

Chinese Students' Academic English Development for Overseas Further Study: A Needs Analysis Framework

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Abstract

Many transnational education partnerships require students to have a good foundation in academic English. The joint programmes between China and Australia provide students with an opportunity to study further in Australia, representing several big challenges to the students. Under such circumstances, students' needs for English, especially academic English, is pressing. This theoretical paper arises from students' English language development in joint programmes between one Chinese university and one Australian university but presents a framework that is more general. Relevant literature is reviewed, and the requirement for the proposed needs analysis framework is discussed explicitly. This research contributes to pre-sessional EAP course design.

Key words: Needs Analysis, Framework, EAP, Course Design

Introduction

The rapid economic development in China pushes globalization in education. In 1980s, joint programmes between Chinese educational institutions and overseas universities began to appear, which have introduced world-culture resources, incorporating advanced teaching theories and pedagogy into China (Yin, 2015). According to the Ministry of Education of China, by June 2020, the number of such joint programmes (at the level of undergraduate and postgraduate education) amounted to over 1000 (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). The new century has witnessed significant growth in Sino-Australian cultural exchanges with diversified programmes and outstanding opportunities (Su, 2011, cited in Gao, Feng, & Henderson, 2012, p. 295). In the light of Australian government data, by 2011, China had become the largest source of international students for Australia, accounting for around a quarter of international students in Australia (Gao et al., 2012).

In 2006, joint programmes in the area of business were established between Victoria University (VU) and Shandong Jianzhu University (SJU). The agreements have varied over time but one consistent model has required English language development to occur prior to and not concurrent with the qualification, especially academic language.

This research takes an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course design for such joint programmes as a case study to focus on students' English language development, aiming to illustrate how to conduct needs analysis in order to explore and better meet students' needs. A sound educational programme should be based on an accurate analysis of learner's needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 2001). Different academic courses have different language needs and students tend to be more motivated to learn what they perceive to be relevant. Conducting and responding to an analysis of student needs may enhance student motivation and learning.

EAP can be sub-divided into EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes) and ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) (Jordan, 1997). The former is concerned with how to behave in the academic session, take notes, participate in discussion, make presentations, write academically and so on; the latter is mainly about teaching discipline-based language, learning a discipline's discourse styles, its mode of analysis and developing a specialised academic communicative ability. This research focuses on EGAP (hereinafter referred to as EAP).

The context

According to the agreements between VU and SJU, students who are enrolled in such programmes study in China for the first two years and then move to Melbourne for a further two years of study. On successful completion of the study, students graduate with a VU bachelor's degree and an SJU undergraduate diploma. Unfortunately, this outcome usually takes longer than two years in Melbourne as students fail more than they are accustomed to in China and regularly attribute this to inadequate English language skills.

English language proficiency of the students must meet the language requirements of VU, which is an overall score of IELTS 6.0, and this is difficult for Chinese students. Hence, how to assist such students is a big challenge and relevant research question. A similarly pertinent question is "what kind of students need EAP courses?" An EAP course is designed mainly for students who have the desire to go to English-speaking countries to study further or prepare for their IELTS or TOEFL tests (Yang, 2014). According to current curriculum at SJU, only during the first year of their two-year's study, do students have English. It is only a general basic English course instructed mainly by English language teachers of SJU with supplementary listening and speaking English units instructed by foreign teachers whose native language is English. Unfortunately, these English classes are not connected to the demands of the degree resulting in unengaged students; in the second study year, they are occupied with the business disciplines. Gao et al. (2012) pointed out that "when the English language course sits separately and chronologically prior to the discipline course then convincing the students of the value of certain academic skills is difficult" (p. 299). This paper argues that in the second year, there should be a 30-week pre-session EAP course with four teaching hours a week throughout two

semesters, aiming to help students achieve the comprehensive academic language skills required when they start their further study in Melbourne.

