HOW FAR ARE THE TEACHER TRAINEES' COMMUNICATIVE NEEDS ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN ELT DEPARTMENTS? *

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENLİĞİ BÖLÜMLERİNDEKİ ÖĞRENCİLERİN İLETİŞİMSEL DİL GEREKSİNİMLERİ NE ÖLÇÜDE KARŞILANIYOR?

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Abstract :

The aim of this present study is to report the results of an academic English needs analysis carried out in the English Departments of Dokuz Eylül University and Ondokuz Mayıs University. The study also attempts to investigate the effectiveness of communicative language teaching in these departments from the standpoint of students' individual needs and expectations. The study is based on a questionnaire filled out by 307 undergraduates and 37 English teachers from the English Departments at the universities concerned. The four main objectives of the research were to (1) identify how the teacher trainees perceived the use of various communicative skills, (2) discover how students rated the communicative language skills among the other skills and also their competence in using these skills, (3) find out how students assessed the usefulness of the English courses given by the English Departments of the two universities regarding their communicative language needs, and (4) determine the extent to which their opinions matched those of their English teachers. Besides, this paper provides some pedagogical implications to improve and develop the content of the EFL courses and the methodology which is at present used in EFL classrooms at the universities concerned. It concludes with possible suggestions as to how the teacher trainees' communicative needs can appropriately be worked out within the framework of English language curriculum planning and syllabus review.

Özet :

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi ve Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İngilizce Bölümlerinde uygulanan akademik bir İngilizce ihtiyaç analizinin sonuçlarını incelemektir. Çalışma ayrıca, bu bölümlerde iletişimsel dil öğretiminin etkinliğini, öğrencilerin bireysel ihtiyaçları ve beklentileri açısından incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, söz konusu üniversitelerin İngilizce Bölümlerindeki 307 öğrenci ve 37 İngilizce öğretim elemanına uygulanan bir ankete dayanmaktadır. Araştırmanın dört ana amacı, (1) öğrencilerin çeşitli iletişimsel becerilerin kullanımını nasıl algıladıklarını saptamak, (2) öğrencilerin diğer beceriler arasında iletişimsel becerileri nasıl değerlendirdiklerini ve aynı zamanda bu becerileri kullanmadaki yeteneklerini belirlemek, (3) öğrencilerin iletişimsel ihtiyaçlarını düşünerek İngilizce derslerini nasıl değerlendirdiklerini göstermek ve (4) öğretmen görüşlerinin öğrencilerin görüşlerini ne kadar desteklediğini belirlemektir. Buna ek olarak, bu makale şu anda ilgili üniversitelerin dil sınıflarında kullanılan öğretim yöntemleri ile derslerin içeriklerini düzenlemek ve geliştirmek için gerekli birtakım eğitsel yaklaşımlar ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmanın son bölümünde, öğrencilerin iletişimsel ihtiyaçlarının İngilizce müfredat programı planlaması kapsamında en uygun olarak nasıl karşılanabileceğine dair olası öneriler sunulmuştur.

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* Doktora tezinden yararlanılmıştır.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a growing interest in communicative language teaching in second and foreign contexts worldwide. This new trend in the language teaching world has been partly a result of the common dissatisfaction with such traditional language teaching methods as the Grammar-Translation, Direct and Audio-Lingual Methods. Looking at the learning hypotheses underlying these methods, we find that they largely focus on the structural aspects of the target language rather than on communicative proficiency. However, communicative language teaching, by nature, comes to recognise the importance of 'communication' and 'communicative competence' as the ultimate purposes of language teaching (Hymes, 1972).

