**A Case Study in General English Learning Needs Analysis**

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**Abstract.** This is a case study in general English learning needs analysis. This study focuses on the situation of one person’s English learning and using who is a freshman in a common college majoring in medical imaging engineering over a period of five years. This case study consists of three stages. At first, the research summarizes the learner’s present English skills through self-assessment questionnaire and English test. Secondly, it analyzes the situation of college English teaching by teacher’s interview and classroom observation. After two-year study, the learner also finished the self-assessment questionnaire on English competence. Finally, the author observes the object’s English use at workplace based on the framework of needs analysis by Hutchinson & Water (1987: 59). The results of the study show that college English teaching should have bridged the gap between the present English abilities of the learner and the English needs of the situation in which he will work, but it failed. Therefore, it’s necessary to supplement ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course, especially EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) course after general English learning. In addition, it’s essential to make a profound and comprehensive learners’ needs analysis before college English course designed.

**Introduction**

At present, more and more colleges switch the focus of college English teaching from general English to English for specific purpose (ESP). The class periods of general English are decreased while the more ESP courses are provided. This trend is more common in firs-class universities in China for various reasons. However, the college English teaching is still focusing on general English in the most common colleges. For example, there are just two colleges which try out the teaching mode of combination general English teaching and ESP teaching among 52 colleges in the whole Jilin province according to the author’s research. Is it necessary to reform the current college English teaching? Therefore, the author conduct a case study in general English learning needs analysis to answer this question.

**1. Theoretical Framework**

**1.1 Needs analysis**

We maintain that any course should be based on an analysis of learners’ needs. This is why we choose needs analysis as an approach to test whether current course design in college English is reasonable or not.

According to Howatt (1984), the term “analysis of needs” first appeared in India in the 1920s, proposed by Micheal West. He found that secondary-level learners’ needs could not be defined with any great precision and whose teaching was defined as Teaching English for No Obvious Reason [1]. After that, the concept of need didn’t appeare again until 50 years later. However, the term became prominent with the advent of ESP, for which need analysis has become a key instrument in course design. The dominant focus of early needs analysis was constrained to ESP. More recently the focus has shifted to include general learning.

**1.2 Approaches to need analysis**

The foremost research on needs analysis is John Munby’s Communicative Syllabus Design
(1978). Munby designs a highly specific set of procedures for discovering target situation needs [3].

The target situation needs mainly refer to learners’ language requirements in the occupational or academic situation. He calls this set the Communication Needs Processor (CNP). But in reality, there is much more to needs than this. Subsequently, the demand analysis method has been developed to take into account the current needs of learners and the needs of the situation of the target, which can be referred to the analysis of learners’ deficiencies or lacks [4]. Hutchinson & Water (1987: 63) also presents a learning-centered approach to needs analysis. They emphasize both target situation needs and learning needs [5]. Analysis of target situation needs is concerned with language use. But language use is only part of story. We also need to know about language learning. Analysis on target situation can tell us what people do with language. What we also need to know is how people learn to do what they do with language. In this paper, the author will use Hutchinson & Water (1987: 59) framework to analyze the target situation needs. The following is simple framework of target situation analysis by Hutchinson & Water (1987: 59):

A target situation analysis framework
Why is the language needed?
How will the language be used?
What will the content areas be?
Who will the learner use the language with?
Where will the language be used?
When will the language be used?

2. Methodology

Needs analysis methods can be classified in various ways. Berwich (1989) makes a distinction between inductive (eg. observations and case studies) and deductive methods (eg. questionnaires, surveys or other data-gathering instruments) [2]. This study adopts case studies as the major method.

This study focuses on the situation of one person’s English learning and using over a period of five years. The object of the research is a freshman in a common college whose major is Medical Imaging engineering and we call him Huang. This case study consists of three stages. The first one mainly concerns the situation of English learning when he was admitted to the college. The method of data-collection is questionnaire and English test. The questionnaire is a self-assessment on English Competence and the test is based on the college entrance English exam. The second stage will discuss the issue of college English teaching. Through teacher’s interview, classroom observation and student questionnaire, the thesis aims to analyze the teaching method and results of college English. The last stage, the author will observe the Huang’s English use at workplace based on the framework of Hutchinson & Water (1987: 59)

3. Findings

3.1 First stage (present situation analysis)

After seven-year systematic English learning, the student in my case study develop the basic English skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing before his college English learning. His reading skill is especially better than another three. In the following part, the study will summarize his listening, speaking, reading and writing skills respectively.