Research aim and research questions

The aim of this research is to explore learner's needs for EAP in Joint Programmes between VU and SJU, especially identifying their target and present situation needs.

The research questions are as follows:

- a. What are students' present situation English language levels?
- b. What are students' target situation English language levels?
- c. What is the gap between present situation and target situation?
- d. What are students' requirements for English?

Literature review

1. Defining and developing the language learning needs and needs analysis

Jordan (1997, p. 22) claims that other terms have also been proposed for "needs", such as necessities, likes, deficiencies, goals, aims, purposes and objectives. Applying the idea to the area of second or foreign language learning, Richards (2001, p. 55) states that needs are often described in terms of a linguistic deficiency as well as language needs (language skills needed). Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1987) is also used significantly in language teaching: the main task of teachers in tertiary education is to stimulate students' interest and motivation, satisfy their basic needs, and explore higher needs to enhance their language comprehensive abilities and cultural quality.

A "Needs analysis" includes all the activities used to collect information about students' learning needs, wants, wishes, desires and so on, and sometimes takes into account the expectations of teachers, parents and societies (Richard, 2001). This term became a key instrument in course design with the advent of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) (West, 1994, p. 2). Jordan (1997) states that needs analyses should be the starting point for devising syllabuses, courses, materials and the kind of teaching and learning that takes place. The process of conducting a needs analysis is a systematic one based on specific information-gathering techniques, not a one-time event (McArdle, 1998).

Objective and Subjective Needs

Brindley (1989) describes two types of needs: objective and subjective needs. The former refers to “the needs which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language in real-life communication situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties” (p. 70). Subjective needs refer to “the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation”, which are difficult to be determined because many factors in learners’ personality, confidence, attitudes and their expectations are not easy to determine. Therefore, it is a big challenge for educators to balance between observable and behaviourable needs.

Felt Needs and Perceived Needs

Berwick (1989, p. 55) discusses the distinctions between felt needs and perceived needs, claiming that felt needs are those which learners have and may be regarded as “expressed needs” from learners; whereas perceived needs refers to educators’ sensitive understanding of what learners really need. This distinction can help locate the source of the need and keep a balance between learner-centred and teacher-centred inputs to the planning and delivery process. At the same time confirming that both sources of input are needed.

Target Situation Analysis (TSA)

Munby (1978) introduces TSA which presents a highly detailed set of procedures for discovering target situation needs—Communication Needs Processor (CNP), being aimed at learners’ future target career or learning context and identifying the task and activity of target needs. West (1994) concluded that the subsequent development in needs analysis have been improvements in many ways over the shortcoming of Munby’s model. However, this model was found to be cumbersome, unrealistic, and impractical in actual practice (Richards, 2001, p. 41); more recently, Chen (2009) states that it is very complex and time-consuming, and excessively student-oriented. These intricacies aside, having or developing a model which is reliable and valid is essential for developing effective teaching and learning curricula, in this case, a meaningful English language curriculum.

Present Situation Analysis (PSA)

PSA was introduced by Allwright in 1982 (cited in Chen, 2009), and it focuses on analysing a process of identifying deficiency between learners’ present felt-needs and target context perceived-needs which is the supplement of TSA. This analysis neglects students’ individual cultural roles as a component of their learning (Chen, 2009), which focuses on the gap between students’ present ability and level and target needs. Therefore, needs analysis should be more informative if the above two modes are combined (Yu, 2002).

The role of needs analysis in foreign language teaching

The design of any course starts from educational objectives. It relies on a learning needs analysis, which is a wide range of activities for assembling information about the learners, their needs, wants, and the environment in which learning will take place. In order to design this pre-session course, a needs analysis should be conducted to identify students' needs for EAP.

Shu (2004) points out that a needs analysis for foreign language learning and teaching plays four roles. It is the basis of: (1) making a foreign language policy and offering a curriculum; (2) providing evidence for the course contents, layout and implementation of a foreign language; (3) developing the teaching goals and methods in a foreign language; and (4) forming the examination and assessment in foreign language teaching.