In addition to the other tenets of communicative language teaching, as Nunan (1988) points out, communicative language teaching emphasizes interaction in the target language, language learning process, personal experience, and language activities outside classroom. According to Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983), being different from the traditional methods, communicative language teaching signals meaning and the ability of communication. Brown (2001) also suggests that communicative language teaching promotes the authentic and functional use of language in order to ensure a "real-life" communication in the classroom. On the basis of various theoretical bases established by many linguists such as Widdowson, Wilkins and Hymes, Richards and Rogers (1986: 71) conclude that communicative language teaching has a rich and eclectic nature. They provide a summary of the underlying characteristics of this communicative view of language as follows:

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning;
- The primary function of language is for interaction;
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses;
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

Communicative language teaching has virtually been welcomed by those who are involved in teaching a variety of English courses in the English Departments at Dokuz Eylül University and Ondokuz Mayıs University (hereafter DEU and OMU). However, as implied by the results of the questionnaire, the courses taught in these departments do not ensure the effective practice of communicative language teaching in the classroom. Actually, a set of reasons for this deficiency can be put forward such as the lack of students' interest in the courses, the shortcomings of the present materials or the problems in relation to curriculum planning, etc. Whatever the reasons might be, the main point in this case is how we can find a solid way of assessing learners' communicative needs, which would surely enable us to

evaluate the present courses in the curriculum effectively. For this purpose, this paper suggests, in the first place, the very need to adopt a learner-centred instruction in order to cover the specific communicative needs of the student population concerned.

Briefly defining what is meant by a learner-centred approach, it is the learner himself who takes the central position in identifying his own language needs and thus is actively involved in the ongoing process of curriculum assessment and development. According to Brown (2001:46-47), 'learner-centred instruction includes techniques that focus on learners' needs, styles, and goals'. Research has shown that the notion of learner-centred approaches to assessment has been fully explored in the second language teaching and learning. It has been successfully applied to teaching practice (Campbell and Kryszewska, 1992), methodology (Nunan, 1988; Tudor 1997), curriculum development (Nunan, 1988), and learning-training (Wenden, 1985; Oxford, 1990).

On the other hand, 'needs analysis' like 'learner-centeredness' is a key concept for the purposes of the study. Research has shown that the implementation of a needs analysis is considered as a prerequisite in any course design (Richterich and Chancerel, 1987). Hutchinson and Waters (1993) state that learner's needs should be considered in the process of planning the content of a language program. Johns (1991: 67) points out that 'all language teaching must be designed for the specific learning and language use purposes of identified groups of students'. According to Knox (1997: 56), a needs assessment enables researchers to justify their assumptions whether or not potential educational

needs are sound to design a program. Richard deals with this issue from the standpoint of curriculum development, and he holds that the data to be collected from learners, teachers and administrators in the planning process will help to identify general and specific language needs. Besides, it will provide data to maximise language program and evaluate the existing program. According to Richards (1986: 156), 'needs analysis is concerned with identifying general and specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives and content in a language program'. He maintains that needs analysis thus can concentrate on the content of a language program by obtaining data on who the learners are, their present level of language proficiency, teacher and learner goals, or on a specific need such as listening comprehension training.

THE RESEARCH STUDY
Problem Statement and Research Questions

It is necessary to identify students' academic language needs before designing a language course. Designing a course on the basis of administrators' beliefs or on the teachers' perceived needs would not be a reasonable approach to course design. Students' particular language needs, interests, expectations and their perceptions about the use of the various language skills should also be considered in designing a course. Such an analysis of the needs will make the teachers more aware of the students' actual language requirements and help design a more effective language course.

The research questions to be considered are as follows:

1.What are the common perceptions of the students towards using the various communicative skills?

2. What is the relative amount of time and importance devoted to communicative and other skills so as to be successful?

3. What are the main areas of difficulty encountered by the teacher trainees?

4. How the students evaluate the effectiveness of the course books available, considering their basic communicative needs?

5. How do the teacher trainees assess the usefulness of the English language instruction given by the English Departments in relation to their communicative needs, depending on the content of the courses?

6. How are the self-report data from the EFL students and the teachers correlated?

The reasons which lead us to conduct such a study may be summarised as follows:

1. It is commonly recognised that the large number of students are linguistically competent but communicatively incompetent in the English courses.

