

Needs analysis and competence profiling through ethnographic methods: the case of the Academic English course at the Graduate School of a Spanish university

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OVERVIEW

needs analysis for competence profiling \Rightarrow the design of an **Academic English (AE) course for doctoral students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context**



Actividades transversales e interdisciplinares de la
Escuela de Doctorado. Curso 2016-2017



Inglés Académico

Director de la actividad: Ignacio Guillén Galve
Duración: 20 horas presenciales

OVERVIEW

Problem: **no qualitative evidence** regarding the **degree of competence** and the competence profiles in spoken and written communication in academic English **to be expected from the students** that enroll in the course.

Solution:  → **Teaching Innovation Project (TIP)** with the *aim* of developing ethnographic study protocols capable of **providing empirical data** on competence profiles, and **analysing the learning needs** of the above type of EFL adult learner. The **aim** of this paper is, therefore, **to provide a preliminary report on those results that can help to improve the AE course design by planning it more efficiently on the basis of a needs analysis.**

Project coordinator: Ignacio Guillén Galve (Director de la Actividad transversal de “Inglés Académico”)



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Universidad Zaragoza

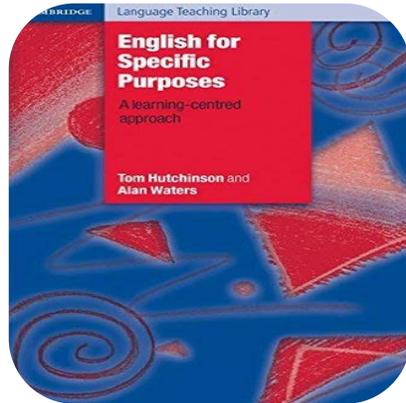
Convocatoria de
Innovación
Docente 2016/17

PIIDUZ - Programa de Incentivación de la Innovación Docente en la UZ (PIIDUZ)

Estudio de la competencia de comunicación escrita y oral en lengua inglesa de los estudiantes de doctorado de la actividad transversal 'Inglés Académico': del análisis de necesidades a la planificación curricular

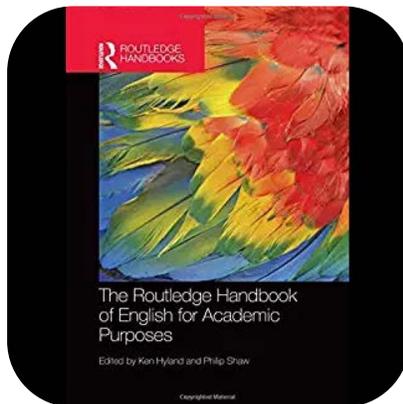
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Theoretical foundations



ESP [...] is an approach to language learning in which all decisions as to content and method are based on **the learner's reason for learning**

(Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19)



Needs Analysis (NA) is the “systematic investigation of needs for the **design** of a language course and the **optimisation** of language teaching and learning”

(Bocanegra-Valle, 2016, p. 560)

Theoretical foundations

"needs analysis process" (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016, p. 563, Figure 42.2)

