AN ACADEMIC NEEDS ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS
Helen Kakrida
Agricultural University of Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT

The aim of the present paper is to report the results of an academic English needs analysis carried out at the Agricultural University of Athens and to offer a general overview of the learners’ wants and likes, their learning strategies as well as their needs and objectives during their academic studies. It also suggests some teaching implications for the improvement and development of the EAP course material presently used in EFL-EAP classes at the AUA.

Introduction

The present paper reports the results of an academic English needs analysis carried out in the Agricultural University of Athens (AUA). The research was conducted through an extensive questionnaire administered to first-year students of Agriculture in the beginning of the academic year 2004-2005 and involved an investigation into the students’ views on their learning needs and expectations, the difficulties they encounter in learning English, their preferences for language skills and their objectives during their studies at the AUA.

The aim of the study is to look into ways of improving the quality of teaching a foreign language at tertiary level, to revise the syllabus and materials so that they serve the students’ needs and objectives. The conclusions drawn refer mainly to the connection between students’ attitudes toward EFL learning during their secondary school years and their expectations of an EAP programme during their studies at the AUA.

Research background

A broad definition of needs analysis would refer to “the process of determining the needs for which a learner requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities” (Richards et al. 1992)

A needs analysis has a practical rather than theoretical value as it refers to an analysis of the aims and the teaching methodology and focuses every time on the teaching material and how on ways of improving it. A needs analysis is not only a means of looking into the teaching / learning reality but also serves as a control tool of testing the suitability of the teaching programme as well as the effectiveness of the teaching methods. In this respect, a needs analysis operates as a diagnostic means of making changes and modifications in the curriculum so that it can be adjusted to the learners, the students of agriculture in our case.

EFL courses at the AUA

According to a study on the Language Policy of Greek Universities in Greece and in Cyprus (Tambanoglou, 2003), the language policy of Higher Education Institutions in Greece is shaped by a number of factors:

- The languages taught
- Whether the course is compulsory or optional
- The credit unit system
- The possibility of exemption and the relevant prerequisites
- The existence of other terminology courses

A student who enters Tertiary Education generally already has some knowledge and communicative skills in the foreign language, thus the role of the University is to enhance the already acquired knowledge and to encourage the acquisition of further skills by the students. Today, the language policy at the AUA is as follows:

English is the only foreign language offered at the AUA. Students who have obtained (or who are going to obtain during their studies at the AUA) a certificate in a Foreign Language (English, French, German or Italian) of at least the B2 level of the European Council are exempt from attending the English course and therefore are not obliged to sit the exams.

English language courses have been taught at the Agricultural University of Athens on an optional basis since 1980. In 1994, following a Senate decision, English became a compulsory subject. It is taught during the first six semesters of studies. The AUA Rector’s Council (13/09/1994) decided that the course is not to be graded on the basis of the typical 1 to 10 marking scale; instead, papers are assessed as “pass” or “fail”. Students cannot graduate unless they have successfully completed the English courses offered by the University (with the exception of language certificate holders).

Objectives of the course

The English course is meant to train the students in the language skills necessary for agricultural studies in Greece and abroad (post graduate studies). In particular, the course focuses on:

- agricultural terminology
- academic skills (academic reading and academic writing)
- translation of agricultural texts
At the beginning of the academic year students are given a diagnostic test so that their level and weaknesses can be identified and remedial work can be planned beyond the regular teaching syllabus. In general, the level of the AUA students ranges from B1 to C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

**Questionnaire design and structure**

The questionnaire contained 17 questions of closed type (yes or no) and of multiple choice, based on three axes: the students’ previously acquired knowledge during their school years (Questions 1-6), their experience in language use (Questions 7-11) and their expectations in learning a foreign language during their studies at the AUA and later on. The results are presented according to this structure.

