BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN NEEDS ANALYSIS AND COURSE EVALUATION INSIGHTS

Rubina Khan
Department of English, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
E-mail: rkhan@agni.com

Tazin Aziz Chaudhury
Department of English, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
E-mail: tazinchaudhury@yahoo.com

Abstract: The "Advancing English Skills", textbook was compiled and introduced about a decade ago, at the Faculty of Humanities, Dhaka University, Bangladesh, to teach the foundation English courses, to freshmen students from thirteen departments, including English. Today the course is still being taught at some departments. The department of English scrapped the foundation course, but the textbook is still being used for another compulsory course. This paper presents the findings of a study conducted to determine the English language needs of students (60) and teachers (30) at the Humanities Faculty of Dhaka University. Additionally a two prong evaluation of the course and materials from the viewpoints of both students and teachers of the Humanities faculty was carried out, in order to shed light on the nature, effectiveness, and objectives of the course. Strengths and shortcomings of the present course, and areas of mismatch between the students' needs and the course, were identified. Suggestions have been made, to improve the English language courses based on these findings, and implications for pedagogy have been highlighted.
Keywords: *needs analysis, course evaluation, perceptions, ability, mismatch*

INTRODUCTION

English is a part of Bangladesh's colonial heritage; the language of the educated elite and not commonly used in daily interaction. Post-independence English was de-emphasized in education and replaced by Bangla in all official domains, as a result English standards fell to abysmal depths in public schools and universities (Choudhury, 2001). However, almost 95% of the texts and reference books are in English, this resulted in the necessity of giving time, attention and energy to the learning of English (Alam, 2001).

Bangladesh is a monolingual nation with no need for a second language for internal communication, yet the contemporary labor market needs a work force competent in English as participation in the global economy has opened up job opportunities where English competency is a prerequisite for employment (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). Public universities had to fulfill the demands of industry in order to make their graduates employable. Thus compulsory English for Academic purposes (EAP) courses were implemented in the freshman year in all

public universities from the 1994-95 academic sessions, to improve the English proficiency of graduates, in accordance with the Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commission's directives.

Over a decade ago ELT experts at Dhaka University (DU), the premier institution for tertiary and higher education in Bangladesh, designed and implemented the Foundation English course, an ELT course to teach freshmen students from thirteen departments at the Faculty of Humanities, DU and compiled and introduced the "Advancing English Skills", textbook. As the course had to be prepared and introduced within a specified deadline the courses were designed and implemented sans a proper needs analysis; once implemented, the concerned authorities never evaluated the course. The logistical constraints, problems, limitations of students and teachers were never acknowledged or explored. Despite teaching compulsory English for an entire academic year, the general standard of the students' English proficiency is unsatisfactory.

This study focused on identifying the specific English language needs of the students and teachers, of the different departments of the Faculty of Arts of DU and evaluated the effectiveness of the existing ELT course and textbook. Finally recommendations have been made on the basis of insights obtained from the needs analysis and course evaluation findings.

The method of identifying learners' needs is termed Needs Analysis (NA). NA is a prominent feature and vital element in designing any EAP syllabus (Munby, 1978; Robinson, 1991). Gardner and Winslow (1983) affirmed that a NA should be conducted "to produce information which when acted upon

makes a course better adapted to the students' needs" (Gardner and Winslow cited in Dudley-Evans & St John 1998, p. 121). Nunan (1999) classified NA into two processes: Content needs and Process needs. NA is not a be-all end-all activity rather it is a continuing process in which the conclusions drawn are constantly checked and reviewed.

Several Bangladeshi researchers and curriculum experts strongly recommended that NA be conducted at DU and other Bangladeshi universities on the needs of Bangladeshi, tertiary level learners. Haque & Zaman (1994) urged that:

"the EFL course should aim at academic purposes and learner needs/wants as -- the learners' needs and wants tremendously control the whole package of teaching materials, aids and equipment, and the application of teaching techniques and strategies, the employment of classroom activities and, most importantly, the method of teaching and the construction of the syllabus" (Haque & Zaman 1994, p. 79).

More recently Khan (2000) noted that:

"the syllabus needs to be revised and developed -- the content -- needs to be outlined clearly -- rewritten keeping in mind the needs and demands of the students. -- before revising the syllabus a needs analysis could also be carried out to determine student needs" (Khan 2000, p. 106-107).

According to Weir and Roberts (1994) evaluation is an indispensable part of NA and provides the means for determining whether any program is meeting its goals; that is, whether, the measured outcomes for a given set of instructional inputs match the intended or pre-specified outcomes i.e. evaluation

is carried out to see whether the stated objectives have been achieved. Similarly Tuckman (1985) claims that the success of a language program in terms of innovations and implementation can be determined by systematic evaluation.

