



Analyzing Writing Needs of MBA Students: A Case Study of IIUI

Vol. IV, No. III (Summer 2019) | Page: 382 – 389 | DOI: 10.31703/grr.2019(IV-III).42

p-ISSN: 2616-955X | e-ISSN: 2663-7030 | ISSN-L: 2616-955X

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze written skills of students enrolled in Business Communication course by conducting a Needs Analysis survey. While focusing on the necessities, lacks and wants of learners, the current language proficiency of students was matched with the target level needed in business organizations. For this purpose, a needs analysis based on the target situation needs analysis model provided by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) was conducted. Two questionnaires were designed to collect data from learners and prospective business employers. Moreover, faculty members were interviewed to get an enriched data. A quantitative data was qualitatively analyzed to reveal that needs analysis is a neglected aspect of curriculum development in Pakistan and that the needs of students are not considered. Moreover, the written skills are being focused, but the current proficiency level of the learners does not match the target situation needs.

Key Words: Needs Analysis, Target Needs, Business Communication, Writing Skills

Introduction

English language teaching is divided into many branches, one of which is English for specific purposes (ESP). From the early 1960's, ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of English Language teaching today. It is defined by Hutchinson and Waters as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning” (1987). It is mainly about preparing the learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments (Basturkmen, 2006) and depends primarily on the analysis of the needs of students. Thus, language is not learnt for the sole aim of getting general education, but to smooth the path to entry in these environments.

Every ESP course proceeds in steps and its primary objective is to meet the language needs of learners, starting with needs analysis. And an awareness of these needs distinguishes ESP from general English. Needs Analysis according to Cohen “is a research designed to render decision making informed rather than conjectural and speculative” (Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison, 2000). Therefore, it can help in identifying general and specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives and content in a language program (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The importance attached to needs analysis can be seen in these words: 'Just as no medical intervention would be prescribed before a thorough analysis of what ails the patient, so no language teaching program should be designed without a thorough Needs Analysis' (Long, 2005). A thorough Needs Analysis also involves the information gathered from specialists either from relevant academic disciplines or from envisaged future professions with regard to future language demands on the students. Richards, Platt and Platt state that Needs analysis is “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities” (1992). Needs, in fact are gaps between goals set and learner's proficiency at that stage. It can be stated that in simplest terms, a Needs Analysis includes all the activities used to collect information about the students' learning needs, wants, wishes, desires, etc. Needs Analysis most often remains a neglected topic in most educational courses, but if we accept that a student will learn best what he wants to learn, less well what he only needs to learn, less well still what he neither wants nor needs to learn, it is clearly important to leave room in a learning program for the learners wishes (Bowers, 1980).

The study aims to investigate that while special attention is being given to writing skills of MBA students, their current writing proficiency does not match with that needed in the target situation. This study focused on Business English (BE) which is by definition a part of ESP (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1998). Whitehead and Whitehead define BE as the language of communication in international business and that “it is ordinary English related particularly to business use” (1993). Business

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English comprises the language components of organizational communication in English language. In Pakistan, BE teaching practices are following traditional ELT patterns as most teachers are not trained in ESP due to which learners are unable to develop appropriate communication skills. It's a need of every business organization as entire working depends on it. Business communication employs both oral and written medium at all levels. All communication skills are significant, but Smeltzer and Leonard (1986) describe strategic advantages of written communication (1986) as important messages are communicated in writing. This study will deal only with the written business task requirements of MBA students.

Background

In Pakistan, business English has been a much neglected area as far as research is concerned. Nowadays, more stress is being given to verbal communication, as a result of which, written communication is being neglected. Due to this massive shift in attitudes, students written communication proficiency is found to be at the lowest.