**The participants**

According to the AUA records, 474 students were enrolled in the six Faculties of the AUA in the academic year 2004-05. The questionnaire was distributed on the first day of the English classes. 135 questionnaires were returned (49 Crop Science students, 18 Animal Science students, 8 Agricultural Biotechnology students, 23 Rural Economics and Development students, 20 Food Science & Technology students, and 17 Natural Resources Management & Agricultural Engineering students). The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 19 years old (75% aged 18). 73 were female and 62 male and 72% were born in Athens or in the wider area of Attica. The questionnaire was written in Greek to ensure better understanding.

**Limitations**

The number of students who responded to the questionnaire constitutes a major limitation for this study, as there is an issue of representativeness and therefore any attempt to reach definite conclusions or make general recommendations for teaching practices based upon such a small sample of students is tentative. In fact, the numbers of respondents per faculty are not representative in relation to the students’ total number. However, it was rather difficult or impossible to have access to all students as class attendance is not compulsory. No sampling techniques were used, which affects the internal validity of the study. The results are a product of a descriptive analysis and no statistical analysis was done.

**Selected findings and interpretation**

Looking into the students’ background we see that 50% of the respondents have been taught English for 7 or 8 years, whereas 22% for 9 to 10 years (Chart 1). This could lead us to the conclusion that the level of the students could be described as quite high (C1). However, only 8% of the subjects are C1 or C2 Certificate holders while 54% are B2 Certificate holders (Chart 2). Only 6% of the respondents have been taught English for 1 to 4 years (mostly at school and private language schools). Very few of the respondents (27%) have taken private language lessons and 1.5% have been taught English abroad. However, when the students were requested to assess their English language knowledge on a 1-6 scale (levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) the answers were various. The students tend to overestimate their knowledge since 24% assess themselves at C1 level and 41% at B2 level (chart 3).

It is interesting that, when asked for a detailed self assessment of their language skills (chart 4), almost 60% of the respondents claim that they have very good reading skills whereas almost 50% believe that they have very good speaking skills. Grammar, writing skills and listening skills rank between B1 and B2 level for 64% of the respondents. There is, of course, a percentage of 11% to 17% who assess their skills very low. A diagnostic test given at the beginning of the academic year verified that some students were extremely weak. We cannot ignore this as it poses an issue of whether these students are in a position to follow the English language courses of the AUA.
In our attempt to look into the ways the students make use of the foreign language beyond the classroom, we asked them if they read any English leaflets, guides or scientific texts, if they write letters, e-mails, application forms or academic/technical texts in English, and if they listen to any English radio stations (Chart 5). 53% of the respondents say that they read guides in English and 55% that they write e-mails. Not surprisingly, few of the students read scientific texts (84% answered negatively) whereas hardly any of them write academic essays (96% answered negatively). These figures could be considered normal since the respondents have just entered university and it is unlikely they have any experience in EAP. What these figures actually show is the necessity to intensify the teaching of academic writing and scientific texts and terminology at the AUA.

Closely related to the above is the students’ ranking of the individual skills (chart 6). The great majority of the respondents (84%) regard reading of agricultural texts quite or very important. 78% of the respondents regard terminology equally important. Listening and speaking skills, as well as presentation skills also rank quite high (73% and 82% respectively). As for grammar and discourse, there is a percentage of 60% who consider them important, and this can be attributed to the students’ experience in secondary school where great emphasis is put upon grammar.

The issue of translation of scientific texts is quite interesting. In the questionnaire there were two questions on translation. The first one was “Do you consider important to get practice on translation of scientific texts at the AUA?” to which the answers were various. 61% of the respondents are positive whereas 26% consider translation of little importance. There is also an 8% who consider it not important at all. (Chart 6). In the second question the students’ were asked to state their preference regarding translation
Which is more important to learn during your studies at AUA?

![Chart 6]

**TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH INTO GREEK**

- a lot
- quite
- a little
- not at all

**TRANSLATION FROM GREEK INTO ENGLISH**

- a lot
- quite
- a little
- not at all

**NO TRANSLATION**

- a lot
- quite
- a little
- not at all

![Chart 7]

What do you prefer studying?

