Using Focus Group Methodology to Understand International Students' Academic Language Needs: A Comparison of Perspectives

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Using Focus Group Methodology to Understand International Students' Academic Language Needs: A Comparison of Perspectives

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Abstract

Assessing students' language needs is the indispensable first step in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) curriculum development. In this article, we report a portion of the results from a needs assessment study whose ultimate purpose was to inform curriculum development in EAP contexts. We used the focus group methodology to examine learner needs from different perspectives and conducted discussions on international students' academic language needs with three groups: international students, university faculty members, and university administrative personnel. Analysis of the focus group discussions showed that while the perceptions of the three groups converged to some extent, each group also had different concerns, thus indicating the need to examine multiple perspectives in student needs assessment. Results also showed that writing was perceived to be a crucial area of need, that academic language needs extended beyond the classroom, and that cultural skills were seen as an important part of academic language competence.

Introduction

A key responsibility of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs is to help students of English as a Second Language (ESL) develop the kind of English proficiency that will lead to success in their academic endeavors. In order to design a curriculum that helps ESL students acquire English language skills necessary for academic success, however, we must first fully understand ESL students' academic language needs. The study reported below was motivated by the desire to assess these needs and use the results of needs analysis to inform EAP curriculum development and revision. [-1-]

Since the 1980s, many studies have examined ESL students' academic language needs. Whereas some studies (e.g., Johns, 1981; Ostler,

1980) examine students' needs in several skill areas, others focus on specific areas such as aural/oral skills (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Ferris, 1998), and writing skills (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Horowitz, 1986; Hale et al., 1996). Often, needs analysis studies focus on what Hutchinson and Waters refer to as "target needs," particularly "necessities" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, cited in Jordan, 1997). Researchers collect data to identify the tasks students might encounter in university content classrooms, and some also analyze the tasks to shed light on the skills students may need to perform the tasks successfully. For example, Horowitz (1986), in a study of writing tasks, analyzed 54 writing assignments from 29 courses taught in 17 departments at a university, identified 7 categories of writing tasks, and provided a description of their characteristics.

Studies focusing on ESL students' target needs based on task analysis have provided useful information about the academic tasks students are expected to perform and the materials with which they must work in university content classrooms (e.g., reading journal articles, doing group work in class, and writing library research papers). Yet many studies, particularly the early ones, often rely solely on data collected through questionnaires. A problem with this, as pointed out by Braine (1995), is that terms/categories which researchers use in the questionnaire may be interpreted differently by the respondents. Perhaps even more troubling is that the student perspective is often missing in this area of research. As observed by Christison and Krahnke, "[C]urriculum design in ESL programs for academic preparation has, in general, failed to use the experience of students themselves as a basis for planning and decision making" (1986, p. 61). While there is no doubt that faculty representations of academic tasks and their perceptions of student needs can be extremely helpful, we believe that our understanding of ESL students' academic language needs can only be strengthened by a triangulated approach which examines multiple perspectives, including those of the students themselves.

Thus far, academic language needs seem to have been implicitly interpreted as language needs related to classroom tasks. Many studies have confined needs analysis to the classroom and have not examined ESL students' language needs in the larger university setting. However, our encounters with ESL students indicated that needs related to specific classroom tasks constitute only one part, albeit an important one, of students' language needs. We have observed that students' academic experience encompasses their experience outside of the classroom in the institutional setting as well, and that students' classroom performance can be influenced by their interactions with people in the larger institutional context. We believe it is necessary to expand the scope of investigation to fully understand what language skills ESL students require in order to function successfully in the university setting. [-2-]

This article reports a portion of the results from a study designed to assess the academic language needs of ESL students. In the larger study, we employed several research methodologies, including focus group discussions with students, faculty, and administrative personnel; student surveys; and classroom observations. The results from the focus group discussions are used here to illustrate the need to consider multiple perspectives and to go beyond the classroom in academic language needs assessment. We report our approach and findings below.

The specific questions we addressed are:

1. What are international students' perceptions of their language needs in relation to the tasks they must perform in the university setting? What specific language difficulties do international students perceive themselves to have?
2. What are university personnel's (faculty and administrative staff) perceptions of international students' language needs in relation to the tasks they must perform in the university setting? What specific language difficulties do university personnel perceive international students to have?

Methodology

Context

The study took place at a large public research university located in the Southeast of the United States. The university enrolls about 35,000 students, and international students make up approximately four percent of the entire student population. International students at the university come from 118 different countries (particularly from countries in Asia and Latin America) and major in a number of different fields, with the top three fields being engineering, business, and computer and information sciences.

