A Needs Analysis Approach to the Design of College English Elective Courses: A Descriptive Account of Chinese College Students' Needs

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Abstract: This descriptive NA research with 455 participants studies the Chinese independently-run college learners' needs, to help teachers design College English elective courses. It finds that the learners' target needs include to pass English exams for future career and academic study, and to talk fluently in English; students' learning needs are to satisfy the personal interest, to learn autonomously with passionate and knowledgeable teachers in a relaxed atmosphere with authentic, creative and enlightening class activities with authentic learning materials, and to develop their cognition in the first and the second academic years. Proposals for College English elective courses design are made accordingly.

College English electives is an essential section of College English education which has been under national-wide reform in China, required by *College English Curriculum Requirements* (2007) (*Requirements* hereafter), a government guideline of College English education, issued by the Ministry of Education of P.R.China. Elective courses are expected to allow students to extend their studies and experiences beyond the learning of the core curriculum and required courses, to pursue the personal, academic and vocational needs and interest. Yet, with 160 minute-long in-class comprehensive College English course learning a week, students do not have enough language explosions. Therefore, taking College English elective courses is a necessary compliment for English learning.

To scientifically design College English elective courses, a needs survey has to be carried out before frameworks are written (Yalden, 2000: 131). Needs Analysis (NA hereafter) has been recognized as the starting step and also the indispensable part in curriculum design before syllabus, materials and teaching activities are decided. NA began to raise the interest of educators and researchers as the learner-centered communicative language teaching sprung in 1970s. According to Long (2005:21), most needs analysts developed from the Council of Europe in the early 1970s by Wilkins, Richterich and others, and related studies such as that conducted by Munby.

By means of NA questionnaire and investigation on the students of three independently-run colleges in Guilin, Guangxi Province, namely, LC of GNU (Lijiang College of Guangxi Normal University), IIT of GUET (Institute of Information Technology of Guilin University of Electronic Technology), and BCM of GUT (Bowen College of Management Guilin University of Technology), this study aims: (1) to investigate students' needs towards College English electives, including target needs and learning needs, both including 6 categories respectively: why, who, what, how, when, where; (2) to give recommendations for improving the teaching of College English elective course in independently-run colleges.

1. Needs and Needs Analysis

The word Needs has been defined from different perspectives. Some give it a clear definition, while some state the domains it covers. Dubin et al. (2006:4) point out that needs are closely related to individual learners and change and shift during the period of a course. In the language-centered approach, Hutchinson et al. (2002:54) define needs as "the ability to comprehend and/or produce the linguistic features of the target situation". Berwick (1989: 52) states that "needs is ……as a gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state". Nunan (2005:4) refers needs as the collection of information about learners.

Needs assessment is an integral part of systematic curriculum building (Brown, 2002:35). For the definition of NA, scholars have different answers. Dubin et al. (2006:5) put needs analysis as the fact-finding stage, and it is the basis for establishing policy or formulating goals. Brown (2002:35) considers needs analysis as the activities conducted to obtain information, and it is the basis for developing a curriculum, with the purpose of satisfying the learning needs of particular students.

In all, Needs is the information one lacks and wants in desire of reaching to a certain goal; Needs Analysis is a systematical information-gathering process, in which educators apply instruments to collect and sort information, for the purpose of designing and implementing effective curriculums.

NA models have been designed by some experets to systemetically define and carry out needs analysis, such as Yalden's model (2002), Munby's model (1978), and Hutchinson & Waters' model (2002). For needs analysis in this study, Hutchinson & Waters' NA model is applied to design the questionnaire as it contains almost overall elements of the study needs, that is from the target needs and learning needs, and each includes Why, How, What, Who, Where and When.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

The principle objective of the present study is to identify and assess the independently-run college learners' needs of College English elective courses in Guilin city, thus to provide recommendations on College English electives teaching.

The design of the study tries to explore the following questions: 1) What are the learners' needs (target needs and learning needs) for taking College English electives? 2) In what way can the results of the needs analysis help to improve the teaching of College English electives in independently-run colleges in Guilin?

2.2 Research Subjects

Questionnaires were employed in the study. The participants of this study were 455 non-English major EFL students from three 4-year independently-run colleges in Guilin, namely, LC of GNU (Lijiang College of Guangxi Normal University), IIT of GUET (Institute of Information Technology of Guilin University of Electronic Technology), and BCM of GUT (Bowen College of Management Guilin University of Technology).This was done in order to ensure the random-selection of population representative of independently-run colleges in Guilin, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

2.3 Research Instrument

The questionnaire is carefully designed according to the frame work of Hutchinson & Waters' model for needs analysis, the characteristic of college English elective courses and the real situation of independently-run colleges in Guilin.

The 78 rating-scale statements are the paraphrasing of 12 categories developed form Hutchinson and waters' model for needs analysis, which were sub-categorized into 19 topics. The scaling technique explored here is the 5-point Likert scale.

2.4 Research Procedure

First, the questionnaire based on the frame work of Hutchinson & Waters' model for needs analysis was designed. Then, a pilot study was conducted with 160 students from 8 departments in Lijiang College participating. With the data collected and analyzed, the questionnaire was moderately changed.

Altogether 540 questionnaires were sent out in the 3 independently-run colleges in Guilin city, and collected in June, and September, 2012. 482 questionnaires were returned and 455 were identified as valid, therefore, the valid response rate achieved 84.3%. Participants distribution was presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 Distribution of participants according to years of colleges

College	Frequency	%
LC of GNU	163	35.8
BCM of GUT	153	33.6
IIT of GUET	139	30.5
Total	455	100.0

Table 2 Distribution of participants according to length of college study

Years of college study	Frequency	%
1	181	39.8
2	271	59.6
3	3	.7
Total	455	100.0

2.5 Research Procedure

2.5.1 Data Collection

Quantitative data analysis was carried out in this study through the SPSS 11.0 software. The statistical analysis includes the following: (1) descriptive statistics (Frequency) were computed to summarize the distribution of the respondents according to colleges, years of study; (2) factor analysis and reliability analysis were employed to identify the validity and reliability of the questionnaire; (3) descriptive statistics (Mean, Std. Deviation, Valid percentage) were computed to analyze the responses of participants' needs. The significance level in this study was set for $P<0.05$.

2.5.2 Reliability and Validity

The factor analysis and reliability analysis were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

1) Reliability. The internal consistency reliability is estimated by Cronbach's coefficient Alpha by reliability analysis (table 3). The higher the Cronbach's Alpha is, the more reliable it is. Thus, the questionnaire is highly reliable.

Table 3 Reliability analysis of the revised questionnaire

	N of cases	N of items	Alpha
Target needs	455	35	0.9438
Learning needs	455	43	0.8874
Questionnaire	455	78	0.9485

2) Validity. The construct validity is tested by Factor Analysis, and the data is presented in Table 4. The coefficient of the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy) is 0.904. The higher KMO coefficient is, the more feasible the factors are, and the more mutual factors the questionnaire instrument has. Table 4 also shows that in Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, Sig. is 0.000(p=0.000), demonstrating that there are significant relations among the variables. The analyses ascertain that the questionnaire employed in this study is a valid and reliable instrument.

Table 4 KMO and Bartlett's Test of the questionnaire

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.904
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	17301.401
	df	3003
	Sig.	.000

3. Data Analysis and Results

Mean score of Target Needs (M=3.65) is higher than that of Learning Needs (M=3.49), which indicates that students have stronger preference to Target Needs than to Leaning Needs.

3.1 Target Needs

For the six categories of Target Needs, the mean score of the group "Who will the language be used with?" achieves the highest (M=3.91), showing most students want to talk to co-workers or clients in the job or foreign friends in English.

The mean score of the group "How to use the language?" achieves the second high (M=3.63), showing that most students are taking College English electives for using English in daily life with fluent oral English and good command of listening skills, writing skills, and reading skills.

The mean score of the group "Where will the language be used?" ranks the third (M=3.62), showing students taking College English electives either for the future study or for future work.

The mean score of the group "What will the content areas be?" ranks the fourth (M=3.61). This group consists of three sub-categories. Among them, the mean score of ELS is the highest (M=3.97), followed by ECK (M=3.48) and ESP (M=3.39). It means that students want to improve their English skills eagerly by taking College English electives, and they are attracted to the English culture in general. However, they do not have strong desire to take College English electives for learning ESP.

The mean score of the group "When will the language be used?" ranks the fifth (M=3.60), indicating more than half of students want to apply the College English elective knowledge into the current undergraduate study and into the future study.

The mean score of the group "Why is the language needed?" is the lowest (M=3.51), showing the reasons the students in independently-run colleges taking the College English electives vary. Most students want to be better prepared for the CET4/CET6 or the English exam for the entrance of postgraduate study. Still, some are for further major study, some for the oversea travel and some for getting some English level certification. However, a small number of students want to prepare for exams such as GRE, TOFEL, or IELTS by taking College English electives.

3.2 Learning Needs

The mean score of the group "Where will the course take place?" is the highest (M=3.85). Personal interest and college compulsory requirements are the main reasons students taking college English electives.

The mean score of the group "Who are the learners?" ranks the second (M=3.83). This group consists of 4 sub-categories: Requirements to teachers and Cognitive needs ranking the top 2 with very high mean scores (M=4.20, M=4.11), followed by Attitude towards Western people and culture (M=3.48), and Learning Styles (M=3.54). The data shows that students favor passionate and knowledgeable teachers and they have strong cognitive development needs for taking college English electives in general. Slightly more than half of students are willing to make friends with native English speakers and like English language, and about 1/3 of students hold neutral opinions. The low mean score 3.54 shows that independently-run college students' learning styles vary, with a light preference: students are more analytic than global when dealing with ideas, more extroverted than introverted when dealing with people, more visual than auditory and hands-on learning when using physical senses to study or work, more intuitive than concrete-sequential when handing possibilities, more closure-oriented than open when approaching tasks.

The mean score of the group "What resources are available?" ranks the third (M=3.49). The study finds that students favor authentic English learning materials and do not have strong preference towards one certain type: a sub-course with one specific aspect, or an introductory course. Students believe either foreign teachers or English teachers with Chinese mother tone will be acceptable to give courses.

The mean score of the group "How do the learners learn?" ranks the fourth (M=3.46). In general, most students want to learn in a relaxed atmosphere and like to involve in creative, authentic and

enlightening class activities and tasks in a group (M=3.71). Students believe that teachers' role is to guide them to learn and it is their job to learn well (M=3.59). Self-assessment is preferred by students (3.41).

The mean score of the group "Why are the learners taking the course?" ranks the fifth (M=3.32). In the process of learning, personal interest and college compulsory requirements are the main reasons students taking college English electives, while the assignments and tests of the courses are not the determining factors.

The mean score of the group "When will the course take place?" is the lowest (M=2.95). Students prefer to take electives in weekdays and daytime, and are more willing to take electives in the first and second academic years.

4. Pedagogical Recommendations

4.1 Courses

Giving College English elective course with students' preferred contents is advisable. The present study finds that students have different preferences towards courses selection; therefore, two categories of College English electives should be made to meet learners' different needs: the prior category of courses with larger learner demands, and the secondary category with smaller learner demands. Based on the results achieved, it is recommended that College English elective courses should be put into 4 categories, each with specific content areas and with a further division into prior category and secondary category (see table 5).

Table 5 Samples of the content areas of College English elective courses for independently-run colleges

Course category	Course contents	
	Prior	**Secondary**
English language skills	English listening English speaking English reading ……	English vocabulary English translation English interpretation ……

English language literature and culture	Foreign languages
	  Thai, Vietnamese, French, etc.
	Western folk culture
	Customs
	Food culture
	Western social etiquette
	Western way of thinking
	Cultural differences
	  e.g. Cultural Differences between China and Western Countries: An Introductory One
	    Food-Cultural Differences between China and Western Countries
	……
		Western political systems
		Western social systems
		Western laws and regulations
		Western idea of values
		Western philosophy
		Western religions
		Western science and Technology
		Western geography
		Western history
		Western idioms
		English literature (novels and poems, etc.)
		……

ESP (especially EAP and EOP)	Introductory courses of EAP e.g. English for Arts, English for Science and Technology, English for Engineering, English for Finance and Economics, etc.. Introductory courses of EOP	Advanced courses of EAP Advanced courses of EOP EST
Applied English	Tourism English Situation English ……	English speech English debate ……
Exams and certificates preparation	CET4/CET6 English exam for the entrance of postgraduate study	TOEFL, BEC, GRE ……

4.2 Course-time Arrangement and Physical Surroundings

Proper course time should be set as what time classes take place affects all teaching planning. Which school years do students prefer to take college English elective classes decides the difficulty level and types of the courses. As this NA study shows, English College elective courses should be arranged in weekdays and daytime, and most courses should be put in the first and second academic years.

Physical surroundings should be learner-friendly as it also influences learning efficiency. First, comfortable surroundings should be created as it will help learners to focus on study: a classroom with a proper learner capacity, a learning place with quietness, brightness and neatness, etc. Second, it is advisable that classrooms should be equipped with multi-media, as it will enable teachers show more learning materials effectively, and to organize different class activities, to help students achieve high learning efficiency. For instance, by running a computer connected with Internet, teachers can present more background knowledge to students, such as up-to-date news related to the learning topic. Third, except traditional classroom learning, virtue class learning can be an alternative, as this study finds that 42% of students are willing to take virtue classes as it provides opportunities of learning with no fixed place and time.

4.3 Teaching Materials

The English elective courses teaching materials are not adequate in market as the interview shows. Several methods can be done to solve this problem.

One is to take commercial materials. Commercial materials may be complete, with teachers' books, students' books, and CD, and with the content, the language, and the sequencing carefully designed (Nunan, 2001: 98; Harmer, 2000: 112, 118). It is advisable for teachers to contact the publish presses to get the recommendations.

Another is to take rich-content, user-friendly computer packages as a source of teaching materials (Nunan, 2001: 98). So far, for the independently-run colleges in Guilin, *Lan Ge Software* and *New Horizon College English Online Learning* have been adopted to facilitate the learning and teaching of English.

Teachers' own teaching materials are also valuable sources with authentic and up-to-date materials, including video clips, TV programs, radio and newspapers, photographs and pictures etc. Though the collecting of these materials is time-and-effort-consuming, if there are no appropriate textbooks in market, it might be a good way out.

4.4 Methodology

Methodology is an important element for language teaching, and it includes the selection of learning activities and materials, and specifies the 'how' of teaching (Nunan, 2001: 4, 76). To determine 'how' of College English elective teaching, learning styles, teacher's quality and role, and class activities have to be discussed.

4.4.1 Learning styles

Learning style refers to an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills (Reid, 2002: F34). The identification of learners' learning style will enable teachers to adapt appropriate teaching methodology.

With the learning styles information collected in the present study, College English elective course teachers should organize a wide range of social, interactive learning tasks (games, conversations, discussions, role-play, etc.) as students are more extroverted than introverted. Teachers should also prepare details finding exercises, logical analysis and contrasts activities as students are more analytic than global when dealing with ideas as the present study finds. Visual means (books, video, pictures, etc.) materials should be prepared as most of them are visual learners; listening and speaking activities and some language projects should also be organized as part of students are auditory person and hands-on person. Step-by-step instruction might not be effective ways of guiding students to learn as they are more intuitive; and abstract and critical thinking

activities should be encouraged. Explicit directions should be given when organizing class, and learning tasks should be carefully designed as the study shows students are closure-style and dependent on teacher in the learning process.

4.4.2 Teaching staff

The study finds that students like passionate and knowledgeable teachers. College English elective teachers should well-design the teaching plan, keep themselves up-to-date with the latest research of EFL teaching, possess the knowledge of the target language and target culture and learn how to teach and learn (teaching methodology, learning principles, psychology of language, etc.)

This survey shows students know English is learned not taught and teacher's role is to help and facilitate their study, but they are reluctant to do the autonomous learning or they simply don't know how and what to learn. Therefore, lectures about learning strategies should be given and successful language learning samples should be set; observation and individual communication should be carried out to discover and solve students' learning problems; interesting and authentic learning materials should be provided, and real-tasks should be designed for students to learn or do after class. Except of being facilitator, teachers should also be an expert observer with good target and native language (within cognitive-code theories), a resource and an evaluator (Humanism), as Dubin et al. (1986: 47, 48, 77) point out.

4.4.3 Class activities

This NA study finds out that, in general, most students in independently-run colleges want to learn in a relaxed atmosphere and like to involve in creative, authentic and enlightening class activities and tasks in a group, and like classes given by foreign teachers and their own English teachers. About half of the students in survey show positive attitudes towards English, but still about one third of them hold ambivalent attitudes. Teachers should therefore carefully design the learning activities with specific teaching objectives and learners' preference in mind to arouse students' learning interest.

Communicative tasks can be included when designing the activities, as cooperative, open, and caring manner is expected in a communicative curriculum, and group activities and sharing is emphasized (Dubin et al., 1986: 77). These tasks match the learners' learning style (61.6% prefer to work or study with others; 59.2% of students enjoy building or making things to learn), thus would be effective class activities. Teachers may design different activities and present rich materials to help students to learn, such as group work, free conversation, learners deciding their own topic, etc. If possible, College English elective teachers may organize some activities to help students directly or indirectly talk with native English speakers. There is a problem most teachers may encounter: though the data shows students like group work, most independently-run college learners are unwilling to practice actively because of their elementary English level—broken spoken English, small vocabulary, wrong grammar, etc. To solve this problem, English teachers can present topic-related vocabulary, sentence patterns, phrases, and background information as well, to students. At the same time, teachers shall be patient enough to encourage students to evolve in the class activities and allow them to make mistakes.

4.5 Learning Assessment

By designing their own test-form, students believe it can better assess their learning outcome, as the NA results presented. The assessment serves to the purpose of assessing learners' learning when deciding the test form. Thus, it is advisable that students can design their own test form with the specific instruction given by teachers.

When negotiating, College English electives teachers should clearly present the teaching objectives, testing purpose, as well as the test deadline to students. Then, recommended test forms (2-3 choices for operational purpose) and instruments (objective of subjective, open or close, written or oral), as well as some requirements for each test, should be clearly stated. Students then choose one to assess their learning achievement or design one test by discussing with the teacher. Only when it gets teacher' confirm can a student carry out the test.

5. Conclusion

This descriptive study was conducted to find out the learners' needs in independently colleges context. The results provide a data base for the design of College English electives. However, the representative sample needs to be enlarged. The research instruments in this study is questionnaires which is not enough to provide overall information. Triangulated research measures should be adapted including observation. Moreover, the research studies the independently-run college learners' needs in general, leaving the individual, discipline and college differences unexplored. More researches need to be conducted for the operational purpose.

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