Listening: Huang is able to follow the English teacher’s instruction in the class and comprehend the simple English daily conversations. When listening to a passage without new words, he can understand 70% of it if it’s spoken by the speed of 120words per minute.

Speaking: He can introduce some situations simply such as, his own experience, family, school or some persons. He is competent to keep talking ceaselessly for five sentences in English. Although there are some pauses and repetitions in his talks, he can still express himself clearly and fluently.

Reading: He can read the passages which are about society, culture, history, autobiography and
so on with the speed of 50-60 words per minute. 70% of the passage reading can be comprehended by him.

**Writing:** If given hints, he is able to spend 30 minutes to write an article with 80-100 words. There are no serious mistakes in grammar and vocabulary.

**Vocabulary:** He can master 1200 words and some other phrases and expressions. In addition, he also knows other 800 words but not master them.

### 3.2 Second stage (the general situation of college English teaching)

1. **Course design:** College English is a compulsory course which is taught for two terms. There are four class periods of reading classes and two listening and speaking classes each week. The teaching week will last 18 weeks each semester. There are textbooks for this course.

2. **Teaching method:** The teaching approach to college English is the combination the multi-media teaching with traditional one. The multi-media method dominates the teaching methods. The students also must attend the autonomous English listening class.

3. **Teaching evaluation:** Teaching evaluation combines the formative evaluation and summative evaluation. There’ll be the final exam. In addition, students also need to finish the on-line assignment on the self-learning platform.

   The results of self-assessment in English skills are showed as follow:

   **Listening:** Huang is able to comprehend dialogues and short passages which are closely related to learned contents with the speed of 130 words per minute. He can understand the directions expression, such as directing the way, guidelines for manipulation.

   **Speaking:** Huang can answer teacher’s question and discuss with classmates and deliver a simple and short speech in English.

   **Reading:** With the help of English dictionary, Huang can comprehend medium-difficulty and ordinary-theme passages. In addition, he can read low-difficulty passages with the speed of 100 words per minute.

   **Writing:** Based on the specific outline or theme, Huang can compose an article with 120 words in half an hour. Moreover, he can write or reply business letters or e-mails.

   **Vocabulary:** He can master 4500 words and 700 phrases and expressions among which there are 2000 active words.

### 3.3 Third stage (target situation analysis)

Huang found a job as a training supervisor in the international service department of a medical equipment corporation after his graduation. Based on the observation of Huang’s English use at work, it’s concluded that English will be used in the following four mediums: speaking, listening, writing and reading. The content areas will be related to medicine, biology and engineering. In these subjects, Huang’s skill should achieve a technician’s level. The listeners of Huang’s English include both native and non-native speakers. In the following part, the thesis will analyze his English from four aspects:

**Listening:** Huang needs to comprehend the descriptions of technical problems in English by native or non-native speakers. The working environments require him to understand daily conversations in English.

**Speaking:** Huang has to solve the technical problems in English through phone and deliver the presentations or training in English. In addition, he also needs to make daily conversations accurately and fluently.

**Reading:** He is demanded to comprehend technical manuals, instructions and e-mail in English.

**Writing:** He needs to reply the e-mail and make training PPT in English.

### Conclusion

Before the course of college English is designed, the learners’ needs analysis should be conducted. All colleges in China provide the course of college English as a compulsory course for two years. Almost all of them didn’t carry out the learners’ needs analysis before the course was
taught. Therefore, the two-year college English learning can’t well prepare the learner for the challenges from English use at work. We can conclude that the college English teaching is time-consuming and inefficient. Based on the findings of the study, it’s summarized that it’s essential to make a profound and comprehensive learners’ needs analysis before college English course designed.

College English teaching should have bridged the gap between the present English abilities of the learner and the English needs of the situation in which he will work, but it failed. The findings of the study show that the English ability of the learner after two-year study can’t fully satisfy the working situations’ needs. The major problem lies in that general ability of learner can be improved after college English learning. But that didn’t focus on the working needs. Therefore, it’s necessary to supplement ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course, especially EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) course, such as engineering English, medicine English etc.

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