

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

Learner's need analysis for TOEIC syllabus design in non-major English University

LAI HOAI CHAU*¹& NGUYEN LUONG TUAN DUNG²

^{1&2}Lecturer in Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam

*Email: hoaichau.206@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

The requirement of updating knowledge put lecturers under pressure to review their syllabus every year depending on the analysis of learners' need and the combination of factual aspects. This article is the summary of a research in Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment which aimed to dig deep in understanding learners' need, basing on which the necessary changes in syllabus designs were created. Data was collected by using questionnaires and analyzed by Linkert scale. With the use of constructivism method, this article explored students' strength and preference of learning. From the precise analysis, some pedagogical implications were suggested. Learners would like to learn in medium-size classes and the syllabus should be focused more on activities to improve vocabulary and listening skills.

Key words: learners' need, constructivism, TOEIC

Introduction

The university of Natural Resources and Environment in Ho Chi Minh City is the largest public university in the South of Vietnam which aims to provide human resources for the fields of environmental technology, engineering geodesy - maps, land management, geology, meteorology, climate change, management of marine resources and islands, geographic information systems (GIS) and so on. The school educates over 8,000 students and there are currently 13 teachers in the English Teaching Groups, the Faculty of Basic Sciences. All teaching and learning activities are under the light of student-centered approach. At the beginning of 2015-2016 school year, for the practical need of education, the TOEIC preparation program has been introduced for teaching ESL, replacing the previous general English program with *New English File* course books. At the beginning of the school year, students had to undergone a placement test to classified them into suitable level classes. If their TOEIC score is under 200, they will not be signed up

officially for the course but to learn a supplementary course. From 200-300 students would study ESL 1, from 300-500 study English 2, those with mark over 500 would be exempt from studying English at school. The compulsory requirement is that students must have TOEIC certificate with score at least 450 to be graduated from university. Since then, English program has been experiencing many changes from choosing instructional materials, constructing programs, designing syllabus, designing test format etc. In the previous school year, 15% of students failed from the placement test and 12.5% couldn't pass the final ones. As a result, this article was carried out at the beginning of school year 2016-2017 to make crucial changes in the syllabus so that they can bring more fruitful teaching and studying results.

Literature review

When teachers would like to put the learners in center, knowing their needs and preference is a must. In setting a classroom and designing syllabus, asking learners what they feel

and they need to practise is a good initial step (Needs analysis, 2018). According to Andrei Z. (2013) for the difference in each class, *"it is best to use a combination of class discussion and individually completed needs analysis forms"*. As a result, the author decided to carry out these papers to have a base for the later changes. In research fields, many authors had used learner's need analysis to apply in their teaching with different subjects. Some authors cared for this topic can be named as Bahador A., Mohammad T. H., Ahmad D. H., (2014), Sarah B. (1996).

The theory on which the author based to carry out this article was constructivism, which was applied widely in education because it could explain how people might acquire knowledge and learn (Constructivism, 2018). Roberts C. once stated that in this method, *"teachers will make an effort to understand their students' preexisting conceptions and use active techniques, such as real-world problem solving and experiments, to address the students' conceptions and build on them"*. This advantage totally coincides with the purpose of teaching TOEIC, enhancing authors to come up with suitable questions in survey.

In short, learner's needs is undeniably crucial in every program as knowing the learner's preference and learning habit may effect to syllabus design and activities chosen in every aspects.

Target population

A total of 200 freshman students were surveyed. They were chosen randomly from eleven ESL-1 and ESL-2 classes. All students had to pass the placement test, which was designed in TOEIC format with TOEIC score of about 250. Their levels of English are mainly in range from Elementary to Pre-Intermediate, some are in Intermediate. Most of them are at the average age of 18.

The survey was conducted on the day after the placement test so the students did not know their teachers' TOEIC teaching history or teaching style.

Methodology

The survey was conducted anonymously. On the questionnaire sheet, it was clearly stated that the survey was for research and not for testing the students' knowledge of TOEIC, and thus had no

effect on their grade in any way. The 12 questions, answer choices and statistical percentages of answers in Vietnamese were afterward translated into English and were listed in the Appendix. These questions were chosen in order to find out the students' past experience with TOEIC, their expectation for the course (about grade, skills gained and class organization).