As a principle of course design any teaching and learning programme should be responsive to learners' needs. Therefore, conducting a needs analysis is a vital prerequisite to the specification of language learning objectives (Brindley, 1989, p. 63).

2. Models of TNE

Clarke, Johal, Sharp and Quinn (2015, p. 364) define "transnational education (TNE) as offshore or cross-border education where an accredited education provider delivers programmes in a country other than its own country of origin". In China, Sino-foreign Educational Joint-Programmes is the term often used. The programmes are important to China for the transferability of pedagogical approaches, enhancing intercultural awareness of staff and students and increasing opportunities for research collaborations and exchange (Gao et al., 2012). For exporting countries such as Australia the same objectives and opportunities exist with the added component of revenue (Productivity Commission, 2015). Many of these programmes are taught in English and require a sophisticated disciplinary understanding of the language; the language requirements are compounded, particularly the oral communication skills, if study in the exporting (also known as "host") country is undertaken (Dixon & Henderson, 2005).

There are two main models of TNE in China: (1) Cooperative partnerships and (2) international campuses. Gao et al. (2012) summarize joint or partnership programmes as models of: 1+3, 2+2, 3+1 and so on (the first number refers to the years of study in China, while the second number indicating the years of study in the exporting countries). An international campus arises when a foreign university sets up an offshore campus and develops its own regional education. In 2004, The University of Nottingham Ningbo China was founded, which was a new exploration in TNE. According to it, all the courses are delivered in English by British teachers and all programmes are assessed by Nottingham University in the UK (Ennew & Yang, 2009). Thus Nottingham set up its own campus and developed its own regional education in China. Undeniably, no matter what the mode is, it introduces an alternative western philosophy of

education and teaching resources into China, and promotes increasing internationalization of Chinese educational market.

3. Research on EAP course design

In China, a number of propositions have been suggested to explore English language course design within TNE, and the majority of them focus on macro research, replete with opinions and experiences, embodying descriptive results, with a lack of theoretical and data support. Hence, an empirical treatment of EAP course design is necessary.

Cai (2012) argues that EAP courses should replace general English in the first year of Chinese university courses. In 2012, he made a needs investigation into EAP proficiency of undergraduates across four universities, and the research results from his questionnaires and interviews showed that students' proficiency in EAP was insufficient. Cai (2012) states that EAP curriculum is vital to cope with the globalization of the advanced education. He also identified two modes of pedagogical approaches in EAP. In the first mode, the content of EAP courses can be designed to be classifiable according to different disciplines; the second one is set according to students' different English levels, ranking from 1-4 levels, and students can choose the suitable levels. However, his studies on EAP involve only general English or an English major in EFL (English as Foreign Language) circumstance, not with joint programmes.

In 2009, Chen Yaxuan from Zhejiang University of Science and Technology (ZUST) implemented an EAP course in the Sino-Australia programme with the University of South Queensland (USQ), because he found that students' proficiency in English could not meet the requirement of USQ. Hence, he introduced the EAP pedagogical mode from USQ and developed the notion of PASIT (Pragmatism + Academic awareness + Skills + Independent-learning ability + Task-based approach). Chen (2012) concludes that EAP can improve Chinese students' abilities in question analysis, research, and composition of English in the academic style, which will contribute to their life-long learning.

The above two studies in EAP provide the theories and evidence for the proposed framework for establishing learners' needs. EAP courses can improve students' language skills to the level required for their chosen course of study and prepare them for the kinds of tasks they will need to perform in their future academic studies, provided that a high level of engagement can be achieved. An appropriate needs analysis can contribute to student engagement.

Framework for establishing a language learning Needs Analysis

In the literature presented earlier a number of stakeholders and roles were identified. In order to comprehensively address each, an integrated approach which takes into account the home educational context of the students (in this case China) and the exporting country's educational context (in this case Australia), is proposed for the framework.