The biggest challenge faced by MBA students at their work place is when they are asked to communicate through writing. Similarly, employers in business organizations stress the importance of written communication, they feel that most of their employees are unable to function effectively as they are not fully trained according to the target situation, thereby confirming the fact that the most crucial problem in fields of ESP is how to specify the target communicative competence. Since more focus is on texts rather than learners, it is difficult to point out the exact prerequisites of the course. This makes it even more necessary to conduct a detailed needs analysis survey which can help in finding out the gap between both current and target situations in business communication and consequently lead to a more effective and rigorous curriculum, which can ultimately bridge the gaps and deficiencies in students' communicative skills.

In this study, the researcher examined the situation by focusing particularly, on the writing skills and analyzing their level of English in terms of the demands at their work place by collecting information from business organizations as to what their requirements are for their employees; what are the student's language needs and expectations from the course, the ranking of their difficulties and problems in learning English and their wants and lacks, which were specified by students, their teachers and prospective employers. The results, therefore, can be utilized for the subsequent planning and decision making regarding course content, implementation and outcome.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- To identify the current and target proficiency levels of the students
- To identify learners' difficulties and problems in written business task requirements such as assignments, letters, reports in class

Literature Review

English for Business Purposes (EBP) is used extensively in business organizations as it is the fundamental of communication. In any organization, communication is the underlying part which helps to determine the strength of any business organization. This can be confirmed by Henderson that an organization cannot operate effectively without communication (2000). In academic situations, EBP is used at length to instruct students of business communication in order to gain proficiency to function efficiently in business organizations.

With globalization of institutions, the use of EBP is increasing in the Pakistani context as well. Abrar-ul-Hassan (2010) argues that its role in Pakistan is established due to international linkages of organization and communication in global market. EBP plays a key role in not only carrying out essential business but also in its development (Tahir, 2004).

Academic resources about EBP/BE in Pakistan are quite limited. According to Qadir, the learners need a business communication course which emphasizes the study skills in order to bridge the gap between their linguistic and communicative competences (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2010). Most BET materials are being imported that do not fulfill the needs of the learners. According to Tamim, quoted by Abrar-ul-Hasaan (2010), the most problematic area of the learners' as seen by the teachers, was the writing skills. The proficiency level of the learners was far below the standards required by the institutions.

Needs Analysis

Needs are defined by Johns and Dudley-Evans as the "identifiable elements" of "students' target English situations" (1998, p. 299). Needs analysis involves inquiring about the students' backgrounds and goals (Frodesen, 1995) and (Tarone, 1989), consulting faculty about course requirements (Johns, 1981), drawing up a profile to establish coherent objectives (McDonough, 1984), collecting and classifying assignments (Howoritz, 1986), monitoring students in classroom settings,

such as lecture classes, finding the language demands, and take subsequent decision on course content (McDonough, 1984). The rationale for needs analysis is that by identifying elements of students' target English situations and using them as the basis of ESP instruction, teachers will be able to provide students with the specific language they need to succeed in their courses and future careers (Johns, 1981).

Needs analysis is a means which distinguishes the general English from ESP, which, according to Hutchinson et al. (1979) is not the existence of a need as such but rather the awareness of the need. Hutchinson (1979) explained the meaning of 'needs' in needs analysis as the ability to comprehend and produce the linguistic features of the target situation in a language centered approach. Identification of needs depend on the level and experience of the student. Robinson quotes that McDonald and Sager (1975) demand more wider ranging research into needs and wants (1980).

Analyzing the needs is not just identifying the linguistic features of the target situation. Data is gathered by various tools through which needs can be analyzed. The main tools for analysis are interviews and questionnaires (McDonough, 1984), but observation, group discussions, gathering texts may also be used in addition. The use of these tools is selected according to the individual requirement of the study, which may depend on the complexity of the situation and also time factor, which affects the study.