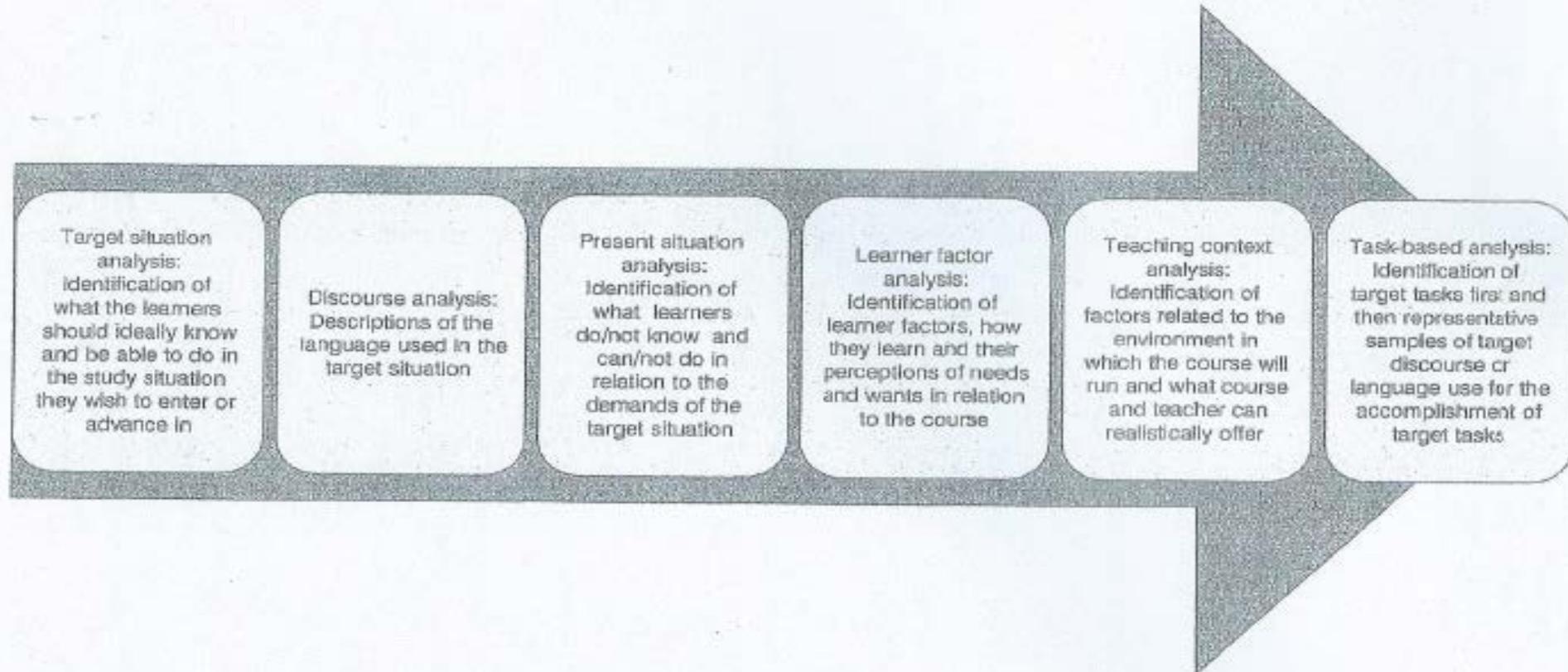


Figure 42.2 The needs analysis process, based on discussion in Basturkmen (2010, p.19; 2013, p.4211) and Long (2005)

Methodological foundations

It is my contention here that the most productive way of carrying out the necessary target and learning situation analyses for the AE course in question is the ***implementation of a micro-ethnographic, qualitative study of the academic literacy background and practices*** of the doctoral students that participate in the course. The present study is, therefore, based on the ***administration of a structured questionnaire as the starting point for small-scale semi-structured interviews.***

Drawbacks?

Our study is **not new** either in terms of **sources** or in terms of **research instruments**, but...

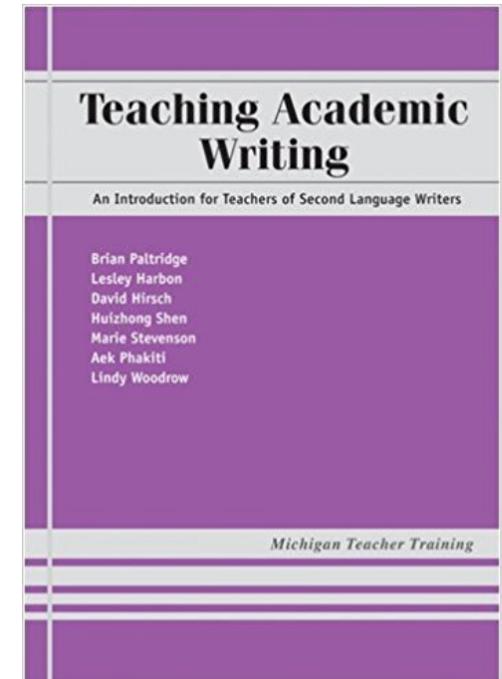
There are not very many studies that focus on postgraduates, let alone doctoral students + "questionnaires are used in all cases and interviews rank as the second most preferred data collection technique" ← Bocanegra-Valle's (2016, pp. 562-567 & Table 42.1) .

There is an expanding body of publications on developing writing skills with a focus on postgraduate students, and on approaching the topic from the students' viewpoint ← Odena and Burgess (2015)

A questionnaire can be the starting point for small-scale semi-structured interviews ← Dacia Dressen-Hamouda (2012): "studies were identified as using qualitative methods if authors used at least one, if not a combination of, qualitative methods including: surveys, questionnaires, interviews, case studies, textography [...]" (Dressen-Hamouda, 2012, p. 506; my italics).