2. Students and instructors alike in the English Departments often complain that the courses, if not entirely, do not help students develop their communicative abilities.

3. Most instructors and students point out that students' communicative needs are not taken into consideration before designing a language course.

4. There appears to be little progress in the use of students' communicative abilities whereas the present programmes of the education faculties are exposed to constant changes.

5. Even though student-centred studies have increased in all the fields of education recently, the students' individual language needs are scarcely considered in the process of designing language programmes.

METHODOLOGY
Context

This research was carried out in the English Departments in the Faculties of Education at DEU and OMU where the medium of instruction is English. The study was conducted in all the classes from first year to fourth year.

Participants

The subjects who participated in the present study were 307 (n=307; female=226 and male=81) EFL students and 37 (n=37; female=20 and male=17) teachers from the English Departments at DEU and OMU.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation adopted in this research was a student questionnaire and teacher questionnaire. Except for the questions involved in the part of students' background, the same questions were used in the two questionnaires. The learners' needs analysis questionnaire had the intention of collecting data on learners' background, their competence in using various language skills, their perceptions of different communicative skills, their view of the most problematic areas and their evaluation of the usefulness of the present English courses and finally their own suggestions as to how their needs can be appropriately met.

The questionnaire was prepared in English. It was, to a large extent, drawn from a number of sources (Munby 1978, Kelliny 1988, Baştürkmen 1988). Apart from Part I

and Part II, to be able to measure students' common attitudes in Part III, a Likert type attitude scale was constructed. Also, in order to test the scale's reliability and validity, first draft of the questionnaires was administered to a selected group of students at DEU two times at different intervals. For the students who might not fully understand the English version of the questionnaires, the Turkish version was read and approved by specialists. As a result of the comments received from the members of the Institute of Social Sciences at the same university, the necessary changes were made accordingly. Three hundred and forty four questionnaires were returned and the reliability was found 0.3 and above.

The data collected from the student questionnaires were analysed using the SPSS statistical package. By means of %, responses were expressed as a percentage.

Data for the study were collected over a period of almost two years from 2000 till the end of 2001. Then, it took a period of six weeks to assess the data that are available. Before students filled out questionnaire forms during class time, they were informed about the significance and purpose of the present study. They were also reminded that the questionnaire survey would give them the opportunity to specify their actual language needs and expectations.

Structure of the Questionnaire

In the student questionnaire, three parts were included, the first of which asked for general information such as student's age, sex, year of study and major field of study. Remarkably, they were asked to specify their English language experience before university and for what purposes they would need to learn English. Part two was designed to identify the students' needs, EFL and communicative needs. The particular emphasis along with this part was on the ranking of language skills in terms of the students' responses as to how much time or importance they devoted to each skill. Students were also asked about their attitudes toward recognising the importance of communicative abilities as well as the degree of difficulty posed by their application. Questions involved in Part three were generally intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the English courses on the basis of students' particular communicative needs. Finally, students were invited to provide suggestions and comments for making the English class more effective and useful with respect to the communicative aspect of English language instruction.

In the teacher questionnaire, except for the Part I, that is concerned with students' background information, the teachers were asked to answer the same questions in order to reveal how student and teacher responses were correlated.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The items involved in the questionnaire are basically investigated under three headings: 1) Background information, 2) Information about field of study, and 3) Evaluation of the English courses.

1) Background information
a. English language experience before university

Given the framework of students' language experience before university, the results showed that 64% of all students had an extensive foreign language training at high school whereas 36% of students felt the need to have much more exposure to a greater use of the target language in order to

compensate for the lack of their previous language experience. Together, what was clear from the findings was that a vast majority of students would probably need help from teachers to deal with their future language training at university.

b. Students' purpose for learning English

Students were asked to specify for what purposes, educational or occupational, they required English studies. Students at DEU and OMU appeared to be in full agreement on their specification of occupational purposes. 204 (69%) students versus 90 (31%) perceived occupational purposes being more important than educational ones. These results indicated that both occupational and educational needs of students should be given due attention in language teaching.

2) Information about field of study

a. Assessment of the reading, speaking and listening skills by time

Items 1-3 in the questionnaire (Part II) sought to reveal how much time students devoted to the improvement of the reading, speaking and listening skills. 64% of students reported that they engaged intensively in reading skills whereas 29% said they read English only weekly. It is clear that reading is regarded as an effective means of extending students' command of English. The findings confirm this emphasis on reading. On the other hand, 73% of teachers indicated that students read English daily because of the need to pass the exams.

57% of students claimed that they devoted a great deal of time to the development of speaking skills whereas 24% of students acknowledged that they spoke only weekly. Worse still, 16% of all students admitted that they occasionally spoke English. Data obtained from teacher questionnaire exhibited parity with students' responses. 28 teachers out of 37 confirmed that students devoted less time to the speaking than the reading.

As for the listening skill, only 40% of students reported that they listened to English daily while 38% of them admitted that they listened to English weekly. 17% of students acknowledged that they listened to English occasionally. Also, teachers confirmed students' common attitude to listening. Almost 95% of teachers claimed that students devoted very little time to the development of the listening skill. The results indicated that most of the students lack the awareness of developing their communicative skills such as speaking and listening.

b. Importance of language skills

Concerning item 4, students ranked speaking (45%) as the most important and the writing the least (7%) in order of importance. Reading (30%) was also seen as the other important area like speaking, and listening was noted as crucial with 18%. According to teachers, speaking and listening (42% and 36%) were regarded as the most important areas in response to reading and writing (15% and 7%). Teacher and student responses exhibit parity except for the ranking of listening.

Item 5 was intended to reveal the amount of time students devoted to the language skills. Students reported that they devoted less time for the study of listening, pronunciation and speaking in contrast to reading and writing. Students ranked reading as the skill to which they devoted most of their time while studying. These results were consistent with the teachers' responses.

With item 6 in the questionnaire, students were asked to evaluate a set of basic communicative tasks, considering their importance for their language needs. Almost 90% of the students reported that the communicative tasks such as participating in discussions, asking questions in the class, listening to spoken presentations and giving spoken presentations. Teachers also reported similar views indicating the importance of developing the communicative abilities of the students through the practice of such communicative tasks.

With item 7, students were asked to specify which skills are ignored as not being relevant to their language needs. Teacher and student responses illustrated parity in this question. All participants acknowledged that listening, speaking and pronunciation were ignored as not being relevant to the students' needs.

c. Students' language problem areas

Given the framework of students' language problem areas (item 8), a large number of students reported having inadequacy in pronunciation, listening comprehension and speaking in order of difficulty. Teachers claimed that students had problems particularly in speaking, listening and pronunciation. 127 students out of 307 (42%) stated that they had great difficulty in pronouncing the English words correctly. In terms of the other language skills, the students identified their language problem areas in order of difficulty as revealed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Students' language problem areas

	F	%
Pronunciation	127	42
Listening	62	26
Speaking	71	23
Learning new words	42	17
Writing	14	4.6
Grammar	3	0.7

What was clear from the overall results was that speaking and listening-related skills posed the greatest problem for the majority of the students, whereas most students found grammar and writing skills the least troublesome of all skills available.

d. Evaluating students' abilities and knowledge of English

With item 9, students were asked to evaluate their abilities and knowledge of English. This was intended to provide data that would be useful for identifying students' needs in term of the language skills. The consensus was that students (almost 84%) would tend to perceive listening, speaking and pronunciation as having inadequacy in the course of teaching and learning whereas almost 76% of students rated themselves as good and satisfactory in reading and writing. 14 teachers said that students were good at reading and writing but not at particularly speaking and listening. 12 teachers rated students poor at pronunciation. Thus, there was generally parity between student and teacher responses

3) Evaluation of the English courses

In this section of the questionnaire, the students and teachers at DEU and OMU were asked a set of questions regarding the content of the present English courses conducted at the English Department. These questions emphasised the relevance of the courses to the actual language needs of the students at DEU and OMU.

a. Evaluation of the use of the language skills in the courses

In item 1, a clear majority of students (81%) and 27 (74%) teachers agreed with the view that the majority of the English courses focussed on the teaching of reading and writing skills. The results indicated that many students and teachers believed that an overemphasis on reading and writing skills was not of great value for satisfying students' actual communicative needs. The items 2 and 3 attempted to identify students' view of speaking and listening courses. 79% of the students and 67% of the teachers reported that the content of the courses did not help students to acquire the skills of speaking and understanding the spoken language as it was expected. Item 3 was used to find out whether the reason for this deficiency could be the lack of sufficient speaking courses in the curriculum. 84% of the students and 95% of the teachers admitted that only the first year students were required to take the speaking and listening courses, which was by no means sufficient to make a considerable progress in speaking and listening skills.

In question 4, almost 90% of students and 92% of teachers reported that the teaching of pronunciation skills was ignored although most students had great difficulty in spelling English words correctly.

b. Participation in the lessons

Item 5 and 6 were designed to reveal whether the English courses allowed students to participate in the lessons actively. 67% of students acknowledged that the content of the courses did not allow them to participate in the lessons actively although 74% of the teachers claimed that the content of the courses reinforced students' participation in the

lessons. In the next item, students and teachers admitted that the classroom interaction was limited to the participation of a particular group of students.

c. Materials evaluation

With items 7-9, students and teachers were asked to assess the use of the English materials in the courses. In question 7, 89% of the students and 65% of the teachers reported that the course books did not include material at the appropriate level, which reflects the nature of communicative interaction. In question 8, 81% of the students and 62% of the teachers admitted that communicative activities used as learning material in the English lessons were not real in terms of the real world, but communicative only in the classroom. In the last question, 74% of the students and 48% of the teachers acknowledged that most of the English materials currently being used in the courses were not relevant to the communicative needs of students.

Suggestions of All Participants

The following suggestions were obtained from the students who took part in this study. Here are some of them:

1] More innovative materials should be introduced to develop the communicative aspect of English language instruction.

2] Spoken courses including listening and pronunciation should not be restricted to the only first year but should be extended to the second, third and, if possible, even fourth year.

3] The English courses should be made accessible to the particular communicative needs of teacher trainees. What is more, fundamental changes are needed in order to develop

students' ability to speak English fluently.

4] Students should be allowed to speak freely. They should decide upon their own preferred learning styles.

5] Students should have the English classes given by the native speakers of English and be able to make use of language laboratories.

6] Students' motivation and interest in the English courses should be encouraged through enjoyable and challenging activities.

7] The proportion of using English within the classroom by most of the English instructors is insufficient. Since the English Department is required to offer an English-medium education, an extensive use of English must be provided.

CONCLUSION

The needs analysis study revealed that the teacher trainees have definite opinions about their particular communicative needs. The data helped to contextualize how teaching and learning in the English Departments should take place by taking into account students' communicative needs. The questionnaire data confirmed that a significant percentage of the student population surveyed did not favour the present instructional programs and goals since students lacked the sufficient opportunities to use language for communicative purposes in and outside classroom.

The most important pedagogical implication of this study is that the English courses should be designed on the basis of students' particular communicative needs. In this respect,

I am reassured by the fact that needs assessment comes to be an ongoing process which can serve as a

powerful tool for identifying students' varying needs. In an effort to improve communicative language teaching, the task to be undertaken is to reconsider the focal points underlying 'educational programs', 'teacher training', 'syllabus design' and 'research' within a communicative framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, we would like to put forward a number of propositions which will help provide some guidelines for removing the shortcomings involved in teacher trainees' limited use of the target language for communicative purposes:

1] We assume that needs assessment is an essential process for identifying students' communicative needs in the process of curriculum evaluation and development.

2] The teacher training programs available need to be reorganised around the identification of learner needs. It is supposed to cover the diverse needs of students from the linguistic context to a full range of second language use.

3] The speaking courses including listening and pronunciation are taught only in the preparatory and first year as it is stated in the present curriculum. So, the extensive use of these skills is needed.

4] The contents of the courses should ensure that the teaching of accuracy and fluency goes hand in hand during the language instruction.

5] Students should be encouraged to take active part in discussions.

6] Speaking and listening-based exams should be regarded as equally important as reading, writing and grammar-based exams in order to make students focus on the communicative aspect of language.

7] The scope of this study should be extended to the other higher educational institutions in Turkey; it needs supplementing by relevant studies.

APPENDIX

STUDENT AND TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Background information

1) Year of study
    a) Preparatory year
    b) First year
    c) Second year
    d) Fourth year
2) Sex
    a) Male
    b) Female
3) English language experience before university
    a) I studied English as a subject at school
    b) I attended an English-medium school
    c) I have lived abroad
    d) Other
4) Is your purpose for learning English required
    a) Occupational needs
    b) Educational needs

II. Information about field of study
    1) I read English
    a) Daily   b) Weekly   c) Monthly   d) Occasionally   e) Not at all
    2) I speak English
    a) Daily   b) Weekly   c) Monthly   d) Occasionally   e) Not at all
    3) I listen to English
    a) Daily   b) Weekly   c) Monthly   d) Occasionally   e) Not at all

4) Of the major English skills, which are the most important for success in meeting educational and occupational needs?
    a) Reading comprehension
    b) Listening comprehension
    c) Speaking
    d) Writing
5) By means of numbers 4(most), 3, 2 and 1(least), indicate the relative amount of time devoted to each skill.
    a) Listening   b) Speaking   c) Writing   d) Reading   e) Pronunciation
6) How important are these tasks in English for your other subjects? Write the appropriate number according to the following scale in the space provided.
    1. Very important   2. Important 3. Not important
    following lectures
    following questions/answer sessions
    in class
    listening to spoken presentations
    asking questions in class
    giving spoken presentations
7) Which skills are ignored as not being relevant to the students' needs?
    a) Listening   b) Speaking   c) Reading   d) Writing   e) Pronunciation
8) Which area of English is the biggest problem for you?
    a) How to pronounce English words b) Speaking c) Listening d) Reading e) Writing
    f) Learning new words g) Grammar
9) In relation to your own studies, evaluate your abilities and knowledge of English in the following areas.
    1. Good   2. Satisfactory 3. Unsatisfactory

a) Reading b) Writing c) Speaking d) Listening e) Grammar f) Pronunciation

III. Evaluation of the English Courses

Provide your opinions about English language instruction in your Department.

Here are some ideas about English language instruction. Please indicate how far you agree with each idea.

1. strongly agree 2) agree 3) disagree

1. The majority of the courses focus on the teaching of reading and writing skills.

2. The content of the courses does not help me to acquire the skills of speaking and understanding the spoken language.

3. The present curriculum currently introduced lacks the sufficient speaking courses as only the first year students are required to take the speaking course.

4. The teaching of pronunciation in the English courses is ignored although most students had great difficulty in spelling the English words correctly.

5. The content of the courses does not allow students to participate in the lessons actively.

6. The classroom interaction is limited to the participation of a particular group of students.

7. The course books used in the English classes do not include material which reflects the nature of communicative interaction at the appropriate level.

8. Communicative activities used as learning material are not real in terms of the real world, but communicative in the classroom situation only.

9. Most of the English materials currently used are relevant to the communicative needs of the students.

IV. Suggestions

Do you have any further suggestions for making the English courses more effective and useful to you with respect to the communicative aspect of English language instruction? If so, please specify below.

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