- speaking
- reading
- writing
- new vocabulary
- grammar

![Chart 8]

(Chart 7). An extremely high percentage (83%) believe it is very important to be able to translate from English into Greek, 67% believe that translation from Greek into English is important, and only 20% assume they will not need translation in their future career. Given the fact that translation is a basic tool for low level learners, it is understandable that these students whose level ranges between B1 and B2 in most cases regard translation as a useful tool in order to deal with second language learning. It is also known that only advanced language users avoid translating when they use a second language, which may account for the small percentage of students who claim that they do not need to be taught translation.
A number of questions concerned the students’ preferences for the individual language skills (chart 8). The majority of students are in favour of speaking (45% of the respondents favour speaking skills “a lot” and 28% “quite”), which illustrates the students’ immediate need to communicate and apply the knowledge they have acquired at school. Reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition are their second preference; 73% of the respondents prefer studying texts “quite” or “a lot” and 67% prefer dealing with new vocabulary. However, the majority of the respondents tend to put grammar and writing at the bottom of the list. Over 50% say that they prefer grammar “a little” or “not at all” and almost 45% that they prefer writing “a little” or “not at all”). Such results may be attributed to the traditional pedantic teaching methods often applied at secondary school and the overload of grammar exercises.

Now, the most popular answer to the question “How do you think you can learn the English language better?” was “in a group” or “in pairs” (84% and 71% respectively) whereas “learning in class” was chosen by 44% of the respondents. Still, there is a 54% who choose to be taught individually. (chart 9). We can see that individual student-centred teaching is preferred. Moreover, it is obvious that the students’ preferences after 8 to 10 years of learning English are oriented to small group teaching where more practice and remedial work can be done. The students seem to feel more confident when taught in small groups where there is more personal contact between the teacher and the learner. Finally, the option of learning the language outside the classroom was not very popular (60% of the respondents gave a negative answer).

Finally, it was interesting to look into the reasons why the students consider learning English im-
Conclusions – teaching implications

Taking into account the manifold role of the EAP/ESP practitioner, that of a teacher, researcher, evaluator, course designer and material designer, it is obvious that the parameters which affect the teaching of English as a foreign language in tertiary education are various and complicated. In other words, given the context in which the language taught is used, teaching should be adapted to meet the learners’ specific needs in their specific purposes as much as possible. The students’ motivation is also greatly influenced by their interests and needs; therefore it is essential that teaching be focused on these needs in order to be as effective as possible.

A needs analysis is one of the first steps of a course design, and its findings should determine the objectives of the course (West, 1994). However, a small scale study like this cannot lead to generalized suggestions on teaching practice; what it only serves as is a touchstone for the selection and organization of the teaching material and strategies. The questionnaire revealed many of the students’ views; even though they don’t differ greatly from what we expected they give us a lot of data for the necessary modifications and adaptations of the teaching material and the English course in general at the AUA.

It seems that the students, after eight to ten years of learning English express the need to focus on topics closely related to their field of studies in the AUA, that is, they strongly express the desire and need to learn agricultural terminology, to analyze agricultural texts, to get familiarized with presentation skills and on the whole to explore material through academic skills. Furthermore, the students ranked speaking skills and language use quite high together with the acquisition of better reading skills for scientific texts and new specific vocabulary, as opposed to mere grammar and discourse. This means that the use of authentic material – scientific journals or textbooks should be enhanced in the AUA curriculum. In this way the learners -besides being familiarized with agricultural texts - will be more highly motivated during the sessions, since the teaching material will meet their expectations. However, given the fact that they are mostly a mixed ability group, it is upon the teacher to adapt the material to the students’ average level. In addition, the preparation and presentation of scientific projects in English being an integral part of academic life, it would be very useful for the students to have more opportunities to make class presentations on topics connected to their scientific field or take part in global simulations of communicative tasks on agriculturally oriented topics. On the other hand, although the methodological usefulness of translation has been criticized by the proponents of a communicative approach in recent years, using translation in L2 teaching is among the most common practices of ESP in tertiary education (Sewell, 1996). In fact, the acquisition of new L2 language items through translation is fostered as it is based on transfer of L1 existing competence (Tudor, 1987). Of course, the aim in using translation is not to make language students professional translators. In contrast, if we consider the fact that every language bears a cultural load, it is vital that through translation we introduce learners to L1-L2 differences and help them survive in real academic and professional situations. Therefore, teaching students the basic techniques of translation is considered necessary and so a variety of translation tasks should be included in the EAP/ESP syllabus in accordance with the students expectations shown in the questionnaire.