Questions 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12 and were alternative answer questions while Questions 2, 4, 8, 11 were Likert-scale questions in which number 4, 8, 11 respectively with an even number of choices to avoid students choosing *"the middle option as a way to avoid taking a clear stand on the topic"* (McKay, 2006, p.38 as cited by Tokunaga, 2008). Questions 11 also asked why the students had chosen their answers, and provided some space for written comments.

Needs assessment results and discussion

Question 1, 2, 3, 4: Students' English-learning experiences

About 80% of students had been studying English from early ages. It was the national educational program implemented throughout the country in which English was taught since grade 6 (when students get the age of 12). This provided very good conditions to start learning test tactics as all necessary grammar points were already covered in prior grades. Only 20% of learners started studying English at the age of 15, whose seemed to come from rural areas where English was not really high appreciated. It was not until they came to high school did they start learning English. These students should be given more time to study grammar, build vocabulary, as well as practise speaking and listening.

As a result, it is not a surprise when about 60% of asked students are better at Grammar and Reading than the other skills. It is the purpose of studying for the test that led learners to concentrate too much on practice doing Grammar and Reading exercises. 70% attendees evaluated themselves at poor and average competence of listening for the fact that listening was not a part in any test in high school. Moreover, it is natural that the failure in speaking and pronouncing can lead to the failure in listening. Only 10% of them was not confident with

their vocabulary or reading. However, this result was only for general English which they had learnt at school. In contrast, to improve their TOEIC score, there are more words related to TOEIC's topics to be concerned. In short, it is crucial that the teachers should put in to concern the disparity between the two perceptive skills of listening and reading.

The result for question 4 about the learning preference among freshmen, clarifying the need for immediate change of focus in university teaching. 80% of people did the questionnaire tick the HATE column for Listening skills but not for Reading and Grammar. This might irrationally rooted from their strengths and scores of reading test, leading to the preference of learning what makes them confident.

Another interesting aspect was mentioned in the questionnaire was the reason that hindered learners from studying English. Over one third of answers chose the lack of instructional materials and lack of supporting equipment. It was not for the shortage of resources but the students did not get enough help from instructors/ guiders to buy the materials that are suitable to them, feeling confused to choose in hundreds of books with eye-catching

names. For those who were from rural areas, assessing to the Internet or finding CDs for a book was not an easy task. A little amount of number for the reason coming from teachers/ guiders. Choosing teachers and classes was not allowed in secondary and high school in Vietnam, learners had to learn with the teachers assigned. Hence, the style of teaching might not quite match the personal need. The most outstanding number that need discussing is the **lack of motivation** in learning English. Students tended to assume that English qualifications would not be necessary if they were not English majors. As mentioned before, the students were trained to be technicians in environment, meteorology and hydrology fields. They were unclear about the purpose of studying English, seeing small pressure for studying English at school except for passing the test to take the certificate. Thus, it is important that the students are well informed about TOEIC when they come to university and aware that in the future, either being graduated from university or getting a job, might require a certain TOEIC score, for which they are required to start preparing well in advance.