The main purposes of evaluation in language education projects and programs are for accountability or developmental purposes (Rea-Dickins and Germaine 1998). Norris (1990) said that evaluation may be based on an "objectives model"-to see how far objectives have been met; or a "developmental model"-to identify strengths and weaknesses of the design and methodological procedures or both (Norris, 1990 as referred by Ellis, 1998).

So Evaluation is integral to professional practice; systematic evaluation generates relevant data and information about the program's innovation or whether changes need to be made in the course outline and selected materials and how far it can be continued or whether it is transferable etc. The whole educational process that is the refining an ELT program cannot be completed without a methodical evaluation procedure.

In order to contextualize the present study, several studies conducted, on NA and language program evaluation are reported and discussed in this section.

Khan (2000) evaluated the English Foundation Course at the Arts Faculty at DU. She identified several constraints and problems of the initial course and recommended that a formal needs analysis needs to be carried out on the basis of which the course objectives, content and materials need to be revised and rewritten.

In a related study, Akin and Guceri (2001) carried out a "Macro Materials Evaluation" at Bilkent University, Turkey. It was found that the materials were not satisfactory. On the basis of this materials evaluation study, improvement plans for producing more effective materials were adopted.

A need assessment was conducted by Banu (1993) at the Institute of Modern Languages (IML) of DU. The IML course partly fulfilled students' expectations. The lack of motivation and high drop-out rate in the course was due to the students' dissatisfaction. The study provided informed suggestions for course improvement.

Chaudhury (2011) conducted a needs analysis to identify the English language learning needs of students and teachers at the Humanities Faculty of Dhaka University. The needs analysis revealed discrepancy between the students' and teachers' perceptions of the students' English proficiency. Mismatches were also found between the Humanities students' English language needs and the content and objectives of the English courses that were being taught.

More recently Hossain (2012) conducted a survey at Presidency University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. The survey investigated: the problems students faced in studying EAP. On the basis of its findings tangible recommendations to augment course content and materials were made.

Basturkmen and Al-Huneidi (1996) conducted a needs analysis to study the English language needs and attitudes of students and faculty in Kuwait University's college of Petroleum and engineering. A database of information about study in the college, language needs, perceptions, expectations for English courses, was generated and this was used as a resource primarily for curriculum design.

Zhu & Flaitz (2005) conducted a NA at a public university in the United States.

The objective was to create a basis for assessing the relevance of the institution's current English second language program and identify common problems faced by students and faculty members.

The findings of the present research reflected and confirmed different strands of the findings from all the aforementioned studies.

METHOD

A mixed method design involving survey questionnaires, classroom observations and interviews was employed for the purposes of this study. The respondents were second year students, English language teachers and subject teachers from the Departments of History, Philosophy and Linguistics at the Humanities Faculty of DU. Table 1 illustrates the details of the respondents and the data collection tools used.

Computer coded questionnaires using a five-point Likert scale to assess responses to close-ended questions was used to determine the students' and teachers' perceptions. The completed questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS software. For easy reference the data has been presented in table form and frequency counts and percentages have been used to describe the findings and data analyses.

- Questionnaires were given to 60 second year students from the Departments of History, Philosophy and Linguistics at the Humanities Faculty of Dhaka University.
- Corresponding questionnaires were given to 30 subject teachers and language teachers from these departments.
- Classroom observation and document study (students' work, course outlines etc.) was used to clarify and corroborate questionnaire findings
- Semi-formal interviews were conducted with subject, language teachers and students to further clarify and corroborate findings

Table 1.Research instruments and respondents

Respondents	Questionnaires	Document Study	Classroom Observation
2nd year students of Dhaka University from the faculty of Humanities	60	√	√ (5 hours)
Teachers	30	—	—

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Humanities students' and teachers' perspectives regarding the four language skills and the existing ELT course are presented in this section. The first section presents the students' perceptions vis a vis the four skills.

Humanities Students' Perceptions of Reading Ability

Findings revealed that a considerable number of students are "weak" at:

- reading to respond critically (43.3%)
- understanding a writer's attitude and purpose (28.4%)
- understanding and interpreting charts, graphs, tables (23.4%)
- guessing the meanings of unknown words from their context (20%)
- looking through a text quickly to find specific information (20%)

Hence inadequacy is apparent in the reading sub-skills.

Humanities Students' Perceptions of Writing Ability

A significant number of students were reported to be "weak" at:

- adopting appropriate tone and style (41.6%)
- organizing paragraphs (33.3%)
- organizing the overall assignment (31.7%)
- using appropriate vocabulary (31.7%)
- following instructions & directions (31.6%)
- expressing ideas appropriately (30.4%)

Thus weakness at the writing sub-skills is manifest.

Humanities Students' Perceptions of Listening Ability

Results showed that several students were "weak" in:

- understanding different English accents (28.4%)
- understanding seminars and talks (26.6%)
- carrying out instructions or directions (25%)

So insufficiency in listening sub-skills is perceived.