Learning situation analysis (LSA)

A type of LSA particularly suitable for the AE course at the Graduate School of UZ is that put forward by **Brian Paltridge and his collaborators (2009, pp. 50-51)** in their introduction to the teaching of academic writing, since their book was written at least for teachers of second language writers. The LSA of our study concentrated on those aspects relevant for the analysis of EFL doctoral students' needs: their **language learning, educational and literacy backgrounds as well as language learning goals, levels of language proficiency and writing ability (among other skills), including their knowledge of target tasks per skill.** ⇒ partly determined the *general structure and contents of the questionnaire*



Learning situation analysis (LSA)

Competency lists (Section 4 of questionnaire) drew on the *Can Do Framework for EAP syllabus design and assessment (CDF)* published by the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP). We had to '**adapt**' rather than 'apply' the BALEAP's framework because the *CDF* is based on research into the "competencies" (the term used in the *CDF*) required by students studying in UK universities *at Master's level*, whereas the present study is about needs analysis and competence profiling for a course with a largely monolingual group of EFL *doctoral* students (87% of the respondents indicated Spanish as their native language).



METHODS used for the study

QUALITATIVE - Survey through questionnaire

STRUCTURE

4 sections and 25 items (questions).

Section 1 → students' personal information (age, sex, their native language as well as their parents', years of study of English at university level, and certified knowledge of English).

Section 2 → students' specific field of academic study

Section 3 → students' personal relationship with the study and use of academic English

Section 4 (***competencies***) → a multiple-answer table divided into the four skills of Writing, Speaking, Reading and Listening.

METHODS

Questionnaire - Implementation

implemented with the technology of Google Forms

Once the structure, contents and wording of the questionnaire had been fully discussed and piloted, the 84 students that had enrolled in the 2016/17 edition of the AE course were sent an e-mail message in which the Coordinator of the course invited them to complete the survey on Google Forms anonymously.

Number of respondents:

45 - 53% of the students that followed the course.

Answers received between March 2nd and March 15th 2017.

METHODS

Questionnaire

SECTION 3 in detail

Item 1 - relationship with English

- merely academic as part of their enrollment in a doctoral programme
- part of their research career
- a professional matter.

Item 2 - predominant factor in their relationship with the English language was at this stage of their lives (i.e. as doctoral students)

- a personal decision or choice
- a necessity
- mere compliance with an academic requisite
- one more stage in their experience as EFL learners

Next two items - ***more objective, skill- and task-oriented answers***

+ **extended negative answer** 'no, but it would suit me to use English for this purpose', the aim of which was to gather preliminary information about the learners' views of what they thought they needed to be able to do in English.

METHODS

Questionnaire: Methodological Foundations

As a **tool for needs analysis**, the structure of certain sections or items in the questionnaire reflects the type of methodology to be found in studies such as **Liu, Chang, Yang and Sun's (2011) exploration of EFL college students' needs** from six university programs in Taiwan.

We decided to adapt Liu et al.'s methodology to our study because

- 1) their study also built on **Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) three subcategories of needs: *necessities, lacks, wants***, and
- 2) had similar objectives, i.e. a **categorized and learner-centered investigation of needs** (see Liu et al., 2011, p. 273).

METHODS

Questionnaire: Methodological Foundations

Necessities, lacks, wants were analysed through the prism of

Paltridge et al. (2009, p. 49)

Necessities

"the type of needs that are determined by the target situation—that is, what the learners *have to know and be able to do to function effectively* in the target situation".

Questionnaire: Methodological Foundations

Necessities

How were they established **in our study**?

adaptation of the BALEAP *Can Do Framework (CDF)*

Why adaptation and not direct use? -- The *CDF* is aimed at Master's level

How was the adaptation conducted? -- Selection of items (competencies) carried out by a team made up by

- ✓ two instructors from the course itself,
- ✓ two doctoral students from the Doctoral Programme in English Studies at UZ who had participated in the 2015/16 edition of the course, and
- ✓ a researcher familiar with qualitative methodologies in Applied Linguistics
- ✓ a third student from the Doctoral Programme in English Studies, who was about to defend a PhD thesis in the field of literature and was not, therefore, familiar with research concerns in the area of ESP, acted as a neutral 'pilot' student.