Types of Needs

Needs are divided into two broad categories of 1) Target needs and 2) Learning needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 54). Learning needs include the psychological, social and methodological needs of the students. We shall not elaborate on them as they are out of the scope of this study. Target needs is an umbrella term that can be defined in terms of necessities, lacks and wants. Necessities are defined as what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation (p. 55). Lacks, on the other hand are identified as the difference between students' present competence and the desired competence (Allwright, 1982). In other words, it is the gap between the target and existing proficiency and it can be referred according to Hutchinson, Waters and Breen (1979) as the learners lacks. Whereas, in order to define wants, Richterich and Chancerel (1980) comment that a need does not exist independent of a person. It is people who build up images of their needs based on the data relating to themselves and their environment" (1980). So, wants are explained as those needs on which student puts high priority in the available, limited time (Allwright, 1982). Also the learners' view of their own needs (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). There are problems in terms such as needs demands and also wants, as they are complex, but Richterich and Chancerel (1980) clarify this problem by establishing that if a student "is already trained in his occupation, his motivation is strong –he knows what he needs and what he needs it for – and he can himself define the skills, purposes, and language areas required" (1980, p. 172).

Research Methodology

This study followed the survey research method as it deals with comparing the target communicative proficiency of the students with the current communicative proficiency. Surveys are more useful as they are systematic and ask questions that the researcher wants answered (Sapsford, 2007). This was done by collecting data through questionnaire from the sample of students in order to find out their current language proficiency, and another questionnaire was used to collect data from the sample of employers from business organizations in order to find out the target language proficiency required at the work place. Interviews were taken from the sample of teachers teaching communication skills to MBA students in order to find out both the current language proficiency as well as the target language proficiency.

Framework

The present study uses the Needs Analysis framework provided by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The model presented by them is more complete and encompassing as it includes both subjective and objective needs of the learners and provides a comprehensive target situation analysis framework. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the analysis of target situation needs is "in essence a matter of asking questions about the target situation and the attitudes towards that situation of various participants in the learning process" (1987, p. 59).

Sample

The MBA students' population from both the men and women block were selected by random selection method. A sample of 30 students each are selected from the male and 30 students from the female block by random selection method in order to reduce gender bias and to make sample more representative. A sample of 3 faculty members each was selected by random selection method. From the population of employees in business organizations a sample of 8 were selected by simple random selection method, as it seeks representativeness of the wider population (Cohen 2000).

Analyzing Questionnaire

The students of MBA were asked to evaluate their level of English in writing skills to see the gap that existed between the target proficiency and the existing proficiency. 74% stated that they 'write with some mistakes' followed by 24% who claimed that they 'write with many mistakes' and the rest of the 12% claim to 'write with no difficulty'. This clearly indicates that a big population of students face problems in written tasks.

Moreover, 50% of the students' state that writing is done 'sometimes' in their course. 32% said 'a lot' of writing is being done, 14% claim that they 'rarely' do any writing and lastly 4 % state they 'never' write in their course. This clearly indicates that writing is not very often practiced in business communication courses. Whereas, 38% 'rarely' have any difficulty in structuring sentences. However, 34% feel some difficulty 'sometimes' whereas 20% claim that they 'never' have any difficulty in it.

A total of 54% 'sometimes' face difficulty in vocabulary. 22% face 'a lot' of problems, 22% 'rarely' face any difficulty in vocabulary. This clearly indicates that students are in need of activities in order to increase their vocabulary. Moreover, 44% of the students feel they 'sometimes' have difficulty in generating new idea. 34% 'rarely' have any difficulty. Students perceive written work as not very difficult.

While in terms of organizing their ideas, 48% students say they 'sometimes' face problems in organizing their thoughts, 34% say that they 'rarely' have any difficulty, 12% say 'a lot' and 6% say 'never' indicating that most students consider themselves having difficulty in organizing their ideas.

During their business course, the activities include grammar exercises, creative writing, translation exercises and summarizing texts. 60% responses of grammar exercises state 'rarely' indicating that grammar exercises are not frequently used. For translation exercises, 52% state 'sometimes' and 30% state 'rarely' showing that they are less frequently used.

Upon asking about the types of messages such as e-mails, letters, reports, research papers, a majority of 66% responded for a lot, for report writing 38% stated sometimes and for letter writing, 58% stated sometimes. The research writing activity in class shows that 66% said 'never', 26% state 'rarely', 6% said 'sometimes' and in the last 2% state 'a lot'. This shows that research writing is not practiced in the course.

