) asked for extracurricular general English proficiency classes, a large number of the participants (84%) identified more communication-based classes as their wants. In addition, 80% of them expressed their wish for more English literature-related job opportunities, while another 59.6% recognized extracurricular preparatory English literature classes as their wants.

With respect to the students’ wants or felt needs, the results of the semistructured interviews, which were elicited only from the undergraduate students and graduates, indicated that the students need to improve their general English skills. Furthermore, they want to be more familiar with different English philosophy, mythology, history, schools of thought, and criticism. In addition, they need to practice in writing formal literature and criticism papers as well as to be provided with more audiovisual facilities as suitable instructional aids for English literature instruction.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Throughout this triangulated study, the researchers attempted to provide a profile of the target needs of Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature in terms of lacks, necessities, and wants. The results of qualitative and quantitative data analysis revealed that teacher-centered and lecture-based English literature classes should be replaced by communication-based classes in which more opportunities are provided for students’ discussion and learning. The importance of this result has been also echoed in the study of Atai and Nazari (2011). Taken the nonnative contexts into account, English literature students should be provided with sound knowledge of English mythology, history, philosophy, schools of thought, and criticism as well as deep knowledge of different authors, critiques, and poets in order to better succeed in their mainstream courses.

In addition, students of this major should be equipped with adequate background knowledge of English literature before admission to the university so that they may be able to select their academic major of interest wisely. Provided that after their graduation, more English-literature job opportunities, such as writing academic literature research and criticism papers, translating literature texts, or instructing English literature are provided for the students, their motivation to learn English literature at the tertiary level will be enhanced.

Likewise, more up-to-date textbooks and materials should be utilized in English literature classes. The use of audiovisual facilities and other sources such as Web-based materials can more efficiently complement and upgrade the use of textbooks in this regard.

Also, the students majoring in English literature should increase their critical analysis abilities and study skills which should be developed beforehand during their high school education. Provided that these abilities and skills are developed during students’ high school education, it becomes possible for them to successfully tackle the tasks
related to the subject specific courses during their academic studies. The significance of the improvement of study skills was furthermore confirmed by the results of Kormos et al. (2001).

Correspondingly, some extracurricular general English classes along with courses on academic writing and speaking skills as well as extracurricular preparatory English literature classes should be offered to the students at the university or foreign language institute contexts in order that they will be better able to meet the academic needs of their mainstream courses.

Based on the findings of this study, there is a pressing need for a revision of the current Specialized English University Entrance Examination in order to better select proficient students who desire to continue their education at the tertiary level. Most importantly, there is an urgent need for updating the current English literature curriculum and materials to keep up with the latest changes in English language teaching.

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