A Pre-Needs Analysis of Oral Proficiency Goals in the ELI
Initial goal

The goal of this study was to look at the ELI program’s policies and performance regarding oral proficiency. It was initially hoped that an abbreviated needs analysis involving program administrators, teachers, students, university administrators, and university faculty could be conducted. Working with Kimzin and Proctor (1986), a needs assessment of the academic listening comprehension (ALC) component of the ELI program, we were able to better grasp the scope of the task. Informed by their report and the difficulty of launching a needs analysis late in the semester, we settled on a “pre-needs analysis” as an initial goal.

Pre-needs analysis rationale

Evaluation being a multi-faceted process, it is useful to begin a needs analysis in a controlled, methodical manner. A pre-needs analysis is a necessary step in a systematic needs assessment process. Kimzin and Proctor used a pre-needs analysis stage and concluded that “after completing a major part of the ‘Pre-Needs’ stage, the project team was easily able to identify its aim” (p. 4). A pre-needs analysis is a good way to begin data collection and clarify basic questions about a program prior to undertaking a formal needs analysis. Data collection for these purposes should be looked at as a long-term process. It is important to establish a good working relationship with people at all levels of a program. Since program evaluation can raise hackles, allowing people time to ask questions can help to lower levels of resistance and increase cooperation. The pre-needs work seems to offer a way to introduce things gradually and prepare the ground so to speak.
Methods

The process began with some informal interviews which led to the writing of a proposal/request for permission which was sent to the program director. In this, we briefly outlined our aims and purposes. The proposal is included in the Appendix. The ELI has roles as a language training center for international/non-native English speaking students, as a teacher training program, and as a language learning research institution. Many of the prior studies conducted to evaluate and improve the ELI have been conducted by students in the ESL MA program. As MA candidates, we were viewed by the administrators as insiders.

For background on the ELI, we obtained copies of reports from previous evaluations. The starting point was Kimzin and Proctor (1986). They employed a systems design approach to formulate their goals and objectives. Their model is similar to the one found in Brown (1989). It has needs leading to goals/objectives/microskills which lead to tests which lead to program design/instruction. Evaluation of these components is a constant process which influences each of them and is itself simultaneously influenced by them. In Brown (1989), program design/instruction is replaced with two separate components: materials and teaching. Their report focused on the ALC component of the ELI.

Harper, Gleason, and Ogama (1983) also focused on the ALC courses. Like Kimzin and Proctor, the oral proficiency standards they promote reflect the EAP goals which constitute the ELI's program goals to a large extent. Class participation skills (requesting clarification, gaining the floor, use of gambits, requesting) and presentation skills are the focus. Kimzin and Proctor (1986) recommend basically the same objectives.
for the ELI 70 and 80 courses, but they include pragmatic concepts like “social distance through speech registers” and “tact” (p.106 & 111).

Brown (1989) discusses what is meant by the term “program evaluation.” His statement “while there is certainly room for some goal or product orientation in program evaluation, the processes involved should also be considered for the sake of constantly upgrading and modifying the program to meet new conditions” (p.223) suggests the need to consider not only whether a program is meeting its goals but also the processes that are in place to monitor program needs.

The study we had in mind would have sought to compare program goals from different perspectives (university administration, program administration, university faculty, program faculty, and student). The goals would then be compared with student needs, again, as viewed from all the perspectives. Finally, the implementation and achievement of them would be considered. As such, the study would clearly mix summative and formative evaluation and product and process evaluation; it would draw on qualitative and quantitative data.

Initially, survey questions for program administrators, ELI teachers, and students were drafted. The purpose of these was to initiate the data collection process. Feedback on these would be used to refine assessment aims. As mentioned before, the initial surveys also allow people in the program the opportunity to query the needs analysts and help to establish rapport. The surveys focused on the whether the oral proficiency goals were explicit or not, how they were selected, and the means by which they were evaluated for continued appropriateness. The pre-needs survey questions are included in the Appendix.
The final part of the pre-needs stage consisted of informal interviews. Many of these were with the assistant program director. He was very helpful and interested in our proposal. While we were unable to survey or interview students, we were able to speak informally with several of the ELI 70 and 80 teachers and received some responses to our initial survey. Our very-late-semester timing was poor, but the teachers we spoke to were helpful and very interested in ELI program development.