An initial needs analysis should be made to identify the target situation and detailed linguistic features of the situation. Analysis of the target situation depends on the following information collected: (1) Factors of the learning environment at the exporting university, such as lecturing styles, the modes of assessment, learning strategies, how to prepare for and present a formal, academic essay and research proposals (2) Factors of the social situation, mainly referring to information on the local customs, culture and social behaviour.

The following framework is proposed to collect such data:

(1) Collect relevant teaching and learning information from institutional documents and the exporting university website. Review and thematically code for the pedagogical approach, overall course objectives, learning outcomes, teaching and learning modes, materials and assessments.

(2) Interview: semi-structured group interviews of a sample of Chinese “international” students studying at the exporting university to learn about their experiences, challenges and needs in studying and living.

(3) Interview: semi-structured group interviews of a sample of teaching staff in the joint programme to collate what are often anecdotal but valuable insights into the difficulties in learning and social situations in the exporting country.

(4) In order to determine the English language strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese students, it is necessary to conduct an assessment about the students’ current language proficiency and study skills, especially their previous academic experiences. Possible methods include:

a) Meetings: group discussions to ask students to talk about their language competency, learning styles and so forth, in order to find out their current oral language levels and study habits.

b) Questionnaires: to check the students’ EAP proficiency and triangulate ideas about learning gathered from the meetings.

c) Interview: semi-structured interviews of students to find out about their career goals and aspirations.

Any one source of data is likely to be incomplete or partial (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 2001), and different sources and methods can make the analysis more precise. The needs analysis may be a long, extensive and repeated procedure, in which the conclusions drawn are constantly checked and re-assessed (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; West, 1994). For this need analysis, it should be conducted as completely as possible before the course development begins and it should also be repeated, for a continuous cycle of improvement. SPSS software

may be used to analyse quantitative data, and content analysis software may be used to analyse qualitative data.

Discussion

This framework recognizes the importance of EAP courses in joint programmes. Most research, however, carries some risks and barriers which deserve attention. With even the most informed needs analysis, curriculum development can occur independently. This can be due to financial imperatives, misunderstanding of needs analysis, time constraints, competing agenda of university management and educators, and inexperience of educators. For example, it is important that instructors' perception of the level of difficulty of the academic tasks is consistent with the students' current EAP proficiency, which is the basis of designing the EAP course.

Another example is that the quality of EAP needs to be ensured by instructors having appropriate academic and bilingual experience by having studied abroad or visited in an English-speaking university. In many Chinese universities, including SJU, the number of English teachers with such qualifications are limited, yet they are in charge of College English and English major teaching. These teachers are graduates from English language and literature disciplines, and their educational background is homogeneous, yet it is possible for them to become the future instructors in EAP which has students learning in an English-speaking country as an outcome.

There exist some limitations to this framework. Firstly, it is difficult to determine the appropriate sample size for any of the data collecting methods. Secondly, the selection of instruments needs to be appropriate for the context and time allocation. Ideally, they would be piloted and amended as necessary. Thirdly, not all educators feel confident with their skills for effective data collection and analysis and even those who are confident may not feel empowered or supported to argue for change in the EAP curriculum.

Conclusion

This study argues for a thorough needs analysis before an EAP course is designed, and it provides empirical evidence for the role of needs analysis in course design. It identifies a gap in the EAP development for successful transnational education in the perspective of needs analysis, and it proposes the necessity of a needs analysis cycle. The framework presented contributes to the future development of adaptable curriculum design.

EAP is a new English education model in the Chinese EFL context, and a needs analysis for EAP is a complex process in which a number of factors need to be considered. In China, more and more EAP courses are emerging, but more research and evaluation needs to be done, especially about how to put theories of needs analysis into practice. This study has proposed a framework which now requires evaluation.

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