Questionnaire: Methodological Foundations

Lacks

"what the learners know and can do already and the gap between this and what they need to be able to do"



learners' previous literacy experiences were initially elicited by means of the additional questions in Section 1 about the number of years of study of English after the students began their degree studies, and about certified knowledge of English (in terms of e.g. Cambridge English Language Assessment)

Questionnaire: Methodological Foundations

Wants - "the learner's *views* of what they need, or want, to be able to do in English. This requires a **learning situation analysis**, which provides information **on learners' subjective, or felt needs**".

This is the reason why each item in the 'competency areas' Section was followed by six possible answers which were, in order of appearance,

- 'no',
- 'no, and besides *I don't think* this goal is a necessity',
- 'yes, very occasionally',
- 'yes, sometimes',
- 'yes, often', and lastly,
- as an extension of the affirmative answer, 'in my case, I also believe that this *goal* is one of my big deficiencies in my use of the English language'.

Why "goal"? Paltridge et al.'s (2009, p. 49): "[a]n examination of wants **also includes** the collection of information on students' learning goals" as they "may vary from those of the teacher". Extension of the negative answer → Identification of possible areas of conflict between learners and course designers.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

1. As regards the 37 competencies included in the Competency Areas Section of the questionnaire ...

Not very many **competencies** were identified by students as '**not-a-necessity**' (27%, or 10 out of 37), and then by **few students (less than 10%)**.



→ There is a **high degree of agreement about "necessities" between students and teachers** (here in terms of our adaptation of the BALEAP *Can Do Framework* to determine the set of competencies necessary for the AE course).

None of the non-necessities concern **Reading**, which is not a problematic area, either, in terms of "wants".

An explanation for the students' choices may be that these competencies can be judged to be too general or unrelated to EFL or, in terms of the *CEFRL*, distant from "communicative language competences" or from usual doctoral student activities or situations.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

'Not-a-necessity' competencies

Competency area	Competency ('Can Do')	Respondents
Writing	Summarize information/sources and incorporate them into a discussion	7%
Writing	Adopt a certain posture towards or stance on something	7%
Listening	Understand non-native speakers' accents or pronunciation of English	7%
Writing	Quote sources correctly	4%
Speaking	Make use of cultural aspects/information while acting e.g. as a guide during an institutional visit	4%
Speaking	Guide the audience through the structure of an oral presentation	4%
Speaking	Carry out concrete communicative functions during an oral presentation	4%
Writing	Make the aim of a text clearly identifiable with a clear wording	2%
Listening	Understand a speech, lecture or dialogue with a fast, colloquial style	2%
Listening	Be fast or precise enough to detect lacks in terms of logic, accuracy or certainty in a presentation or discussion	2%

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

2. In terms of "present situation analysis" - part of "lacks"

- A relatively high number of students (**61%**) had been studying **English (EGP) for only 5 years or fewer after entering university for their degree studies**, and that **only a fifth of the respondents had been studying English for 10 years or more**.
- As regards the variable of 'certified knowledge of English' (item no. 7), **about a quarter of the respondents (27%) answered that they had no certificate**, only **11% of the rest having reached the C1 level** and then not all holding a certificate from well-established institutions such as Cambridge English Language Assessment (CELA).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

2. In terms of "present situation analysis" - part of "lacks"

Comment

In our view, the age/years of study complex is a reliable indicator that **the AE course classes** are likely to be **mixed-abilities ones**, with the instructors having to make every effort not to turn the AE lessons into EGP ones.

A reason for this may be **the typically high average age of the students participating in Spanish doctoral programmes, with a significant third of our respondents within the 31-40 years-old range**, and just above half of them (58%) within the 23-30 years-old range, which is the range closer to the year of completion of a master's degree.