Humanities Students' Perceptions of Speaking Ability

It was noted that many students were "weak" at:

- delivering oral presentations or reports (35%)
- explaining processes or procedures (43.3%)
- brainstorming (36.7%)
- taking part in class or tutorial or group discussions (25%)
- speaking with other fluent speakers of English (38.3%)

Therefore inadequacy is marked in speaking sub-skills.

Students' Perceptions of Course Difficulty

Most students "sometimes-often" faced difficulty in the course as:

- discussions in class were difficult (93.7%)
- language of the course book/handout /materials were difficult(93.3%)
- tasks and activities were difficult (93.3%)
- difficulty in completing the given work on time in class (91.7%)

Thus the existing course, materials and tasks can be considered as extremely difficult for Humanities students.

Teachers' Views on the present ELT courses:

The teachers' perception of the existing English course was examined and the main results are highlighted below:

Reading sub-skills

Many teachers felt the course was "not helpful" in teaching:

- understanding and interpreting charts or graphs or tables (36.7%)
- understanding a writer's attitude and purpose (26.7%)
- reading to respond critically (23.5%)
- guessing the meanings of unknown words from their context (16.6%)

Thus the reading component in the course can be considered inadequate.

Writing sub-skills

A large number of teachers felt the course was "not helpful" in teaching:

- adopting appropriate tone and style (26.7%)
- organizing paragraphs (20%)
- expressing ideas appropriately (16.7%)
- using correct punctuation and spelling (13.3%)
- structuring sentences (13.3%)
- using appropriate vocabulary (13.3%)

- expressing what you want to say clearly (13.3%)

So the prescribed writing component of the course may be considered unsatisfactory.

Listening sub-skills

A lot of teachers felt the course was "not helpful" in teaching:

- Listening to and understanding seminars and talks (23.3%)
- Listening to and understanding lectures and notes (20%)
- Listening to and carrying out instructions and directions (16.7%)
- Listening to and understanding class and tutorial discussions (13.3%)
- Listening to and answering questions in class and tutorials (13.3%)

This indicates that the listening module of the course may be considered as insufficient.

Speaking sub-skills

Some teachers felt the course was "not helpful" in teaching

- expressing opinions or objections (30%)
- explaining processes or procedures (26.7%)
- asking questions (20%)
- delivering oral presentations or reports (20%)

Consequently the prescribed course module for speaking can be considered ineffectual. The majority of the teachers were "unsure", "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" on the matter of whether the course helped their students to:

- Learn language usage (83.3%)
- Improve their English (70%)
- Feel confident about using English in their studies (70%)

In general the teachers opined that the course book was not meeting students expectations:

- reading sections are not interesting/motivating (80 %)
- reading passages are not of appropriate difficulty level (80%)

Therefore the teachers did not feel that the course book content helped to develop their students' English proficiency.

Course book evaluations

In this section strengths and weaknesses of the textbook are highlighted and some suggestions for improvement are presented.

Teachers' opinions on the "Advancing English Skills" textbook

Based upon Interviews with teachers the following strengths of the textbook were established:

- The topics are locally relevant and culturally appropriate
- The textbook is suitable for pre-intermediate level
- There is a good mix of easy and relatively more difficult texts
- The textbook caters to students of different proficiency levels
- The textbook moves from easy to difficult texts
- The textbook mainly emphasizes upon reading and writing skills
- The textbook sections on paragraph and essay writing are reasonably good

However the following shortcomings were also identified:

- The textbook is inadequate
- The textbook has minimum mediation and scaffolding
- The textbook has no coverage of the listening skill at all

- The grammar exercises in the textbook are inadequate
- The text length is awkward as some texts in the textbook are too short and others are extremely lengthy
- There is a mismatch between students' present proficiency level and the difficulty level of the textbook's reading passages
- Some of the texts in the textbook are not interesting enough
- The text types in the textbook are limited in range and lack variety

Teachers' suggestions for course improvement

The teachers offered a range of suggestions for improving the course and textbook which could be taken into serious consideration in future course design. Firstly it was suggested that the course be modified to cater to the needs of students of different abilities and levels. Secondly it was recommended that all four skills be focused upon, particularly listening and speaking. It was also advised that some texts could be retained and a wider variety of texts could be added including authentic materials. Additionally it was proposed that grammar could be reduced and subject specific vocabulary could be built up. Moreover it was counseled that sentence formation should be focused upon along with the introduction of writing on social or practical issues, writing research papers and formal reports. Lastly it was put forward that ICT and multimedia presentations should also be included in the course.

CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion and observations, it appears that the current English course and "Advancing English Skills" course book leaves much to be desired and that there is plenty of scope for improvement in the present course that is being taught at the Humanities faculty. The feedback from the teachers established that their students' abilities fall short of the proficiency level that is required, to academically succeed at the tertiary level. Moreover areas in which the English course is not fulfilling the teachers' expectations have been identified. The Humanities students' perceptions of their specific needs were identified, their opinions about the present English course were ascertained; areas in which improvement is required were highlighted. Future ELT courses will be benefited greatly if the above mentioned needs and perceptions of Humanities students and teachers are kept in mind whilst specifying the content and designing the courses.

The needs analysis identified:

- specific English language needs of the Humanities Faculty students
- specific areas of difficulty in language learning that need improvement from both the teachers' and students' perception
- the strengths and shortcomings of the present language course book
- areas of mismatch between learners' needs and the current course
- suggestions for addressing the mismatches and bridging the gap

This study raised awareness as it brought to light and provided information to teachers, curriculum experts, and decision makers about the existing course. It is important to remember that evaluation is an intrinsic part of teaching and learning and necessary because it provides specific pointers and guidelines to curriculum developers and practitioners for future development of planning and development of courses and for

management and implementation of classroom tasks and activities. The findings of this study pertaining to students' language learning needs, lacks, wants, problems and difficulties, and teachers' perception about students' language proficiency have implications for future curriculum development.

REFERENCES

Akin, A.R., and M. Guceri. (2001). A macro materials evaluation for better or for worse. *The Weekly Column*, Article 56. Retrieved on 4 November 2006 from http://www.eltnewsletter.com/back/April2001/art562001.htm.

Alam F. (2001). The Dhaka University English curriculum. *Revisioning English in Bangladesh*, P1-14. UPL.

Banu, R. (1993). A comparative needs analysis: Bangladeshi students at IML and one Japanese student at Georgetown University. *Journal of the institute of Modern Languages* (ed.).

Basturkmen, H., and A. Al Huneidi (1996). *The language needs analysis project at the college of petroleum engineering Kuwait University*. ERIC document. Retrieved on 10/11/2008

Chaudhury, T. A. (2011). Identifying the English language needs of humanities students at Dhaka University. *Journal of Linguistics,* 32-53.

Choudhury S. I. (2001). Rethinking the two Englishes. *Revisioning English in Bangladesh*, 15-27. UPL

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). London: Longman

Dudley Evans, T., and M.J. St. John. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes: a multi-disciplinary approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (1998) Teaching and research: Options in grammar teaching. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*, 139-60.

Flowerdew, J., and M. Peacock. (2001). The EAP curriculum: issues, methods, and challenges. In Flowerdew, J and Peacock, M. (Eds) *Issues in EAP: A*

preliminary perspective. UK: Cambridge University Press

Haque, S. M. F., and M. Maniruzaman. (1999). Attitudinal and motivational impact on EFL proficiency of undergraduates: afurther investigation. *The Dhaka University Studies,* 65-87.

Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hossain, M. D. (2012). EAP course design: compromising with learner needs. *Research Journal of Commerce and Behavioral Science. 1(6),* 7-13.

Hutchinson,T., and A. Waters. (1987). *English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jordan, R. (1997). *English for academic purposes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khan, R. (2000). The English foundation course at Dhaka University: an evaluation. *The Dhaka University Studies, Part A, 57(1),* 77-110.

Kennedy, C. et al. (2001). *Sociolinguistics.* Birmingham: Centre for English Language studies.

Manivannan, G. (2006). *The importance of the English language*. Retrieved on April 6, 2009.from http://www.usingenglish.com/teachers/articles/importance-english-language.html.

Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative syllabus design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching & learning.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle publishers.

Rahman, A. (2007). The history and policy of English education in Bangladesh. In *Thehistories and policies of English education in Asia.* (Ed) *Asia TEFL Series I (205-231)* Cobblestone Austin TX

Rea-Dickins, P., and K.P. Germaine. (1998). (Eds) *Managing evaluation and innovation in language teaching: building bridges*. England: Longman Ltd.

Robinson, P, (1991). *ESP today.* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Tsui, A. B. M. &J. W. Tollefson. (2007). Language policy and the construction

of National Cultural identity. In A. B. M. Tsui & J. W. Tollefson (Eds.) *Language, Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts.* Lawrence Erlbaum Mahwah N.J. 1-24.

Tuckman, B. W. (1985). *Evaluating instructional programs.* (2nd ed.) Massachusetts, USA: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.

Weir, C. and J. Roberts. (1994). *Evaluation in ELT.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

Zaman, N., R. Khan, N. Huq, Z. Alam, T. S. Mahboob, and B. S. Sinha (2000) *Advancing English skills.* Bangladesh: Department of English University of Dhaka.

Zhu, W., and J. Flaitz. (2005). Using focus group methodology to understand International students' academic needs: a comparison of perspectives. *TESL- EJ 8(4).*