The students were asked about their level of satisfaction regarding the amount of time given to the written business tasks. 58% state 'not enough', 32% state 'a sufficient amount', 6% said 'not at all' and lastly 4% state 'a great deal'. This clearly indicates that the satisfaction level of the students regarding time spent in writing skills is not at a satisfactory level.

Analyzing Questionnaire

The employers from various business organization were asked about how much importance they attach to the written medium of communication in their organizations. The responses show 75% attached 'a great deal' of importance of written communication and only 25% attached 'a sufficient amount' of importance to it. These results clearly indicate that most of the business organizations consider the written medium as extremely important for their effective functioning.

A total of 87.5% respondents state that the written language is used 'very frequently' and 12.5% state 'frequent' use of it. This clearly indicated that the written language is used very frequently in organizations. Whereas, 100% of the respondents stated that written language is used with 'all three' category that includes employers, employees and colleagues. This clearly indicates the scope and extent of usage of the written language which has to be used by all employees.

Regarding the level of difficulty faced by the employees in organizing their ideas, generating ideas, vocabulary and sentence structure. 50% stated that employees 'sometimes' have difficulty in organizing their ideas; 62% stated that employees 'sometimes' have difficulty in generating ideas. This indicates that the syllabus needs modification in order to increase independent and free thinking.

While asking about employees level of difficulty in using vocabulary, the responses 50% stated employees 'sometimes' face difficulty in vocabulary, 37.5 stated 'rarely' and 12.5% stated 'a lot'. Indicating that a need is there to further enhance the vocabulary of the students by modifying the syllabus.

About the employee's difficulty level in sentence structure, 50% stated that employees face 'a lot' of difficulty in structuring sentences, 25% stated 'sometimes'. This clearly indicates that a big population of employees finds difficulty in sentence structure, thereby confirming the need for modification in the business communication syllabus.

According to 50% respondents, employee use letters 'a lot' in their organizations. 37.5% use letter writing 'sometimes'; 50% use summary of meetings 'a lot' frequently, 37.5% use it 'sometimes'; 62.5% give 'a lot' of importance to email writing and 37.5% 'rarely' give email any importance. Therefore, it can be inferred that use of letters, summary of meetings and e-mails are significant written task in business organizations as they are used more than any other writings. It should be essential for the business communication syllabus.

About different kinds of writings used in their organizations and the frequency with which they are used in the target situations, the responses reveal that 50% 'sometimes' use persuasive kind of writings, 37% 'never' use it and 12.5% use

persuasive writings 'a lot' during written communications. A small amount of written business tasks is persuasive in nature.

When business employers were questioned regarding the amount of attention needed by the employee in writing skills, the responses that were received are; 75% claimed that 'a sufficient amount' of attention should be given to the writing tasks by the employees and students and 25% claimed that 'a great deal' of attention should be given. This clearly indicates that employees in the business organization need to focus on writing skills in order to work effectively work in the target situation, as a lot of importance is attached to it in business organizations, and that students writing skills need to be of a higher proficiency level to cope with the writing tasks required in the business.

Analysis of Interview Questions

The faculty members when asked about the course content being used to instruct the learners with regard to writing skills, the responses indicated that all faculty members largely rely on "Effective Business Communication" written by Murphy with slight changes and modifications keeping in mind the difference in teaching methodologies. Mostly the stress is given to business letter writings, report writings and summary writings as they are considered the most essential elements of written communication to be used in business. However, some theoretical instruction is also given in which students are told about the do's and don'ts of business communication.

The instructors claim that learners face many difficulties while taking the business communication courses. While selection of words most often students cannot locate appropriate business vocabulary. Similarly, learners cannot construct or structure sentences as they do not practice putting words into thoughts. Paragraph construction is normally followed by the students as provided in the business communication books which makes it easier for them to comprehend, and as a result they manage to replicate the letters on the same format. But if the need arises to write something that is not given in the sample form, they find it hard to produce any coherence out of it. This is indicative of the lack of creativity amongst the students. As they are more interested in being guided, they do not generate any new ideas and thus follow a fixed pattern. Their written work mainly lacks certain writing devices such as coherence and cohesion. While writing two or more paragraphs, which is very seldom done as business messages are very short, precise and to the point, students fail to develop cohesion between them as they not often in harmony with each other.

In MBA, students from various cities of Pakistan with different linguistic backgrounds are studying together. Students coming from larger cities are able to perform well as compared to those coming from smaller cities, towns and villages. Furthermore, students in the female section are able to achieve well in comparison to those in the male section as they are less inclined towards study. Almost all students lack basic grammar knowledge which creates problems for them in their written assignments. Apart from this most students have great difficulty in spelling words correctly which is an issue that infests their writing continuously. Moreover, students have a high perception of their language proficiency level which does not match with the perception of the instructors.

When asked how they dealt with these kinds of problems faced by the students, the instructors use various methods to rectify them. Firstly, using continuous practice in written tasks help in better skills. The teachers introduced a register maintaining strategy in which the students had to maintain a register in which they would write the entire report, review and the analysis of whatever activities that were given by the teacher in the week. All this was then to be converted into minutes, points or a summary form which gave the students ample practice in the written tasks. Apart from this, all classroom activities were assigned marks so that the students do not become relaxed and would make an effort in all the tasks. Moreover, regular and continuous feedback was given to the students which helped in rectifying the mistakes committed by them. Similarly tips and points were also received by the students on a regular basis. Students are also advised to stay abreast with the current affairs and read newspapers which can help them in many ways. And in some cases firm and strict attitude, as well as the threat of marks deduction was used to make students realize careless mistakes so that they would not be repeated in future.

The faculty also faces many difficulties while teaching as all of them claim that the time given is only one semester and there is a whole range of four skills that have to be taught. Since all the skills are interlinked with each other and they cannot be taught in isolation, therefore, there should be an addition of one more semester which would allow to combine all skills in a comfortable manner. This would also allow time for the much needed practice which is otherwise not done in such short duration.

Most often, students' motivation level is far from satisfactory, as they are not much bothered about the communication skills. Although business communication is the backbone of any business organization, but students do not give it the importance that should be given. However, during the course students receive knowledge but fail to develop appropriate skills that are required for its effective use. This is what one of the interviewees called 'the irony of fate'. Most teachers also follow the traditional autocratic teaching style.

The course, it was suggested, should include more writing practice, they should be given assignment more often as well as project writings. The students should be stopped from using material from the internet and start relying on their own capabilities. Furthermore, there should be teachers assessment done by class observations and which should aim at giving

positive feedback to enhance teaching methodologies. Its aim should not be to raise criticism at teachers but rather to improve and augment teaching learning situation to optimum level. The business communication course is normally not considered as very important in the Pakistani universities and that courses are given to teachers who do not have any insight of business activities. Due to this, teachers mostly use English for general purposes for teaching business students. The teaching of business communication should be assigned only to the teachers who have background knowledge in both business and English studies.

Findings and Discussion

Business communication is an essential component of the MBA course in the universities of Pakistan. In International Islamic University Islamabad, it is being offered once in the masters' level. This business communication course comprises of all four language skills mixed together. But this is not being practiced as more stress is being given to other skills as compared to the writing skills. Writing skill holds a very important role in the business communication in all business organizations including private and public sector as well as banks. These business organizations need employees who can effectively and efficiently utilize their written skills in the work environment.

Current Proficiency Level

The courses are being selected by the subjective judgment of the teachers according to the level and needs of the learners, which follows a fixed pattern. The learners' perception of their language are varied from that of the target situation. The students mostly use the written medium of communication with some reservation as they are not very good at it and often make mistakes. The various skills and strategies related to writing skills are not practiced much often as not much stress is given to the writing in the course. The faculty members also believe that the time given to the written aspect of communication is not enough to instruct the learners to their optimum levels. The importance perceived by the learners relating to spellings, selection of words, accuracy, and precision is much less as compared to the importance given to these aspects in the target situation. Again, the students have not laid any stress on the sentence structuring in paragraph writings and also on organization of ideas, generating new ideas and vocabulary. Moreover, the proper emphasis is not given to the use of grammar which is also an essential of effective writing. The strategies such as, prewriting and revising is a significant aspect of writing which helps to enhance the writing skills of learners, are not practiced. In fact, a few responses indicate that these are never being used during the course.

In the course, not much emphasis is given to the written communication therefore, they do not practice the three different types of writings such as argumentative, persuasive and informational. Amongst the three only a small weightage is given to informational writing. In the various exercises used for enhancing writing skills which include translation exercise, creative writing, grammar exercise and summarizing texts, only small amount of stress is given to creative writing and summarizing texts. This clearly shows that minimal effort is exercised towards writing during the course. According to the students' perception emails, report writing and writing research paper as required more often than any other sort of messages.

Majority of the students believed that more time should be given to the communication which should be at least thirty percent more than what is already being invested currently. They also feel that their needs in terms of writing business messages are not being fulfilled in the duration of the course. Also that the responsibility of teaching business communication should be given to both content area and English teachers. Since business communication also involves a lot of business practices and business attitude therefore the teachers should have the dual background of both language and business.

The students to a large extent do not practice much writing in the duration of the business communication course. The time given is believed to be insufficient for the various written tasks that have to be practiced in order to better equip the students for the target situation. More time is needed and teachers having knowledge of both English as well as business are required.

Target Proficiency Level

In order to find out the written language requirements of the target situation, a questionnaire was constructed that asked the employers at various business organizations about their written needs and their expectations from their employee. Written communication is considered by the organizations as greatly essential and that it is used very frequently by the employees to communicate within and outside the organization as well as with employers, between employees and clients. Mostly, the standard English dialect is used with natives but in cases of multinationals it is also used with non-native people as well. Employees have problems in organizing their ideas and formulating messages and using the appropriate vocabulary. Sentence structuring is another aspect of writing which the employees find difficult to handle. More practice is required in these areas in order to efficiently perform in the work place. For organizations the most significant messages are summary writings, letter and report writing, whereas e-mails are not used as often enough. The organizations believe that most of their employees should give some extra time and effort to further hone their skills where writing is involved.

Gaps Between Current and Target Proficiency Levels

Based on the information obtained from the target situation of written business communication proficiency requirements, the current proficiency was analyzed and the lacks of the students are identified. Written communication is not given its due share in the communication course as other skills especially oral skills are more focused at. The one semester given is relatively insufficient to complete all the required activities and many areas are left behind. This time constraint leads to less practiced skills in the writing of students which, as a consequence, leads to the inefficiency in work situations, thereby giving rise to deficiencies and lacks. The lacks of students in terms of writing elements, is clearly evident from the analysis as they are not emphasizing on the writing section enough. Their areas of deficiency are the basic grammar, spelling errors, lack of appropriate business vocabulary, difficulty in basic sentence structures, lacking capability of generating and organizing their ideas and thoughts in a comprehensible manner. Moreover, capitalization and very frequent use of information style of writings is not done by the learners. Furthermore, instead of reports and summary writings they are focusing more on e-mails which leads to lack of proper ability to create effective messages. They do not practice prewriting and revision without which mistakes cannot be removed from any form of business messages.

Conclusion

Needs analysis is an area that is often neglected in academic situations in Pakistan. Courses are mostly designing without considering needs of learners. A needs analysis was carried out. The study aimed to investigate that while special attention is being given to writing skills of MBA students, their current writing proficiency does not match with that needed in the target situation. Viewing the current situation of the students and the target situation it can be clearly understood that they do not match with each other. The students' assessment of their own abilities and the teachers' assessment of the students' abilities also do not match with each other. It is apparent that student do not reach the level of proficiency that is set by the business organizations.

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