Findings

The term “findings” is used loosely. Our interviews were limited to the assistant program director and some informal conversations with a few of the teachers. To date, we have received only one response (out of four) to our teacher survey. The student survey and interviews were not conducted.

That said, our research did give us insights into current workings of the ELI. We now have enough information to conduct a needs analysis from an informed perspective.

From our research we were able to determine that the ELI program goals are explicit and that they are the subject of much discussion. The assistant administrator (who has been in the position for a year) and teachers have taken up the job of evaluating the current goals statements vis-à-vis students’ needs and the ELI’s EAP mission. Teacher opinions of program goals were solicited at the beginning of the Fall ’97 semester. The program goals are currently under revision. From our research, the following statements can be made about the program and its goals for ELI 70 and 80:

1. The ELI has maintained a consistent EAP focus from its inception.

2. ELI 70 and 80 courses have included explicit speaking components which focus on presentation skills and class participation skills. While the goals seem appropriate and sufficiently explicit, a survey of university faculty’s views has not been conducted recently.
3. The focus is on strategies and skills rather than performance. Classes need to focus on transferable skills since students come with different backgrounds and academic aims. It is not currently feasible to tailor courses to prepare students for particular academic disciplines.

4. Recent descriptions show attention to pragmatic aspects of language use.

5. The goals are evolving. The program goals are currently being looked at with the aim of revising them. While social skills are listed on the current program goals statement, students in some classes have felt these were adequately covered in the courses.

6. The following are current needs data gathering procedures:

- administrator-teacher exchanges: weekly meetings, informal channels (email and open door policy)
- mid-term and final evaluations by teachers
- final evaluation of classes/instructors by students
- graduate student research. There has been a lot of work done on individual aspects of the ELI program.

7. Placement/exemption decision is based on three scores. While speaking skills are important parts of the ELI 70 and 80 course goals, placement/exemption decisions are based on scores on the TOEFL listening, an in-house ALC test, and a dictation test. There is a short interview following the testing, but there are insufficient funds to expand the scope of the interview as a component of the placement testing.

8. Size and makeup of the student body limits options. The ELI students are a mixture of international and “immigrant” students. There are also undergraduate-graduate-international teaching assistant components in the mix. The resulting needs differences, plus the fact that ELI 80 classes contain new and continuing students, make establishing needs/objectives for the program and individual classes problematic. A measure of overlap between the courses is necessary to deal with new students who place at 80.

9. The same text is used for ELI 70 and 80. Teachers select and supplement to meet the needs of the particular class. Teachers are encouraged to develop ideas and materials. There are a lot of resources (files, former teachers) which current teachers may or may not be aware of.

10. Funding is an issue at all junctures. Lack of funds prevents more thorough oral proficiency assessment.
Components of Needs Analysis

From our background reading and preliminary discussions, a list of needs analysis procedures emerges. The elements of this list were drawn from several sources (Kimzin and Proctor, Weaver et al). Approaches to needs analysis will vary depending on the characteristics the program and goals of the assessment.

1. background reading.
2. query other institutions about their situation and procedures.
3. interviews: program administrators, university administration, teachers, and students. These should include interviews with current and previous students/staff. Interviews should be open-ended. Such a format will be better balanced and elicit information which might be overlooked or omitted if interviews are too formulaic.
4. surveys: university faculty, ELI teachers and students. Where possible these should be pre-tested with a small number of individuals to elicit feedback and help debug the final version.
5. observe classes.
6. case studies with individual students.
7. material evaluation.
8. evaluate test instruments.
9. evaluate test scores.
10. follow-up interviews.

Questions

The ELI as an institution with two roles, EAP language program and teacher-training program, inherently faces some difficulties. The reliance on MA students to teach many of the classes means that most of the faculty are there on a short-term basis. Earlier reports have recommended the hiring of additional full-time faculty. This would strengthen the program by insuring longer term participation in development/assessment
efforts. Full-time faculty would also act as resources in teacher training (Kimzin and Proctor, 1986).

The administration of the ELI is subject to change. Informal conversations to date suggest that institutional memory may suffer from the lack of a permanent program administrator. As noted earlier, there has been a consistent set of objectives for the 70 and 80 classes; thus, it seems unlikely that the program has gotten off track due to administrative handover. On the other hand, it may be that handover affects efforts to develop systematic evaluation procedures at all stages. A full needs analysis would look at systematicity of the evaluation process.

Along the same lines, our research, while admittedly far from complete, suggested that surveys of ELI 70 and 80 students’ needs were conducted by some teachers. At present, there is no program-wide form in use. A question to investigate is the degree to which needs data from a student point of view is being systematically gathered. Further study would look at current procedures with the view to offering ideas for systematizing such information. As part of the same issue, procedures for assigning students to particular sections of a class would be studied.

The initial study proposal was to assess the degree to which the ELI was meeting the program objectives for oral proficiency and how the concerned parties’ (students, teachers, administration, and university faculty) perspectives on EAP oral proficiency compared and/or contrasted. From the work of the pre-needs analysis, we have a better understanding of the working of the ELI and what the focus of a study would be.
Appendix:

**Pre-Needs Questions for Program Administrators**

1. Does the program have explicit goals and do they include speaking?

2. Are these goals clear to teachers, students, and the university community? How are they presented?

3. What provision does the program make for revising the goals?

4. How would you describe the student body?

5. What is the orientation of instruction?

6. How have the policies and practices changed over time?

7. How do the policies and practices help or hinder the program in fulfilling its purposes and goals?

8. How are teachers assigned?

9. How are staff supervised?

10. Is funding adequate? How has it changed?

11. How are personal and academic counseling provided for students?

12. Does the program have a written curriculum that includes observable performance objectives for all levels?

13. What is the rationale for the curriculum?

14. How does it reflect the best, current knowledge in the field?

15. What materials are used?

16. What is the policy on teacher/student ratio?

17. What are the differences between 70 and 80?

18. How are they reflected in the placement test and the curriculum?

19. How does the program engage in self-evaluation?

20. What guidelines are used for this?
Pre-Needs Teacher Survey Questions
1. Does the program have explicit goals regarding speaking? What are they?
2. What provision does the program make for revising the goals?
3. How would you describe the student and their needs?
4. What changes to the ELI/UH policies would you like to see?
5. How are personal and academic counseling provided for students?
6. What is the basis for the curriculum in your opinion?
7. How are the goals reflected in the placement test and the curriculum?

Pre-Needs Student Survey Questions
1. List your speaking strongpoints.
2. List your speaking weakpoints.
3. What speaking strategies or skills do you need in your classes outside the ELI?
4. Which class activities were useful for developing your speaking skills?
5. Which speaking activities were not useful for developing your skills?
6. Which activities would you like to do more of? Less of?
7. What textbook and/or materials were used in the class? How do you feel about them? Why?
8. Do you feel that your speaking improved over the semester? Why or why not?
9. How was your speaking ability tested or graded?
10. Other comments or suggestions -
Pre-needs analysis proposal:

We are interested in speaking as a component of ELI curriculum. Using the report by Kimzin and Proctor, we would like to do a "pre-needs analysis" study to determine what the objectives of a full-blown study might be.

At the "pre-needs" level, we would want to read all relevant in-house literature on the program (history, policies, curriculum, evaluation, etc.) as well as talk to the program directors to hear their version of the same. Based on this background research, we would also draw up a questionnaire for students and teachers. This would hopefully be given to a sample of both. From this test-run, we would then be able to debug and improve our questionnaire for use as a needs analysis tool in a future study.

A future study would examine the question of how the program objectives and students' needs (as viewed by themselves, teachers, program administrators and university faculty) lined up and were being fulfilled.

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Bibliography