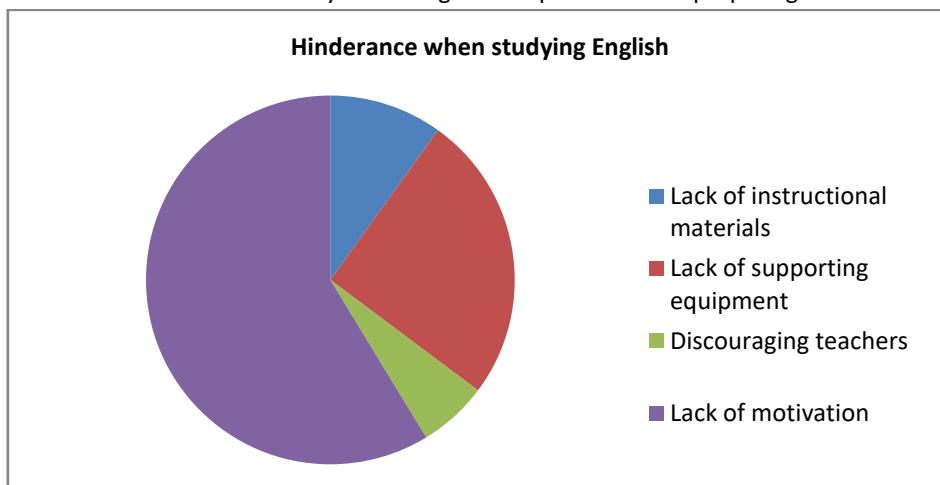


Chart 1. Factors that hinder learners from studying English

Question 5 and 6: Students' TOEIC experiences

Although all of people asked advocated the point that TOIEC was useful for their job, they still blurred about it, leading to the low motivation index above. This gave teachers good recommendation of stressing on the importance of learning before the course starts so that the learners could clearly set up the goal for studying.

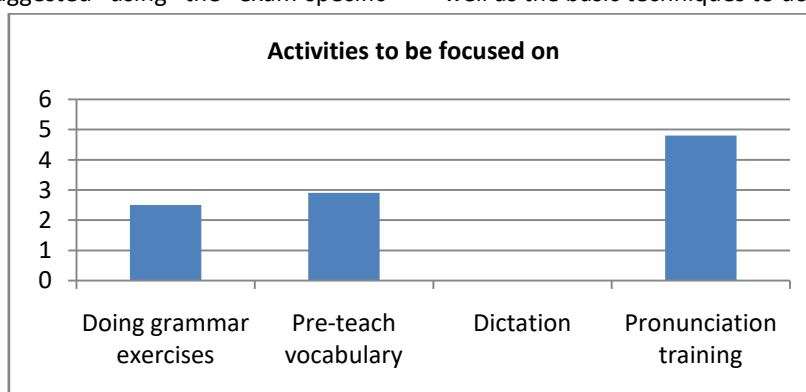
With not much experience in doing TOIEC, students defined the difficulties that prevented them from getting high mark in four main points: **Difficult vocabulary, Complicated grammar, Unfamiliar sounds and intonation, Shortage of time.** These turned to be the base for the syllabus designers to put into consideration.

Questions 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12: Learners' expectation

Most students agreed that it was necessary to use an informative TOEIC textbook to improve their scores. TOEIC is a test of communicative English ability, hence, studying for TOEIC by using well-designed ETS textbooks exposes students to a lot of authentic listening and reading materials that they might encounter in the real life, such as airport announcements, weather reports, news, e-mail, letters, employment ads, itineraries and invoices. 95% of the surveyed students believed that it is necessary to use TOEIC material to improve their scores, some suggested using the exam-specific

materials to develop familiarity with the test, which can lead to improved performance.

Besides, students also wished to be trained with pronunciation – an aspect they had never been taught before in high school. No one thought that dictation might help for their listening but the focus on vocabulary and grammar was more crucial. These statistics strongly correlated with the result in question 10 about students’ expectation for the course in which they expressed their need for learning basic grammar and vocabulary of TOEIC as well as the basic techniques to do the test properly.



The class size was also in the consideration when **most of students would like to study in a medium class with 20-35 students**. Many other researches proved the ineffectiveness in large classes (Pauline C. F.(2010)), while learning in a small class could be impossible for many factual reasons. As a result, it was not a surprise when students choose to enroll in a twenties to thirties class one.

For question about teachers, the survey provided spaces for students to write their reasons, and most of them gave written explanations. The students’ responses were written in Vietnamese, and they were translated into English by the author. Since many of the comments were similar, only a sample of responses was listed here. Those listed were chosen by the author to represent the varieties of reasons. The students thought the teachers should have experience in taking TOEIC is that without experience of taking the test, teachers cannot answer questions with confidence. Teachers should not teach something they were not sure of, making students nervous. Moreover, TOEIC requires some techniques, which only can be learnt from the experience of taking the real test. As a

result, the knowledge alone could not prepare students for the test, instructors needed experience.

Another question is about **the choice of Vietnamese or native English speaker teachers**. There were different responses among students. 30% of them said TOEIC classes should be taught by Vietnamese teachers while 22.5% chose native teachers, and 47.5% said either. Some students who chose Vietnamese teachers think it would be easier to raise questions to instructors, especially with students at beginner level. Vietnamese teachers understand the difficulty for Vietnamese students and it would be better to learn from a person who had already had experience of learning it. Besides, when students had problems with reading sections, they might not understand all the explanations by a native teacher. And if a student did not have a good listening skill already, listening to a native teacher would not make much sense. On the other hand, some thought that being able to listen to a native speaker would help them to improve listening skills, they could learn pronunciation and natural phrases. Those who chose “either” explained that they wanted to learn grammar from a Vietnamese teacher, and listening from a native one. Also

teaching abilities depends on each teacher, regardless of the teacher's native language. If the teacher is a good and enthusiastic enough, students' scores will improve.

Meanwhile, regardless the choice of teachers, learners would love the language of instruction in both English and Vietnamese. No one opposed to use English or Vietnamese but with their pre-intermediate level, they would rather listen to both language in classroom to make sure they could understand thoroughly the lessons.

Implications and Pedagogical Recommendation

The survey results show that whether or not students believed TOEIC is personally important, they knew that TOEIC could help get a job, and they felt that they have to study for the test to achieve good scores. Also, the students had high expectations for their teachers to know about the test so they could learn test taking strategies beside improving their English skills. Resulting from the statistics collected, there are some suggestions can be given to be applied the the process of designing syllabus and organizing classes for students to learn TOEIC at pre-intermediate level.

First, it is important to focus on the vocabulary teaching and pronunciation training. The hole in skills of listening could only be filled gradually with appropriate pronunciation training and terminology teaching. It is the teachers' task to introduce and familiarize students with sounds and intonation in test, as well as with the format of each listening part. Once students grasp the stereotype of each individual task, they could deal to listen themselves. Hence, the proportion of time in the syllabus for these skills should be bigger than reading part.

The choice of textbook is also the core matter. As the book *Tactics for the TOEIC Test - Listening and Reading Test – Introductory* (Grant Trew, 2013) was in favor, the book is kept using as the text book for its high quality and vivid design which is extremely suitable for beginners. The book is divided into two cycles of seven units, which contains appropriate vocabulary and grammar for below intermediate students.

Secondly, at some schools or language centers, students have one Vietnamese teacher and

one native English speaker in turn teaching class. In that situation, the teachers should understand what the students are expecting from each teacher and maximize their strengths. Vietnamese teachers often teach receptive skills like reading and listening while native teachers teach productive skills like speaking and writing. However, in this case only, the students have no choice of foreign teachers, requiring Vietnamese teachers to focus more on both receptive and productive skills. Asking the students what they feel lacking can be intimidating, but the information is useful in maximizing the strength and working on the weaknesses. The language of instruction, for that reason, should be in both Vietnamese and English. The need for clear explanation paralleling with the desire to get familiar with English intonation together make a mix of instructional language.

On the other hand, teachers, to any aspect, should take the TOEIC tests even though TOEIC alone will not make better teachers of English, and it is not argued that better scores mean better teachers. However, taking tests involves knowledge and skills which students are expecting to learn this from their teachers. While it may be possible to teach test taking strategies by learning from textbooks written by experienced test takers, first-hand knowledge acquired by taking the test would seem on the face of it to lead to better understanding of the test. Another useful advice for teachers is they should know well a list of reference books. This is to support learners in searching a supplementary suitable with their personal need. Moreover, books are designed with various contents and forms, knowing the strengths and weakness of each can help teachers give appropriate advices for students.

Thirdly, the organization of class should be paid attention as well. The choice of students to learn in not a too small, not too big class is suitable. It reflects the culture among Vietnamese students when they are too shy to be focused in small class size while too big class can not bring the most fruitful study result. The number of 25-35 students per class is ideal in the situation that there is lack of teachers and rooms for English learning. The rooms should be equipped with efficient audio system and projector so

that the content of the book can be delivered thoroughly in best way to students.

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Participants,

We are designing an English curriculum for ESL-1 and ESL-2 in Ho Chi Minh City University of Environment and Natural Resources. We need your help to complete the questionnaire below to figure out your English learning needs. Your information will help us meet your expectations in this English Program. The information provided by you will be used for research purposes only and will be kept confidential. Thank you very much for your help!

- How long have you learnt English?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)
 - A. =< 3 years
 - B. 3-5 years
 - C. 5-10 years
 - D. >= 10 years
- How do you evaluate your current English competence?** (Tick V into 1 option for each criteria)

	Poor	Average	Fair	Good	Excellent
Grammar					
Vocabulary					
Reading					
Listening					

- What is the biggest hindrance when you study English?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)
 - A. Lack of instructional materials (textbooks, reference books...)
 - B. Lack of supporting equipment (audio file, equipment, CDs, Internet...)
 - C. Discouraging teachers
 - D. Lack of motivation
 - E. Other (please state clearly):

- Which skills/ components do you like learning?**(Tick V into ONE option for each criteria)

	Detest	Hate	Like	Love
Grammar				
Vocabulary				
Pronunciation				
Reading				
Listening				

- Do you think taking TOEIC is useful for your job?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)
 - A. Strongly agree
 - B. Agree
 - C. Disagree
 - D. Strongly disagree

- What hinder you from getting high score in TOEIC?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)

- A. Terminology vocabulary
- B. Complicated grammar
- C. Unfamiliar sounds and intonation
- D. Shortage of time
- E. Other (please state clearly)

- What activities should teachers focus on in the course?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)

- A. Group-working
- B. Dictation
- C. Pre-teach vocabulary
- D. Pronunciation training

- Which language of instruction should be used?**(Tick V into ONE option for each criteria)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
English				
Vietnamese				

- How many students in a class do you think suitable for English learning?**

- (Circle ONE suitable answer)
- A. =<20 students
- B. 20-35 students
- C. 35-50 students
- D. >= 50 students

- What is your expectation for the course?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)

- A. Pass the test
- B. Learn basic techniques to do the test properly
- C. Learn basic grammar and vocabulary of TOEIC
- D. Others (please state clearly):

- Do teachers need to take the real TOEIC test before?** (Circle ONE suitable answer)

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly disagree

Can you state the reason:

- TOEIC class should be taught by** (Circle ONE suitable answer)

- A. Vietnamese teachers
- B. Native speaker teachers
- C. Whoever

Can you state the reason:

Thank you for your cooperation!

References

- Andrei Z.(2013) *The magic of needs analysis for young learners*, retrieved June 27th from <https://busyteacher.org/12710-young-learners-magic-of-needs-analysis.html>
- Bahador A., Mohammad T. H., Ahmad D. H., (2014), *On the Relationship between Learners' Needs and their Use of Language Learning Strategies*, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 136, 9 July 2014, Pages 255-259.
- Pauline C. F. & Abdellatif T. (2010), *Dealing with large classes: a real challenge*, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 8, Pages 272-280
- Richards, J. (2006). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tokunaga, M. (2008). Students' assumptions for TOEIC classes. *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Trew, G. (2013). *Tactics for the TOEIC test – Listening and Reading Test - Introductory Course*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, Calia. (n.d.). *Advantages & Disadvantages of Constructivism in Teaching*. *Synonym*. Retrieved from <http://classroom.synonym.com/advantages-disadvantages-constructivism-teaching-8634178.html>
- Unknown author, *Need analysis*, retrieved June 28th 2018 from <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/needs-analysis>
- Unknown author, *Constructivism*, retrieved June 25th from http://sydney.edu.au/education_social_work/learning_teaching/ict/theory/constructivism.shtml

About authors

Lại Hoài Châu is an 8-year teacher teaching English full time in the Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment. She completed Master Degree in English languages and published

some articles relating to teaching methodology in domestic journals.

Nguyễn Lương Tuấn Dũng, who officially trained as an officer in the army for more than 10 years, started his teaching career 5 years ago and currently pursuing TESOL Master degree in Ho Chi Minh City Open University. He is also teaching English full time in the Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment.