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ENGLISH FOR OTHER LANGUAGES: A NEEDS ANALYSIS OF FUTURE POLYGLOTS AT A FRENCH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. *This paper presents the results of a needs analysis of second year undergraduates, majoring in various foreign languages (except for English) at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris, France. As part of their studies, students can take one semester of English during their second or third year. While needs analyses are an integral part of ESP research, the needs of students in certain disciplines, particularly the Liberal Arts, are not often referenced. Using questionnaires and interviews with current students, past students, and discipline instructors, this study attempts to partially fill that gap. Results show that while current students mostly use oral and written comprehension skills presently, they feel expression skills will become important in the future. Responses from former students and discipline instructors seem to support these results, with some key distinctions. Implications for teaching and future research are discussed.*

Key words: *English for Specific Purposes, Needs Analyses, Language Teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

Needs analyses (NAs) are a defining element of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, necessary for ensuring the quality and effectiveness of specialized language courses (Kaur and Alla Baksh 2010, 3; Strevens 1978). They allow the instructor to better understand the learning context, the needs of the learners, and the demands of other stakeholders. Research on learner needs has direct pedagogical implications, allowing language teachers to create lessons based on authentic tasks, thereby increasing learner motivation, and improving learning gains (Chostelidou 2011, 407; Mohseni-Far, 2008, 4-7).

In the past, learner needs were based largely on the language teacher's intuition (Flowerdew, 2013). Such an approach has, however, proven problematic, as teachers and students may not have the same ideas about learner needs. In her research on an ESP Humanities course at Dhaka University, Chaudhury (2011, 70-71) found, for instance, that students did not consider listening and speaking to be very important in their university, where Bangla was the language of instruction. Teachers, on the other hand, reported listening and speaking skills to be as important as other language skills.

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To be fully representative, a NA also needs to look outside of academia. In an Iranian university, Mahdavi Zafarghandi et al (2014, 10-12) found that, though professors and undergraduate Business majors valued academic journal articles and anglophone press in their ESP courses, business professionals indicated that they used written English mostly for the interpretation and preparation of contracts. Moreover, the business professionals surveyed said that conducting telephone calls was greatly important, though very few students thought so. Such a finding reinforces Long's (2005, 20) point that even students may not be the best source of information regarding their own needs.

To add to this ever-growing body of practical research, this study presents the results of a first round NA conducted for an English course offered to undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages (other than English) in a French university. The needs of foreign language majors have received relatively little attention in ESP research. Nevertheless, as the blog Transpanish (2014) points out "[in] the 21st century, thanks to the economic and business-related effects of globalization, knowing how to speak, read, listen and write in just two languages is simply not enough." It is therefore assumed that, even if a French student majors in Japanese Studies, he/she will benefit from English skills to complement his/her mastery of French and Japanese.

It is in this context that the present study was devised. Guided by research in needs analyses, this paper seeks to address the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the current and future English needs for foreign language majors? How can these needs be implemented in an ESP course?
- 2) How do the expressed needs differ between current students, alumni, and subject professors?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO) in Paris, France. Undergraduate students major in one of over a hundred foreign languages and complete three years of course work in the language, culture, and literature of the chosen specialty.

Participants in this study have opted not to complete a professional track (such as Business or International Relations) and instead dedicated their studies to their chosen language. As an elective, students can select a one-semester, 19.5-hour English course, in which students of all language majors and English proficiency levels are mixed. No specific guidelines for this course exist, though some department brochures refer to it as "English as a working language" (*anglais langue de travail*).

The focus of the English course was "Careers in Foreign Languages;" it was divided into six 2-week units during which different jobs requiring language skills were discussed (teaching, tourism, publishing, translating, diplomacy, journalism). In the first week of the unit, they practiced a professional skill, like writing a CV. In the second week, students did simulations in which they assumed the role of a person doing that week's featured job.

To collect data on student needs, this study follows Long's (2005) recommendations, and uses both questionnaires and interviews to allow for triangulation and increase the validity of results. These two instruments are described below:

- a) Questionnaires. Three different questionnaires were used¹.
- i) A questionnaire was sent to current students in May 2020, just after the English course had ended. Of the 85 students contacted, 29 responded. These students were largely from the Japanese Studies department (12/29), though others were represented (Chinese, Russian, Korean, Arabic, Modern Greek).
 - ii) A questionnaire was sent to past students in November 2020, roughly 6 months after they had completed their undergraduate studies. Of the 44 students contacted, 18 responded. Again, Japanese Studies majors made up the largest group of participants (11/18), though 4 departments were represented (with Russian, Korean, Kurdish).
 - iii) A questionnaire was sent to subject professors, asking for comments on the importance of English in their respective departments. Professors also described what students do after graduation and the value of English in those fields. The questionnaire was sent in February 2021 to the 43 professors whose departments listed the English elective in their brochure; 6 responded.
- b) Interviews. Interviews were conducted with 17 current students on a volunteer basis. The interviews helped to delve deeper into the topics covered in the questionnaire, asking students more specifically about current and future uses for English. Interviews were transcribed and coded, following the recommendations of DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall & McCulloch (2011).²

3. RESULTS

This section presents frequency data from the questionnaires along with information from the interviews to respond to the two research questions. Tables 1 & 2 present current students' responses concerning their current and future uses for English. In Tables 3 & 4, past students described their current situation and responsibilities as well as their current and supposed future uses for English. Lastly, six subject professors described the value of English in their respective departments (departments of Arabic, Urdu, Japanese, Mongolian, Burmese, and Chinese).

Table 1. How often do you use these English skills? (Out of 29 participants)

Skill	Often	Somewhat often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Listening	18	9	1	1	0
Reading ^{3*}	17	4	6	1	0
Speaking*	3	8	8	7	2
Writing*	5	8	10	5	0

¹Questionnaire sent to current students: <https://forms.gle/p3cfLJKijLhP5csm6>

Questionnaire sent to former students: <https://forms.gle/J61rgiJiodGkZF5Y9>

Questionnaire sent to subject professors: <https://forms.gle/iKKbrBUKNXCH3r5u9>

Works consulted in the creation of the questionnaires: Labetoulle 2019; Mahdavi Zafarghandi et al 2014; Taillefer 2004; Vougiouklidou 2013

² Interview coding guide: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WZ7jbrabwjl9XMRPhRamPn1wSKRdgl-olNsdY4hpsFc/edit?usp=sharing>

³ *Only the 28 legible responses were counted

Table 2. How important is English for your studies? //
How important is English for your future profession? (Out of 29 participants)

	Very important	Somewhat important	Minimally important
Listening	23 // 27	4 // 2	2 // 0
Reading ^{4*}	24 // 25	5 // 3	0 // 0
Speaking*	21 // 27	5 // 2	2 // 0
Writing*	21 // 26	5 // 3	1 // 0

Table 1 shows that reading and listening comprehension skills were used with some frequency by nearly all students. Open-ended questions and the interviews revealed that these skills were mostly for leisure activities; students watch films and series in English, listen to music, use social media platforms, and follow international news. This trend perhaps explains the written expression tendencies; seven students described writing in English to respond to English posts they saw online. Additionally, three students also reported having to read in English for their studies. Oral expression, though used less frequently, was reportedly useful for 11 students, for work and family reasons.

Although Table 2 confirms that English is considered necessary, participants were not always sure of how. The interviews gave participants the chance to reflect on the type of tasks they would be asked to do in English in the future. Again, their ideas were rather unclear with many referencing simply that an internationally oriented career requires English. Three notable exceptions were one student who considered becoming an English teacher, another who mentioned having to sell products to foreign clients, and another who wanted to be a tour guide for anglophone tourists in Paris; still, joining the workforce directly after the foreign language degree was an immediate goal for only one student. For future studies, responses were similar; of the 14 students who planned to continue their studies, seven did not know what field they would pursue. Some referenced the general importance of English, though three described that mastering English would be useful for studying texts that are not available in French.

Table 3. How often do you use these English skills? (Out of 14 participants)

	Often	Somewhat often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Listening	9	2	0	0	3
Reading ⁵	7	3	3	0	0
Speaking	2	5	2	2	3
Writing	4	3	3	3	1

Table 4 How important is English for your future profession? (Out of 14 participants)

	Very important	Somewhat important	Minimally important
Listening	11	2	1
Reading	13	1	0
Speaking	13	1	0
Writing	11	3	0

⁴ *28 responses were counted for Reading Comprehension/future profession & Oral Expression/studies. 27 responses were counted for Written Expression/studies.

⁵ *Only the 13 legible responses were counted

Past students reported rather frequent use of comprehension skills, as shown in Table 3. This tendency is perhaps explained by the high number of students completing further education (9/14); open-ended questions revealed that two students take courses conducted in English while four students need to regularly consult resources in English. One student reported not using English at all, five continue to use English in their leisure activities and two use it in jobs (one as a Japanese teacher and one as a barista).

Table 4 shows that most learners feel that English will be highly important in their futures. Four of these students plan to do graduate studies, of which two note that English will be useful for academic research. Eight others have somewhat vague professional objectives, with a desire to work in international fields (business, the arts, translation). Of the remaining two, one wishes to move abroad and the other simply wishes to find a job.

The final group to participate in the study was subject professors. In the end, instructors from six departments responded to a questionnaire concerning the use of English in their respective departments. Members of the Burmese, Chinese, and Urdu programs stated that their students rarely or never had to complete tasks in English as part of their undergraduate studies, or that they were unsure if it was used. The Arabic professor claimed that his/her students were occasionally asked to navigate websites in English. Professors from the Japanese and Mongolian programs said that students had to read academic articles in English fairly often. Additionally, the Mongolian Studies students occasionally had to listen to audio files, attend conferences, and navigate websites in English and frequently had to translate documents into/from English. Japanese Studies students frequently had to consult websites in English and sometimes listen to audio files or attend conferences.

Regarding future academic uses, four of these departments offer study abroad opportunities that require English proficiency. Professionally, instructors from the Chinese and Burmese departments noted that English would not be useful to their students in the future; Chinese Studies majors often do teaching certificates, while Burmese Studies students do not have a clear professional track. Students from Mongolian studies are often simultaneously completing other academic programs, geared towards international careers or research, so English is reported to be useful. For Japanese Studies students, 40% complete graduate studies in Japanese Studies, while others go in numerous directions, where English is thought to be useful. Arabic Studies students often continue into an Arabic Studies graduate program, where English is not often used. Lastly, in the Urdu Studies program, English can be useful for future translators, given all the documents produced in English from Urdu-speaking societies.

4. DISCUSSION

NAs are crucial for ensuring that a course is learner-centered and capable of helping to bridge the gap between what students know and what they need to know (Eslami 2010, 7). The above results, however, show that conducting an NA does not necessarily provide clear answers that would allow for sweeping generalizations. Still, these preliminary findings show at least three trends that can help inform course design, as summarized in Figure 1 below.

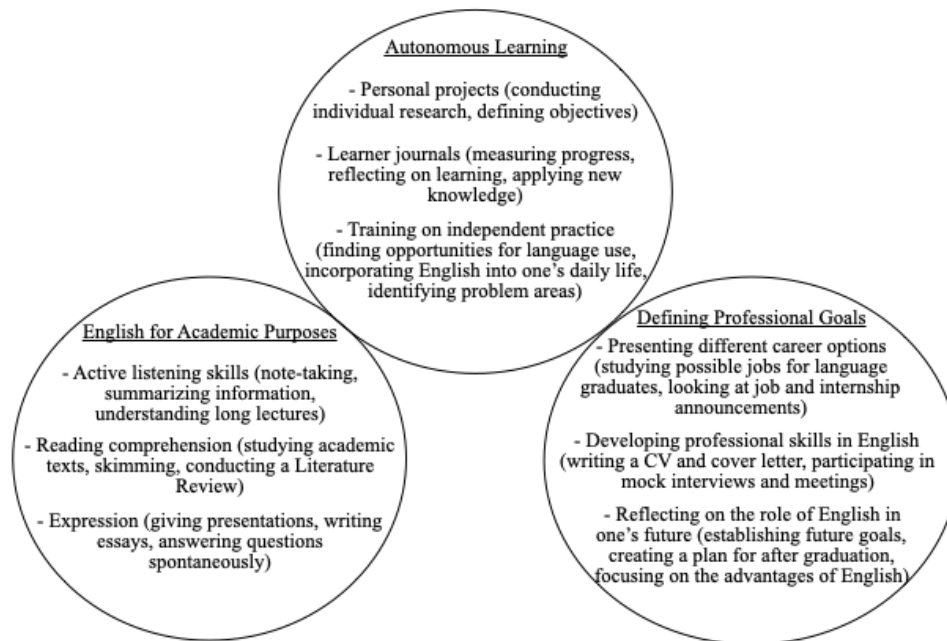


Figure 1. Proposal for an ESP course for Foreign Language Majors

First, as shown in Figure 1, the data highlight the need for academic English. Many undergraduates continue to graduate school where English is important for research and attending lectures. Future versions of this course could focus more specifically on activities such as note-taking while listening to mini-lectures, giving presentations, and reading academic texts, which have a long history in ESP contexts (Fortune 1977; Kaur and Alla Baksh 2010, 14; Preece 1994).

The value of such activities is firmly grounded in research on language teaching. As the participants in the study are students with limited work experience, their primary needs relate to the classroom. Given the immediate relevance of academic skills, EAP tasks provide the authenticity that is so crucial in language courses (Guariento and Morley 2001, 352). Furthermore, developing academic skills could activate learner motivation, according to the L2 Present Self concept described by Schug (2019, 284); students are likely to be more motivated by tasks that relate to their current lives rather than vague ideas they have for their futures.

Nevertheless, instructors must be careful when focusing on EAP tasks. Although taking notes and listening to lectures may constitute authentic tasks based on urgent needs, such exercises may not be powerful motivators (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). Additional research is needed to measure the impact of EAP exercises on engagement and student enjoyment, but teachers should balance them with group activities that take advantage of the social element of language learning (Dörnyei 1997).

The second point in Graph 1 underlines a need to train students in autonomous learning. Even for those attending graduate school, their chosen fields are highly diverse, ranging from International Business to Foreign Languages, and various others. In such situations, it is rare

to see specialized content or elements of ESP in an English class (Van der Yeught 2014, in Terrier and Maury 2015, 78). Autonomous learning activities, such as learner diaries and personal projects, give a more personalized learning experience and allow students to reflect on their own learning while developing skills that are valuable to them (Daloiso 2007; Labetoulle 2017, 42; Woodfield and Lazarus 1998).

The results show that most learners are already regularly using English in their daily lives, for entertainment, socializing and, in some cases, for work and study. Future versions of this course will need to help students take advantage of these learning opportunities and guide them in identifying more. Terrier and Maury (2015, 80-82) show the importance of this guidance for university students, who may not know how to be independent learners. As Yan (2007, 63) shows, even if students have positive attitudes towards independent study, they do not necessarily report frequent use of independent learning strategies. Future research will need to analyze different strategies for tracking guided, autonomous learning.

Lastly, it is important to note that numerous past and current students have unclear ideas concerning their future professional paths. Thus, it can be hard to precisely identify tasks students will need to accomplish in English. This finding echoes Long's (2005, 20) assertion that students are not always the most reliable source of information concerning their needs. Moreover, it is true that students in liberal arts fields tend to have a higher dropout rate (MESR 2013 in Terrier and Maury 2015, 80), which is potentially connected to the lack of clear goals.

While these data may initially complicate ESP course development, they also give the English instructor the opportunity to guide students in creating future projects that include English. Dörnyei (2009, 33-38) offers advice for course design that helps students define their future goals. Teachers can present role models to assist students in adding detail to their future goals, help them define an action plan, and maintain enthusiasm. Such practices are rooted in research on learner motivation and possible selves (Markus 2006, in Dörnyei 2009, 17). Additional studies could experiment with strategies for helping learners visualize their future selves.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study aims to shed some light on the English needs of students majoring in other languages, a group not often represented in ESP research. Two research questions guided this small-scale study.

The first question concerned the current and future English needs of students majoring in other foreign languages. Interviews and questionnaires showed a huge variety of uses for English. Nearly all current undergraduates and several alumni use English for leisure, including watching films and interacting on social media. These needs, however, evolve. The most common plan was to pursue graduate studies, for which English gives access to a wider variety of academic resources and lectures. Subject professors support this trend, with three occasionally using English resources with their undergraduates and two noting that it will be useful in future graduate studies. Professionally, most students plan to work in positions requiring foreign language knowledge; while their specific goals are not always clear, it is widely agreed that English is needed in the professional world.

The second question aims to compare the needs expressed by the 3 different participant groups. The preliminary results presented above show few differences between the different

groups. Both student groups show that English is frequently used for leisure activities. Undergraduates feel that English will be needed in graduate studies and alumni in graduate programs seem to confirm this. Professionally, again, both groups describe similar ideas; they recognize that English will be used in some way for their future jobs. Subject professors echo this opinion, as three note that English will generally be useful in the various fields their students tend to gravitate towards. Only two professors suggest that English would not be useful after graduation.

The limitations of this study are those typical of small-scale research. Given the limited number of participants and low-response rate, it is hard to generalize and apply findings to other contexts. Furthermore, the vague and diverse responses may be difficult to translate into concrete teaching objectives. Still, certain trends were noticed, such as a need for academic skills and a tendency to aim for careers in translation or international business. Thus, larger scale studies could follow Long's (2005, 33) recommendations and conduct observations of various professional environments to better understand how English is used in those contexts. Additionally, many past and current students have rather vague professional objectives; it is hoped that this report will inspire researchers to analyze strategies for developing the learner's self-concept, a topic not often seen in research (Dörnyei 2009, 34). For teachers, Figure 1 offers some pedagogical implications that may be useful to those working with a similar student profile.

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