Focus Group Participants

We used two rounds of focus group discussions in the study. The first round included two student focus groups, one undergraduate and one graduate, and one faculty focus group. These focus group discussions lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Eleven international students participated in the student focus groups. The students came from countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, and their majors included economics, finance, engineering, political science, and applied linguistics. Seven of the eleven students were graduate students,

and all had been in the U.S. for at least a year. We invited these students because we believed that their experience in U.S. classrooms would allow them to provide information helpful to in aiding an understanding of students' academic language needs. Three faculty members from business, physics, and engineering attended the initial faculty focus group. These faculty members were invited because of the relatively large numbers of international students in their programs and because of their experience working with international students. [-3-]

The second round of focus groups included a faculty group with four faculty members (one from engineering, one from chemistry, and two from education), an administrative directors group with four participants, and an administrative staff group with eight participants. These discussions were conducted via e-mail with members responding to the questions we posed, and to each other's comments. This round of discussion allowed us to further explore issues raised in the initial focus groups. For example, students' comments in initial focus group discussions indicated that interaction with university staff was an area of concern, so we decided to include administrative staff members in the focus group discussions and examine their perceptions of international students' language needs. We invited faculty members from programs with robust or growing international student enrollment and directors and office staff from offices which provide international students with various kinds of services (e.g., admissions, academic advising, health services, multicultural center, the library, and international student and scholar services).

Data Collection and Analysis

Because the results of this study are derived from focus group discussions, a few words about the focus group methodology are in order. Focus groups refer to a "nondirective technique that results in the controlled production of a discussion of a group of people" (Flores & Alonso, 1995, p. 84); a moderator typically facilitates the discussion. Participants in focus group discussions constitute a "purposive" sample of the target population (Lederman, 1990), and the number of participants in a focus group can range from 6 to 12 people. Focus groups can be used alone or in combination with other methods [1]. Compared to surveys and interviews, focus groups can provide richer and more in-depth information because they allow interaction both between the moderator and participants and among participants themselves (Lederman, 1990). They also enable "the members of the target population to express their ideas in a spontaneous manner that is not structured according to the researchers' prejudices" (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992, p. 199).

For the first round of focus group discussions, both student and faculty, we prepared a short list of questions concerning students' academic language needs but encouraged the participants to discuss anything they believed to be relevant. Questions for students included "What are some of the particular difficulties that you have experienced in using academic English?" and "Do you feel your instructors understand your particular language needs?" Questions for faculty included "What expectations of academic language performance (in English) do you have of your international students?" and "What kinds of academic language difficulties or needs on the part of international students have come to your attention?" One of us served as the main moderator, who probed for more information, asked for clarifications, and encouraged interaction among the participants.

We audiotaped the focus group discussions while taking detailed notes. After each focus group session, we listened to the tapes and expanded our notes independently. In doing so, we followed the "note-expansion" approach in which "the reporter (note taker) listens to the tape in order to clarify certain issues or to confirm that all the main points are included in the notes" (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992, p. 202). We then each examined the notes inductively for major themes/points discussed and coded and categorized the themes/points. After independently analyzing detailed notes of focus group discussions, we met and compared notes, discussed the themes that emerged, and agreed on the major categories. [-4-]

The second round of focus group discussions were conducted via e-mail to overcome the difficulty of arranging meetings with relatively large groups of people and to increase participation in focus group discussions. Electronic focus groups, however, have been used for needs assessment in studies conducted in other settings (e.g., Fulop, Loop-Bartick & Rossett, 1997) and constitute an effective research tool. In spite of some limitations such as "somewhat impeded group dynamics, and reduced facilitator control," electronic focus groups provide "increased time for reflection by participants, greater ability to reach larger numbers at lower costs, and the possibility of more honest responses because of the greater social distance between group members " (Fulop, Loop-Bartick & Rossett, 1997, p. 26)

The electronic focus groups took place over a period of three weeks. One question was posted for each group (i.e., faculty, administrators, or staff) separately for discussion each week, and again, one of us served as the main moderator, who asked follow-up questions or prompted for more information as necessary. The main questions centered on faculty and administrative personnel's perception of English language needs and difficulties of international students. Specific questions included "How would you assess the English language proficiency of your international students?" and "What kinds of English language difficulties, if any, do you perceive in your interaction

with them? How do you respond to these difficulties?" Once the discussions ended, we independently examined the e-mail exchanges inductively for major points and themes. In this process, we highlighted and coded the important points made by faculty members and administrators and staff members. Then, we compared the themes that we each identified, discussed them, and agreed on the most important themes/points in the data.

Results

In the section below, we will focus on perceived students' language needs from three different perspectives: the students' perspective, the faculty's perspective, and the administrative personnel's perspective.

Perceived needs: Student perspective

First, most of the student participants indicated that they were doing well in their coursework and had overcome many of the initial difficulties that they experienced. Students' comments from both the undergraduate and graduate focus groups covered five skill areas: listening, reading, speaking, writing and culture. For listening, both groups expressed difficulties in listening to long lectures. The teacher's rate of speech, the organization of the lecture, and lack of experience with long lectures were given as explanations for the difficulties. Commenting on his experience with long lectures, a graduate student said, "It is difficult to identify which part is important, and which part is less important. I was not trained." Both undergraduate and graduate students also mentioned difficulties with:

1. simultaneously juggling listening and note-taking,
2. understanding special terminology, and
3. understanding idiomatic expressions for classroom procedures.

For example, one student said that he misunderstood the instructor's announcement that he would "take up the assignment." Assuming that the instructor intended to address the topic of the assignment instead of wanting to collect it, the student consequently failed to turn in his assignment. In addition, graduate students reported difficulty with following multi-participant conversation and with different registers in class (e.g., lecture vs. peer discussion). For example, one graduate student commented that classroom discussions between the instructor and the students and among the students demanded more sophisticated listening skills than teacher lectures because the topics tended to change during the discussions and the speakers could use quite different levels of formality in their speech. In addition to difficulties associated with listening tasks required in the classroom, the participants also commented on their performance on listening tasks encountered outside the classroom, but within the university setting. For example, several students reported difficulty understanding recorded messages concerning academic procedures when they were trying to sign up for courses by telephone. [-5-]

Both undergraduate and graduate students reported frustration with extensive reading and with comprehending information contained in campus publications concerning academic procedures. They perceived their reading process to be slower and extensive reading to be the type of reading exercise less familiar to them. Although they were taught strategies such as skimming and scanning, "strategies taught in the context of short paragraphs don't automatically transfer to the context of extensive reading," commented one graduate student. The graduate students as a group felt challenged by the large amount of reading expected of them. Yet, students commented that while reading, along with listening, constituted major obstacles initially, as time went by they felt more challenged by tasks demanding productive skills, particularly writing. The graduate students, in particular, felt the strong need to produce acceptable academic written products.

While both the undergraduate and graduate groups agreed that they needed to develop academic writing skills and that they needed time and/or assistance with editing, the graduate group was more specific in reflecting on their difficulties and needs in the area of writing. They mentioned:

1. the need for and their lack of experience with writing longer essays/papers,
2. their difficulty with organizing the paper and with using the academic register, and
3. their need to learn how to use appropriate format.

One person said that he was "never trained to write longer essays;" those essays, however, were often assigned in the courses he took. The graduate participants also noted their difficulty with academic register, particularly with academic vocabulary. They had to "think hard to write and come up with the suitable word," according to one participant. The undergraduate group focused on their need to write in a variety of genres for different disciplinary courses. For example, an engineering undergraduate said that for courses in humanities, he did more writing and wrote essays and papers; for engineering courses, however, he wrote lab reports, which were "easier than papers required

in humanities because I am familiar with the content and I only need to state the facts." These comments on writing could reflect some potential differences in undergraduate vs. graduate students' experience with writing. For example, undergraduate students in U.S. universities are expected to take courses in disciplines other than their majors, but graduate students are expected to produce more extended writing in their chosen fields of study.

Both the undergraduate and graduate students claimed to experience similar difficulties with participation in group/class discussions and indicated the need to interact more efficiently with university staff on academic procedures. The two groups provided similar reasons for why it was difficult for them to participate in class discussions:

1. they needed time to process questions and others' comments and think of responses,
2. they feared producing grammatically inaccurate speech and asking inappropriate questions which would distract others, and
3. they lacked experience competing for turns in on-going discussions.
   [-6-]

One student's comment–"I waited and waited but the turn never came"–illustrates this lack of experience. The graduate students also mentioned difficulty with oral presentations, particularly with expressing ideas in spontaneous speech. A couple of the undergraduate students perceived accent reduction to be a need as well.

In discussing their language needs, both the undergraduate and graduate students brought up what one graduate student termed "cultural competence." Both groups expressed the need to understand classroom norms in the U.S. (e.g., whether it is permissible to ask questions in a lecture class or to disagree with the professor in class). They also indicated the need to understand the teacher-student relationship in the U.S. and the need to codify this relationship in language. A few graduate students also mentioned their difficulty with understanding cultural references in lectures and readings.

Perceived needs: Faculty perspective

Faculty perception of international students' academic language needs converged with that of the students to some extent. Faculty members indicated that the English language was not an issue for many international students, and that students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds had differing difficulties and needs. As for specific skills, faculty members unanimously perceived productive skills, particularly writing, to be most challenging for international students, and hence an area in need of improvement. For example, one faculty member wrote:

> *[I]nitially the students seem to do OK in structured classes, but in writing or talking (seminar or journal club) they can have a hard time. Certainly they know the scientific content needed but have trouble writing a good essay answer.*

Faculty members also mentioned students' general difficulty with thesis and dissertation writing and pointed out a few specific skills that they would like to see improved: organization, vocabulary, and grammar. For example, one faculty member commented that even when some students made considerable effort, they still did not know how to organize the information, leading the major professor to assume much of the work in cases of theses and dissertations. Another faculty member claimed that the extremely motivated students had "no trouble keeping up with the rest of the class on readings, class discussions, and projects"; however, "the most difficulty is in their written assignments, such as papers. Very often the wrong word or tense is used, and the grammar is imperfect." Some international students' writing difficulties and needs, nevertheless, might not become obvious until they enter graduate school and have to write their theses or dissertations. This may happen when students rely on their quantitative and problem-solving skills for course work in some disciplines and also if they have not accumulated much writing experience prior to embarking on their thesis or dissertation writing. As a result, their writing difficulties remain undiagnosed until that point. [-7-]

For speaking, faculty members noted that some international students "lack(ed) the experience or confidence to speak" and therefore needed to improve speaking skills related to group discussion, class participation, and presentation. Again, in some cases, speaking was observed to be a "delayed problem" in that students' difficulties became obvious when they had to make class presentations. In addition to language needs related to course work, faculty members also mentioned the special needs of international teaching assistants (ITAs). For example, one professor commented that ITAs had additional challenges in that they needed to be able to explain and present instructional materials and to interact with students spontaneously.

Perceived needs: Administrative personnel perspective

Because the administrative directors and office staff members had similar interactions with international students and shared similar views concerning international students' language needs, we combined results from the two separate focus groups involving directors and staff members, respectively. Administrative personnel, including directors and office staff members, felt that international students brought a wide range of language skills with them and that students from different backgrounds had differing needs. Based on their interaction with international students, the administrative personnel commented both on language skills important for coursework as well as those skills necessary for student-staff or student-supervisor interaction in the university setting. For example, a librarian commented on some international students' difficulty with interpreting their assignments (i.e., comprehending directions provided on assignments and understanding what the professors expected). This difficulty often became evident when students approached the library staff for help with library research related to their course assignments.

Administrative personnel also saw the need for some international students to improve writing and speaking skills so that they could communicate more effectively with university personnel. They commented that students' e-mail messages, written materials supporting applications for admission, and messages left on answering machines were sometimes difficult to understand. One person reported:

> *[O]ur interactions initially are all on the phone, through e-mail or other written correspondence….Messages left on the phone are quite often difficult to understand. Written correspondence really does run the gamut of broken sentences with wrong or incorrectly spelled words to fairly well written letters.*

Administrative personnel also indicated the need for international students to be able to read materials and follow directions (e.g., those concerning application procedures).

Further, administrative personnel observed the need for international students to be familiar with the vocabulary and concepts used in the U.S. educational system. One staff member who had worked closely with international students made this observation:

> *Most students not familiar with the U.S. educational system (irrespective of their English language proficiency level) have a terrible time understanding U.S. academic concepts such as* drop, add, credit hours, grading system, deadlines*, etc., etc. [italics added]. They get thoroughly lost in a whirlwind of U.S. and specifically college-related colloquial expressions, acronyms, abbreviations, nomenclature, etc., etc.*

Although students' command of this branch of academic language might not directly affect their performance in the classroom, it is relevant to their educational experience and important for many of the tasks they have to perform as student members of the university (e.g., signing up for classes, clearing a hold). The need for cultural skills was also noticed, and staff members commented on the need for knowledge/ skills pertaining to both the larger U.S. culture and the more local culture (e.g., the culture of an office in which an international student works). One focus group member noted that "students with superior cultural skillsregardless of language ability, are perceived as more employable." As many international students, particularly graduate students, need some kind of employment to support their studies, it is crucial that they have the language and cultural skills necessary for performing those duties that support their studies. [-8-]

Discussion and conclusion

Focus group discussions with students, faculty members, and administrative personnel allowed us to examine international students' academic language needs from different perspectives. These perspectives both supported and complemented each other. For example, all three groups perceived writing to be a skill that presents a persistent challenge for students, and all three groups indicated that cultural skills are related to language skills. However, each group also offered unique information. For example, the students provided detailed information about their difficulties and language needs related to their learning and functioning in the university community. They also provided the insight that students' language needs may change during the course of their studies. That is, although reading and listening

were seen to pose initial difficulties, students seemed to be able to learn how to cope with these difficulties gradually. Nevertheless, writing was identified as the area of persistent difficulty. Further, students commented that reading skills practiced with short texts might not automatically transfer to other contexts. The faculty members focused in particular on students' difficulties and needs as judged from course products (papers and presentations) and pointed out the specific needs of international teaching assistants. The administrative personnel drew our attention to students' difficulty with interpreting assignments and with the special terminology used in the U.S. educational system. Thus, an examination and comparison of multiple perspectives assisted us in obtaining a fuller understanding of international students' academic language needs.

Results of the focus group discussions demonstrate the importance of triangulation through different perspectives in students' needs analysis. Often, studies of students' academic language needs rely largely on information collected from the faculty members and from course materials, yet the focus group discussions reported above indicate that when assessing students' language needs, faculty members may take a particular perspective, the evaluator's perspective, focusing largely on productive skills. This is understandable because faculty members often interact with their students about or through course products. Yet, this also means that while faculty members can make keen observations of students' productive (i.e., speaking and writing) skills, they may not be completely aware of students' difficulties and needs in other areas. Thus, while the evaluator perspective is an important one and one that must be considered in language needs analysis, studies including only the faculty perspective may provide a somewhat incomplete picture of international students' language needs. Results of the focus group discussions also indicate the importance of including the perspective of university personnel in understanding international students' academic language needs. Note that students' difficulty with interpreting assignments was reported neither by the faculty nor by the students themselves, but by a university staff member, the librarian. This suggests that university personnel can help us understand students' language needs related not only to communicative tasks performed in the larger university context but also to specific classroom tasks and assignments. [-9-]

Our study took place within the context of an U.S. university and involved a limited number of participants (11 students, 7 faculty members, and 12 staff members). Because of this, results of the study should be interpreted with caution. While the specific findings may not be easily generalizable, our research approach and students' needs as identified by the student, faculty, and administrative personnel groups have some potential implications for future needs assessment research and EAP curriculum design. Based on our research, we offer these observations and suggestions:

- It is important to include all groups involved (e.g., students, faculty, and staff in a university setting) and compare their perspectives when assessing students' academic language needs, as each group may offer a somewhat unique perspective.
- Academic language is not confined to the classroom. International students are exposed to and need to produce appropriate language as they engage in required on-campus administrative activities (e.g., registering for class). As indicated in the focus group discussions, for example, good writing skills are perceived to be the international student's most critical area of need, and yet writing needs are not confined exclusively to courses or classrooms, but are essential in other domains of a student's university life (e.g., communicating via e-mail with university staff). A similar observation can be made of reading. International students need to process a variety of reading materials outside of class; these materials, however, may be quite different from course reading materials and may demand different knowledge and skills on the part of the students for comprehension. This means that needs analysis research should encompass and systematically investigate international students' academic language use outside the classroom. This also means that the EAP curriculum should address aspects of academic language use outside the classroom.
- International students' language needs and culture needs cannot be easily separated one from the other. Issues such as the nomenclature of university functions straddle both areas, and strong English language skills by themselves may prove insufficient if the student is unfamiliar with the host culture's conventions. The EAP curriculum should address the cultural component of academic language competence and help students understand the values, norms, and conventions of the academic culture.
- The EAP curriculum should provide international students with authentic academic language experiences. For example, students should be provided with opportunities to listen to long lectures and conversations involving multiple participants, to write longer papers, to participate in group discussions, and to give class presentations. The EAP curriculum should also integrate strategy training into the lessons so that students can develop effective language use strategies. For example, lessons on speaking could include turn-taking behaviors and strategies.

Research to date has provided an increasingly clear but still somewhat incomplete picture of the academic language needs of international students. Our research using focus groups to examine multiple perspectives attempts to provide a fuller context for analysis by extending the realm of data collection, and thus contributes to a better understanding of the full range of international students' language needs. Future studies can continue to provide insight into the nature of international students' academic language needs by adopting a triangulated approach to investigation and by involving a larger number of participants from a variety of disciplines and institutional

settings. [-10-]

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Notes

[1] We used findings from the first round of focus groups to develop a student questionnaire concerning students' language needs and administered the questionnaire on-line.

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Editor's Note: Dashed numbers in square brackets indicate the end of each page for purposes of citation.

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