Doing It Right from the Start:
Needs Assessment as a Fundamental Pedagogical Tool

Estela Ene, Ph.D.
English for Academic Purposes Program, English Department, IUPUI

Background

IUPUI – SYSU Partnership

Dec. 2009: IUPUI and Sun Yat-Sen University, China sign memorandum of strategic alliance.

Multiple departments from IUPUI and Sun Yat Sen University (SYSU, China) are developing dual/2+2 degree programs. SYSU students will come to IUPUI their junior year and graduate with degrees from both universities.

Up to 30-50 international students enrolled in multiple schools are expected to attend IUPUI each year by 2013.

Many programs expect their students to be ready to attend the campus-required ENG W131 *(Elementary Composition I)* or only advanced courses at IUPUI.

Implications for IUPUI's English for Academic Purposes Program

Online courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) offered by the IUPUI EAP Program could improve international students' academic English skills prior to U.S. arrival.

Questions

Which EAP courses (e.g., speaking, writing, other) should be offered online for this specific population?

How should the online course(s) be designed?

What
- linguistic
- academic speaking and writing
- technological
- cultural

needs

should be considered when designing online EAP courses for SYSU students?

Methods

Definitions and Justification of Needs Assessment (NA)

Needs assessment (NA) is a pedagogical best practice across disciplines. It should initiate and continue through repeated cycles of re-design and re-teaching to ensure that instruction will address the true and changing needs of learners, institutions and other stakeholders (Cowling, 2007; Graves, 1997; West, 1994). In practice NA is not performed as often as it should be.
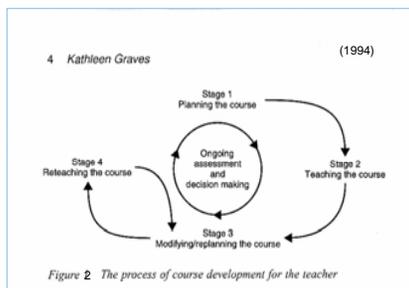

Figure 2 The process of course development for the teacher

Principles of Ethnographic NA (ENA)

The ethnographic researcher/course designer should:

- attempt to understand the insider's perspective and get to know the target situation and participants directly and thoroughly.

- use multiple sources and methods to gather quality data

- triangulate to produce credible results.

ENA probes most or all of the aspects below, while non-ENA captures some of them in isolation:

- The present situation: what learners know, what the institution has.
- The target situation: what learners need to know, what knowledge and resources are needed.
- The objective needs of the stakeholders: learner goals, proficiency, demographics, teacher background, logistics of course administration and resources at the institution
- The subjective needs of the stakeholders: preferred learning styles, topics, strategies and teaching methods.

Design

- The IUPUI EAP Program Director and an EAP Lecturer were immersed in the target environment.
- They designed and taught two summer courses at SYSU (*Academic Writing* and *American Culture*).
- They interacted directly, in teaching and informal situations, with the students, instructors, administrators, and technology at SYSU.
- The writing course was designed similarly to EAP writing courses at IUPUI.
- Assignments, surveys, interviews, class observations, emails and informal interactions were used to gather data.
- The Program Director interacted with IUPUI and SYSU administrators and analyzed existing documentation on English education at SYSU.
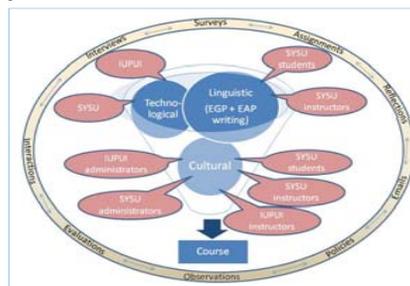

Figure 3: ENA methods used to probe needs in preparation for online course design

Findings

Linguistic needs:
There was a match between SYSU students' general and academic proficiency levels as represented in documents / policies, and in-class and out-of-class performance observed by the IUPUI instructors.

Academic writing needs:
- SYSU students' academic writing skills suggest the need to develop online versions of both W130 (*Fundamentals of English*) and W131 (*Elementary Composition*).
- Almost half of the students were ready for W131 at the beginning of the summer course taught at SYSU.
- SYSU students' mastery of certain concepts (e.g., paragraph and essay structure) was superior to that observed in the regular EAP population.
- In other areas (e.g., plagiarism and use of evidence according to U.S. academic norms), they were similar or weaker.
- The design of the online course(s) should accommodate the observed similarities and differences.

Findings (cont'd)

Technological needs:
Technological resources were sufficient but underused at SYSU. Pedagogical applications of technology were limited.

Cultural needs:
- Reflection on learning and homework with firm deadlines were unfamiliar.

- Unexpected preferences for tactile and kinesthetic learning styles emerged.

- SYSU instructors underestimated student preferences for interactive activities.

- SYSU instructors and administrators expressed opinions and requests indirectly, and they collaborated productively but often changed plans unexpectedly.

Conclusions

- ENA provided a complete, reliable picture of IUPUI's and SYSU's needs and preparedness for online EAP courses.

- The superior reliability of ENA as a scientific approach over *a priori* perception fully justifies ENA.

- ENA provided insights into important cultural differences with pedagogical implications that have not been documented in the literature and could not have been gained otherwise in a timely manner.

Bibliography

1. Cowling, J. D. (2007). Needs analysis: Planning a syllabus for a series of intensive workplace courses at a leading Japanese company. *English for Specific Purposes, 26*(4), 426-442.
2. Gilabert, R. (2005). Evaluating the use of multiple sources and methods in needs analysis: a case study of journalists in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia (Spain). In M. H. Long (Ed.), *Second language needs analysis* (pp. 182–199). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Graves, K. (Ed.). (1997). *Teachers as course developers* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. West, R. (1994). Needs analysis in language teaching. *Language Teaching, 27*(1), 1-19.

Contact

Estela Ene, Ph. D.
Director , English for Academic Purposes Program
Assistant Professor, English Department
IUPUI
eene@iupui.edu; 317-274-3908