Consequently, the curricular planning of the course should take account of the fact that its **average student** will be **one with a discontinuous relationship with the formal study of English as a Foreign Language**, and will not be a proficient user on the basis of what having an EGP C1 certificate may entail (see e.g. CELA's webpage for their Certificate of Advanced English, CAE) for adequate performance in an academic English course at doctoral level.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

2. In terms of "present situation analysis" - part of "lacks"

- Another significant finding was that 38% of the respondents were interested in 'using' English not only because they were doctoral students, but also as young researchers; those that extended 'using English' to their professional life beyond academic and research needs were a significant 20%.
- The results from the above item of 'scope' matched those obtained for ['motivation'](#), the next item in the questionnaire.
 - ❑ 33% were studying English, now as part of an AE course, "out of necessity";
 - ❑ 29% chose the "as a personal choice" answer, and
 - ❑ 27% argued that their enrollment in the course was an academic requisite for successful achievement in their doctoral programme.
 - ❑ Only 11% regarded their participation in the course as one more stage in their life as EFL learners.
- Taking the AE course does not seem to be motivated basically by compliance with a certain academic requisite or the culmination of EFL learning. Reasons such as necessity and personal choice (**62%**) constitute a strong enough motivation to compensate for previous weak literacy experiences.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

2. In terms of "present situation analysis" - part of "lacks"

Not all 'tasks' or 'activities' which we thought could be associated with doctoral students' academic life in English were part of the respondents' experiences. While in a previous item 47% of the respondents indicated that they used English, as can be expected, for purposes related to the *four* skills (use of English for only one, two or three skills was indicated by far fewer respondents, 16% for Reading and 13% for Reading- Listening-Speaking), **certain tasks were not chosen by respondents as typical instances of the use of English among doctoral students.** For example,

- ✓ 40% denied having used English for handling administrative or managerial tasks;
- ✓ 60%, for helping to broker research or financial partnerships, and
- ✓ an even higher group (69%) came up concerning the writing of fund-raising proposals,

although 13%, 33% and 16% of the respondents, respectively, chose 'no' but admitted that it would suit them to be able to use English for those purposes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

2. In terms of "present situation analysis" - part of "lacks"

Similarly, 71% of the respondents stated that they had not participated in the activity of reviewing or evaluating manuscripts written in English, but a significant 40% of them indicated that it would suit them to be able to do so.

Accordingly, **these data can help to identify the tasks that should become the focus of a new or special target situation analysis for the AE course and its curricular planning.**

On the other hand, other activities such as searching the WWW for information *in English* as part of a literature review in the same language were said to have been carried out by more than 60% of the respondents (100% as regards Internet searches in English, 76% for the writing of abstracts and publication proposals in English, and between 60%-70% for the writing of poster presentations or for spoken interaction in the language during fieldwork, conferences or research group meetings). **These activities refer, therefore, to areas less relevant for the curricular revision of the design of the AE course.**

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

3. Wants

The AE course at UZ should be renewed to favour Speaking instruction in particular and, to a lesser extent, Listening and Writing.

The answers to the competency area of Speaking revealed that this area gathers up to 6 of the competencies which were identified as 'big-deficiencies-in-my-use-of-English' by respondents, with percentages ranging from 22% and 16%: for example, 20% selected the competency of participating in a conversation or debate at a laboratory or seminar.

Note This conclusion is similar to one of the lessons learned by Taillefer (2007), who, according to Bocanegra-Valle (2016, p. 564), found out that "[o]ral communication is perceived as the most difficult skill".

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

3. Wants

As regards **Listening**, 22% of respondents indicated that one of their big deficiencies was the ability to understand an adequate enough amount of information (in terms of detail and speed) to participate critically in a conversation or debate, whereas the only other 'deficiency' competency in the area (18%) was a classic one, note-taking.

Writing competencies were less significant as **percentages of respondents were slightly lower**, with 16% focusing, for example, on the ability to understand the conventions of academic English (formality, objectivity, etc.), with, again, one sole other competency.

Lastly, the **Reading** area **only contained one competency** judged to be one of their personal deficiencies by respondents: feeling control of vocabulary and syntax at the advanced level required by academic English, 18%.

NEXT STEPS TO TAKE

1. Semi-structured interviews (3 so far)
2. Analysis by means of  **atlas.ti**
QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS
3. Determination of the micro-skills, strategies and (linguistic) knowledge involved in the "necessities" rather than on the mere "determination of necessities"
4. Focus on oral communication

Why so?

- ✓ Adaptation of the BALEAP *CDF* ↔ students' own evaluation of those competencies as "necessities".
- ✓ "Wants", while not being particularly serious (as the percentages of respondents that identified competencies as personal 'deficiencies' were always lower than 25%), cluster round certain competency areas or skills, Speaking in particular. Therefore, it is the "learning situation analysis" that proved to be particularly meaningful and contributed to competence profiling.

Thank you for your attention

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