The use of portfolios is regarded as a very useful tool which promotes the active participation of learners. It facilitates student-teacher interaction, it is an alternative way of recording learners’ achievements as well as a means of promoting learner reflection. The portfolio can include new information, advice, feedback and corrections which are to be enriched every now and then. Therefore, the use of portfolios in the teaching process could be a means of communication between the teacher and the learner especially in the case of students whose level is not sufficient for them to follow the regular teaching syllabus. It could also serve as a diagnostic tool for student weaknesses on which remedial work can be offered. Portfolios seem to promote a deeper involvement of the learners, offering opportunities for self-assessment, fostering student autonomy and shifting the focus of teaching in tertiary education from a teacher-centred approach to a more learner-centred one.

The use of case studies could also be included in the English language curriculum in the AUA. The students deal with authentic, real life situations; they are confronted with a problem to which different possible solutions exist and they are trained in grasp-
ing the global idea of texts and situations. Case studies can easily be incorporated in the regular teaching syllabus. The role of the teacher is that of a coordinator or advisor. The advantage of this type of approach is that it stimulates the students’ motivation to speak and prepares them for real life situations in their future job, which is what the students expect and need.

Finally, the use of the e-learning technology presently available at the AUA would enable us to create intra- or even inter-university groups according to the student’s specific scientific field, their specific interests or their level. “It should be stressed that the use of e-learning technology opens further possibilities of cooperation among universities of common academic fields such as the AUA and the Sofia University of Forestry since it does not require the physical present of the instructor. Through the use of e-class technology the students have access to authentic material on the internet, which they can explore individually in collaboration with the teacher. Furthermore the need of students to work in small groups or individually could be met.

Further research

The use of an academic needs analysis can be instrumental in becoming aware of the specific needs and priorities of the learners. Considering the fact that the learners are different from year to year and as a result their needs and expectations may vary, it is necessary to conduct an ongoing needs analysis so that the teaching/learning process could be more effective. In addition, a more objective survey on a greater scale, based on more detailed questionnaires, interviews and/or teacher and learner diaries would give more reliable data.

It would also be useful if this same group of students were given the same (or similar) questionnaires at various points during their studies. This would give us an insight into: a) whether and how their needs and wants have changed and b) whether and to what extent their needs and expectations have been met in the course of their studies at the AUA. Finally, it would be interesting to have a needs analysis of graduate students of the AUA or of people working in agriculture, so that a comparative analysis of their needs can be done; in this way the teaching syllabus could be better lined with the real life expectations of the job market.

Conclusion

What is explored in this short study is the learners’ needs and expectations, the possible difficulties they may encounter during the learning process, and their desires and potential in language learning so that the teaching approach and the English language curriculum at the Agricultural University of Athens can be improved. What was shown to be of importance was to give more emphasis on terminology, agricultural texts, presentation skills and academic writing skills. The use of authentic material, global simulations and case studies, various translation tasks, portfolios and e-class technology are some of the teaching suggestions for the enhancement of the English language curriculum in the AUA.

References

15. Postgraduate Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki