A Needs Assessment Study of the ELT Prep Students' Perceptions of the Importance, Performance and Difficulty in Applying Reading, Writing and Language Learning Skills and Strategies

Abstract

A needs assessment study is usually carried out for different purposes. Collecting information on a specific problem that learners are experiencing, helping to determine if an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students, finding out the perceptions of related parties regarding the skills a learner needs in order to perform a specific role, demonstrating a change of direction that people in a reference group feel is important, and signifying a discrepancy between the perceptions about what the students are able to do and what they need to be able to do are the main reasons for needs assessments to be conducted (Richards, 2001). The present study aims to identify the students' learning needs on their overall reading and writing abilities, and the effective language learning strategies enrolled in an English Preparatory Language Teaching program at a highly competitive private university in Istanbul, Turkey. A sample of 12 advanced level students and 3 full-time instructors participated in the study. Data came from an adapted version of a survey developed by Akyel and Özek (2006) (based on Baştürkmen, 1996) to measure students' learning needs with respect to the basic language skills and strategies, and semi-structured interviews conducted both with the students and instructors. The findings suggest important implications for evaluating and redesigning the reading and writing syllabuses of the English Language Preparatory School for the following academic year.

Literature Review

One of the most important phenomena of language learning-teaching process is to make students reach the intended language level in a shorter time and in a better way (Elkılıç et al., 2003). In order to achieve this goal, programs should be designed with

great care. Considering the importance of program design and development, evaluation has received great attention in research. Gaies (1992) defines program evaluation as the systematic collection of information about the effectiveness of the various components of a program. Two aims can be identified for program evaluation: an internal aim, with the focus on student learning (outcomes) and as a means for indicating desirable or needed curricular change, and an external aim, which intends to demonstrate the accountability of an institution and of the program within an institution to the larger public.

Needs analysis is the crucial step to be taken in the design, development and evaluation of any educational program. Altschuld and Witkin (1995) define needs analysis as a set of systematic procedures pursued in order to establish priorities based on identified needs, and make decisions attempting improvement of a program and allocation of resources. Likewise, Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman (2004) refer to needs analysis as the means by which an evaluator determines whether there is a need for a program, and if so, what program services are most appropriate to that end. This task involves constructing a precise definition of the problem, assessing its extent, defining and identifying the targets of the interventions, and accurately describing the nature of the service needs of that population.

Many needs analysis studies have been carried out in order to analyze students' needs, and to revise or design various educational programs. First of all, Baştürkmen (1996) carried out a study to evaluate the communicative language needs of the students in the College of Petroleum Engineering at Kuwait University. Data came from questionnaires, observations and examinations of students' materials and samples. According to the findings of the study, there was a gap between students' and faculty's perceptions of the importance of language skills. Students considered listening to be the most difficult skill whereas the faculty made no distinctions among the basic language skills. Similarly, Akyel and Özek (2006) conducted a needs assessment study at the Language Preparatory School (YADYOK) at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. The main purpose was to assess students' needs of overall

language skills and strategies. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were incorporated to collect data. The findings revealed that there was a difference between students' and teachers' perceptions concerning the importance and the difficulty level of the basic language skills. While students stated that speaking was the most important skill to be developed, teachers believed that reading should be highly emphasized in the program. Moreover, there was a discrepancy between students' and teachers' responses on the strategies students experienced most difficulty ranging from, organizing ideas for argumentative purposes to combining information from multiple texts to prepare an assignment. Finally, Erozan (2005) evaluated the language improvement courses, Oral Communication Skills I /II, Reading Skills I/II, Writing Skills I/II, Advanced Reading Skills, Advanced Writing Skills, and English Grammar I/II in the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) at Eastern Mediterranean University. The participants of the study were 6 instructors teaching the language improvement courses, and students enrolled in these courses. Course evaluation questionnaires for students, interviews with students and teachers, classroom observations, and examination of relevant written documents such as, course policy sheets, course materials, and assessment tools used in the courses were administered as data collection instruments. The findings of the study revealed that the language improvement courses were generally effective in terms of five aspects specified in the evaluation model employed in the study, as perceived by the students and instructors. As a result, they suggested making some changes such as, practice component in the language improvement courses should be enhanced, a wider variety of authentic materials should be used, various methods and activities should be utilized in teaching-learning process, and intra-subject and inter-subject relationships (i.e. continuity and coherence) between or among the courses need to be strengthened.

Needs-Based Syllabus Design

To be able evaluate and redesign the current reading and writing syllabuses of the English Language Preparatory School Program, the following research questions are addressed in the present study:

1. What are the perceptions of the ELT prep students with respect to the importance of performance in reading and writing?

2. What are the perceptions of the ELT prep students in relation to the difficulty in applying basic reading and writing strategies in given tasks?

3. Which language learning strategies are perceived to be effective by the students and instructors in learning English?

Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 advanced students and 3 full-time instructors enrolled in the ELT Preparatory School program during 2008-2009 academic year. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the students.

Table 1. Overview of the participants

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	9	75
Male	3	25

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Age	12	9	18	27	19.50	2.713

Instruments

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for the purpose of the study. Firstly, an adapted version of a survey developed by Akyel and Özek (2006) (based on Baştürkmen, 1996) was administered to measure students' needs on their overall language ability. Each item in the questionnaire was accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'very important' (1) through 'unimportant' (5) in Part 2 and 'always' (1) through 'never' (5) in Part 3 and Part 4. In the present study, only the items related to students' perceptions of; the importance of performance in reading and writing, and the difficulty in applying the basic reading and writing strategies in given tasks, and the effective language learning strategies were investigated. Based on the results gathered from the survey, six students (two low, two middle and two high achievers) were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. Finally, due to the limited number of instructors, only a semi-structured interview was carried out. Descriptive analyses including means and percentages were used to describe students' responses. The data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed by means of pattern coding as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1998).

Results

The Needs Analysis Survey

The Importance of Performance in Reading Tasks

Students' learning needs in terms of the performance in reading tasks were examined in Table 2.

Table 2. The importance of performance in reading tasks perceived as learning needs by students

Reading Tasks (n=12)	1	2	
	always	frequently	M
Textbooks	25	41.7	2.16

Articles in journals	25	33.3	2.16
Course handouts	58.3	25.0	1.58
Texts on the Internet	41.7	16.7	2.08
Newspapers/magazines	16.7	25.0	2.58
Lecture notes	41.7	41.7	1.75
Works of literature	16.7	8.3	3.16
Graphs/ charts/ tables	16.7	33.3	2.58

The range of means of items is 1.58-3.16. The items with the highest importance of performance in reading ranged from; lecture notes (83.4%) to works of literature (25%).

The Importance of Performance in Writing Tasks

Students' learning needs with respect to the performance in writing tasks were analyzed in Table 3.

Table 3. **The importance of performance in writing identified as learning needs by students**

Writing Tasks	1	2	
	always	**frequently**	**M**
A resume (CV)	66.7	16.7	1.50
Essays in reaction to readings	66.7	33.3	1.33
References for a report or project	50.0	25.0	1.75
Projects/term papers	58.3	41.7	1.41

Textbook exercises	41.7	8.3	2.66

The range of means of items is 1.33-2.66. The items with the highest importance of performance in writing differed from essays in reaction to readings (100%) to textbook exercises (50%).

The Difficulty in Applying Reading Strategies

Students' learning needs on the difficulty in applying reading strategies in given tasks were measured in Table 4.

Table 4. **The difficulty in applying reading strategies perceived as learning needs by students**

Reading Strategies (n=12)	**1**	**2**	
	always	**frequently**	**M**
Recognize words automatically.	-	-	3.66
Guess the meaning of an unknown word from context.	33.3	41.7	4.16
Recognize the organization of ideas.	58.3	8.3	3.83
Predict the content of a text.	-	58.3	4.41
Read and respond critically.	-	33.3	3.91
Distinguish fact from opinion.	-	58.3	4.50
Read carefully and understand the details of the text.	-	25.0	3.91
Go through a text quickly to get the general idea.	-	66.7	4.33

		58.3	4.33
Read quickly to find important information.	-	58.3	4.33
Search for simple information.	-	-	4.66
Distinguish the main idea from the supporting detail(s).	-	33.3	4.41
Identify cause-effect relationships.	-	50.0	4.50

The range of means of items is 3.66-4.66. The reading strategies with the highest difficulty were ranked as; guessing the meaning of an unknown word from context (75%) to identifying cause-effect relationships and understanding writer's aim/attitude (50%).

The Difficulty in Applying Writing Strategies

Students' learning needs considering the difficulty in applying writing strategies in given tasks were examined in Table 5.

Table 5. **The difficulty in applying writing strategies perceived as learning needs by students**

Writing Strategies (n=12)	1	2	
	always	frequently	M
Summarize information from multiple texts to prepare an assignment.	25.0	66.7	4.33
Organize writing to express major and supporting ideas.	-	50.0	4.50
Organize ideas for compare and contrast purposes.	33.3	50.0	4.33

Organize ideas to show cause and effect relationships.	50.0	33.3	4.33
Organize ideas for argumentative purposes.	16.7	66.7	4.00
Organize ideas to describe events.	41.7	58.3	4.58
Organize ideas for classification.	16.7	50.0	4.16
Write references and quotations.	-	8.3	3.41
Use relevant reasons and examples to support a position.	24.2	31.9	2.51
Describe a process.	29.7	27.5	2.53
Evaluate and revise your writing.	26.4	24.2	2.51

The range of means of items is 2.51-4.58. The writing strategies with the highest level of difficulty differed from; from organizing ideas to describe events (100%) to evaluating and revising your writing (50.6%).

The Perceptions of Effective Language Learning Strategies

Students' learning needs on the perceptions of effective language learning strategies were identified in Table 6.

Table 6. The perceptions of effective language learning strategies as learning needs by students

Language Learning Strategies (n=12)	1	2	
I like…	always	frequently	Mean
to learn by reading.	16.7	33.3	2.41

to learn by conversations.	41.7	25.0	2.00
the teacher to explain everything to us.	66.7	33.3	1.33
to learn many new words.	50.0	33.3	1.66
to work in groups in class.	8.3	50.0	2.58
use a textbook.	33.3	8.3	2.50
to learn from my mistakes.	41.7	50.0	1.75
to work in pairs in class.	8.3	41.7	2.58
to learn by writing.	66.7	33.3	1.33
to study English by myself.	25.0	58.3	1.91

The range of means of items is 1.33-2.58. The highest scores on the perceptions of applying language learning strategies ranged from; "I like the teacher to explain everything to us" (100%) to "I like to use a textbook" (41.6%).

The Semi-Structured Interview

The results of the semi-structured interview conducted both with the students and instructors were grouped under three basic themes identified from the interview questions.

The Perceptions of Performance in Reading Tasks and Difficulty in Applying Basic Strategies

Considering the answers of the two groups, both the teachers and students perceived the importance of performance of the following reading tasks; lecture notes, articles in journals, careful reading, critical reading and synthesis. Particularly, synthesizing

information from more than one resource was mentioned to be the most difficult strategy for students to employ while reading.

The Perceptions of Performance in Writing Tasks and Difficulty in Applying Basic Strategies

When asked about the importance of the performance in writing tasks both groups mentioned about; essays, reaction papers and term papers. They argued that content, organization and presentation had equal importance in performing writing tasks. Nevertheless, students had difficulties with strategies like, organizing ideas to describe events, combining information from multiple texts and supporting ideas from other resources.

The Perceptions of Effective Language Learning Strategies

Regarding the effective language learning strategies, the teachers and the students mentioned teacher explanation, engaging in reading and writing tasks, studying individually, learning new words and learning from own mistakes to be significant for purposeful learning.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to reveal the learning needs of the ELT Preparatory School students to provide important implications for evaluation and redesign of the current reading and writing syllabuses. Considering the data gathered both from the teachers and students, there were mostly similarities in terms of their perceptions.

One of the similarities between the two groups came from the importance of the performance in reading and writing tasks. Both samples identified; lecture notes, course handouts, textbooks, articles in journals, and reaction papers to be fundamental which were parallel to Ekici's (2003) findings.

Furthermore, the two parties shared a common ground on the difficulty in applying reading and writing strategies like, guessing the meaning of an unknown word from

context, going through a text quickly to get the general idea, combining information from multiple texts and supporting ideas from other resources. To overcome this problem both groups argued that students should be more engaged in extensive reading which is crucial for their improvement in reading. In addition, doing research was considered to be beneficial in students' progress in writing.

Finally, the teachers and students rated the following language learning strategies to be important; teacher explanation, individual work, engaging in reading and writing tasks, learning new words and learning from mistakes which should be focused on while designing the course syllabus.

Implications for Practice

The results of the present study serve as a main guide for evaluating and redesigning the current reading and writing syllabuses in the ELT Preparatory program for the following academic year. The concept of a language syllabus has been fundamental in the development of language teaching practices in the twentieth century (Richards, 2001). A syllabus is "a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learnt (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.80).

Considering the students' learning needs identified by the instructors and students on the perceptions in terms of; the importance of performance of basic reading and writing tasks, the perceived difficulty in applying the relevant language strategies in reading and writing, and the important language learning strategies, the following suggestions should be closely considered:

- Students should be introduced to the importance of performance in following reading and writing abilities:

  Reading: instructions for projects, textbooks, reference tools, computer-presented readings and texts on the Internet etc.

  Writing: projects, essays in reaction to readings, essay-type questions and references for a report or project etc.

- Explicit instruction should be provided to improve the following reading and writing strategies:

  Reading: skimming, scanning, making inferences, identifying cause and effect relationships, understanding a writer's attitude and purpose etc.

  Writing: expressing ideas clearly, being aware of the expectations of the reader, describing a process, using relevant reasons and examples to support a position, following instructions of the task, writing expanded definitions, organizing ideas for classification etc.

- Extensive reading should be included in the syllabus which will help students overcome their comprehension problems, enhance their background knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and improve the relevant reading strategies to become more effective readers;

- The reading and writing syllabuses should contain activities and tasks emphasizing language learning strategies such as, teacher explanation,

individual work, engaging in reading and writing tasks, learning new words, and learning from own mistakes;

- Activities and tasks should emphasize on developing students' accuracy and fluency in English. Both concepts are crucial in becoming fully competent teachers;

- Students should be involved in doing research, interactive tasks and activities to support the development of the basic reading and writing skills and strategies.

To conclude, the present study has its limitations. The first limitation is related to the number of the participants. A larger number of participants would make the study more valid in terms of the generalization of the findings. Second, data from the instructors came only from a focus group interview. A survey could have been developed for the instructors as well. Finally, adding other data gathering sources such as, observations and field notes might have provided triangulation and more reliable results. For further investigation a similar but a longer study could lead to more in-depth analysis and results, which raises the importance of a need for in-service programs to provide teachers with the effective steps of syllabus design and development.

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