Incorporating Needs Analysis in the Design of a Process-oriented Business Communication Course

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INTRODUCTION

In a generic and product-oriented Business Communication course, students are very often taught a number of communication skills, and are asked to produce pieces of communication, without a context or purpose. In developing a Business Communication course (LANG 101) for first-year students of the School of Business and Management at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the principal objective of the course team has been to design a curriculum to meet the specific needs of the students in terms of their linguistic knowledge as well as the communication demands made of them in their future professions. A major problem in teaching Business Communication in an academic environment is that the courses taught may not reflect the communication tasks required in the workplace. In order to bridge this gap, it is essential that in the process of developing the curriculum, the needs of students, teaching staff and the business world should be taken into account. The focus of our course has thus been to contextualise the communicative process and lend purpose to the assignments given. Students are required to accomplish a number of activities linked to a business visit and a simulation, which incorporate such tasks as telephone conversations, meetings, presentations, negotiation etc. With a process-oriented syllabus, learners are given the autonomy and flexibility to negotiate and plan their learning within a given framework.

LANG 101

The Business Communication course under review was requested by the School of Business and Management to help students reading for the degree of Bachelor of Business Administration acquire the communication skills they will need in their future professions. To design the course, it was felt necessary firstly to incorporate the needs of the students; secondly to satisfy the academic staff that the course was relevant and meaningful; and thirdly to ensure that the skills covered were actually those considered important in the business world. The motivation for the enquiry was to ensure that the teachers were aware of the opinions of both
students and businesspeople; and to discover any discrepancy between the opinions of the three respondent groups and take these into consideration when designing the Business Communication course.

From the continuous evaluation and the students’ and teachers’ feedback during the previous two semesters, it emerged that our initial needs analysis had been insufficiently thorough, and a fresh analysis on a more rigorous basis would contribute to the improvement of the curriculum design. The first two courses had been based mainly on the teachers’ own experiences and perspectives. It was necessary to explore the real ‘needs’ perceived by the students and the business sector.

All of our BBA students have to take LANG 101 in the first year of their degree studies. The three-credit course covers 14 weeks and the class meets twice a week for one and a half hours each time. Students are expected to do a certain amount of work outside class, including several assessed assignments.

In the course written for the 1992-1993 academic year there were two phases, each lasting seven weeks. Phase One focused on visits to local firms by groups of students, whose task it was to conduct an interview with a manager. The students were taken through the skills needed to communicate with the company in the lead-up to the visit. This culminated in an oral presentation to classmates, reporting on one aspect of the visit. The skills taught included telephoning, participating in meetings, social English, interviewing, letter/fax writing and report writing. There were several written assignments including a case study. Phase Two of the course was a simulation in which each group took the role of a ‘supplier company’ offering communication courses to a ‘client’. The groups also adopted the role of the ‘client’ from time to time. This process involved the circle of communication starting with a brochure and sales pitch, and covering letters, telephone calls, a proposal, several meetings and finally a sales presentation in which each team presented its ‘product’ to the ‘client’. The ‘client’ then wrote a report recommending one ‘supplier’ to be awarded the ‘contract’.

NEEDS ANALYSIS IN COURSE DESIGN

Yalden (1987:105) points out the relationship between needs analysis and a learning programme:

... the more accurately one can predict what the learners’ language or communicative needs will be, the more clearly the content of a syllabus can be delineated.
For our present purposes, needs are defined as the uses of the target communication skills the learners are required to perform and the language skills and the appropriate attitudes to realise such uses; and analysis is defined as the identification, as well as the exploration of the perceptions, of such needs on the part of the participants in the research (students, teaching staff and business-people), with the aid of statistical measures.

Needs analyses contribute positively to syllabus design and specification, increasing the learner’s motivation and enhancing accountability; cf. Ng (1989:15). However it is essential that the course designer use the findings of the needs analysis in a judicious manner so that a balance can be struck between opposing views, and at the same time attention be paid to logistic constraints in drawing up a needs-oriented and learner-centred Business Communication curriculum.

It is important to note that a highly relevant needs analysis should go beyond just a theoretical model, and take into account the learners’ perceptions and the learning context. In the case of our course, we also need to take account of the business sector’s perceptions of the students’ needs. It is therefore essential that once the needs analysis exercise has been carried out, there should be continuous evaluation at different stages throughout the course.

**Methodology**

To achieve the objectives of the needs analysis for the course, several instruments were used. To identify the target needs, we administered questionnaires to teachers, students, and businesspeople holding managerial positions in Hong Kong; we also held telephone interviews with the businesspeople. To identify the learners’ needs, we elicited formative and continuous evaluation from our students as well as the teachers who taught the course, and continuous feedback from students in the form of e-mail correspondence. For the purpose of this present study, we report only the findings of the questionnaires sent to the students, teachers and businesspeople, which aimed at determining those skills perceived to be important for business effectiveness; the main communicative activities performed by a businessperson during an average business week; those business communication skills which need to be taught in a Business Communication course; and the qualities businesspeople look for when employing a new graduate.
Respondents

Three different groups of respondents were sent questionnaires: students, teachers and businesspeople. The students were 398 first-year undergraduates reading for a BBA degree in the School of Business and Management at HKUST, who had been required to take the Business Communication course. They were questioned before the start of the course, as we did not wish to influence their thinking or induce them to give us answers that they thought we wanted to receive. All but three of the students were Hong Kong Chinese, whose first language was Cantonese.

Of the 82 teachers questioned—from three universities, two polytechnics, one college of higher education and the British Council in Hong Kong—75% had had previous experience in teaching courses in Business Communication, and 40% had developed materials for such courses.

In the third category, 90 randomly selected businesspeople, all based in Hong Kong, were surveyed. Although some of them spoke Cantonese in most of their business dealings, they all had to communicate in English for business purposes at least part of the time. The respondents were all in management positions, having to communicate externally with clients, and internally with colleagues and subordinates.

Results and discussion

Data gathered from the three groups of respondents were analysed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was performed to investigate the significance of the groups’ diverse perceptions towards the questionnaire items. See Appendix for a sample questionnaire.

Skills for effectiveness in business

Table 1 shows the means for the three categories of qualities that the three respondent groups thought should be possessed by an effective businessperson. The three categories, distilled from elements of the questionnaire, are: communication skills, academic/technical skills and attitudes.
Table 1: Means and ANOVA for the qualities the respondent groups considered an effective businessperson should possess (scale from 1 = "Not important" to 4 = "Very important")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent group</th>
<th>Communication skills $\bar{x}$</th>
<th>Academic / technical skills $\bar{x}$</th>
<th>Attitudes $\bar{x}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n = 82)</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesspeople (n = 90)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (n = 398)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANOVA p =</td>
<td>0.2758</td>
<td>0.0039</td>
<td>0.2212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) was found for academic/technical skills among the three respondent groups. Further measures (LSD, Tukey test, Scheffe test, Duncan’s test) showed a statistically significant difference between the groups of teachers and businesspeople, and between the student and teacher groups.

No significant differences were found for communication skills or attitudes between the respondent groups. The average means show that all groups rated the attitudes category as “quite important”. The average means of the three categories among the three respondent groups, in descending order of importance, appear as:

Teachers: communication skills $\rightarrow$ attitudes $\rightarrow$ academic/technical skills
Businesspeople: communication skills $\rightarrow$ attitudes $\rightarrow$ academic/technical skills
Students: communication skills $\rightarrow$ attitudes $\rightarrow$ academic/technical skills.

Despite the statistically significant differences found, the general patterns of how the three groups rated the importance of the three categories of variable are similar, with communication skills being universally agreed upon as the most important skills to possess.

Both the teacher and student groups rated “a good academic background” as the least important factor (teachers: $\bar{x} = 2.1$; students: $\bar{x} = 2.5$) whilst the businesspeople rated “ruthlessness in business deals” as the least important with “a good academic background” as the second least important factor ($\bar{x} = 2.57$). The teacher group rated “ruthlessness in business deals” as the second least important factor whilst the student group rated “honesty” as the second least important factor. Table 2 shows the opinions of the three respondent groups with regard to the quality “honesty”.

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Table 2: Respondents' opinions concerning the quality “honesty” as an attribute of a businessperson (scale from 1 = "Not important" to 4 = "Very important")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent group</th>
<th>ẍ</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Businesspeople</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>13th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst the data show that businesspeople, unsurprisingly perhaps, consider “honesty” an important quality to be possessed by an effective businessperson, teachers and students tend to indicate that they do not perceive it to be of great importance compared with the other attributes listed. Such a finding may suggest the appropriateness of including a Business Ethics component in our future LANG 101 courses.

**Qualities sought in graduates**

The main aim of Question 4 was to obtain information on the perceived importance of qualities listed, by each of the three respondent groups. In contrast to the general patterns observed from comparing the ANOVA of the three variable skill categories identified in Question 1, a statistically significant difference (p < .05) was found between the variable communication skills among the respondent groups in Question 4. Further statistical measures showed that there were significant differences between the teacher and student groups, and the students and businesspeople.

The variable “ability to use initiative” had the highest mean among the 14 variables in the teacher group, but was ranked 5th by in the teacher group and 6th by the student group. It is interesting that the student group considered “excellent academic record” to be the least important of all the variables in Question 4, whilst the teacher group perceived “good general knowledge”, and the business group “ability to speak a foreign language”, to be the least important. Indeed, “ability to speak a foreign language” was ranked consistently low by all groups (teachers: ẍ = 2.75; students: ẍ = 2.73; businesspeople: ẍ = 2.20). This perhaps reflects the attitude that a knowledge of English and Chinese is sufficient within the Hong Kong context, as well as to operate in business in China and worldwide. “Good personal presentation” (teachers: ẍ = 3.69; students: ẍ = 3.63; businesspeople: ẍ = 3.63) was rated as the most important item by the teacher and student groups, and as the second most important item by the business group. This could support
an argument for including a unit on Personal Presentation in the LANG 101 course, especially in the light of the fact that this item attracted the highest mean of all the 13 items in the question—except for “ability to use initiative” to which businesspeople gave the highest mean (3.66).

From the average means of the three overall categories, the descending order of importance for each of the three respondent groups emerges as follows:

Teachors: attitudes → academic/technical skills → communication skills
Businesspeople: attitudes → communication skills → academic/technical skills
Students: communication skills → attitudes → academic/technical skills.

The business and teacher groups appear to value attitudinal qualities, while the student group consider that their future employers will value communication skills as the most important quality in a fresh graduate.

Within the business group, there was a significant correlation between the skills perceived as important for effectiveness in the business world and the qualities sought in fresh graduates. In particular, the variable “ability to negotiate” considered an important quality to possess, and which would be sought a new graduate, featured prominently in the list of skills the business group thought should be included in a Business Communication course.

The aim of Question 3 was to assess the three respondent groups’ opinions on those communication skills which need to be taught in a Business Communication course, aural/oral skills, writing skills and job-seeking skills. A statistically significant difference (p < .05) was found for all skills among the three groups. Whilst “minutes and agenda writing” was considered as a skill not easy to master, the three groups all thought this variable the least important. Both teachers and businesspeople rated the item “negotiating skills” the most important, whilst student groups considered “oral presentation skills” the most important and “negotiating skills” the second most important.

The item “oral presentation skills” had the highest mean of the category (businesspeople: $\bar{x} = 3.73$; teachers: $\bar{x} = 3.64$; students: $\bar{x} = 3.82$); there was a significant variance in the means, with the students rating “oral presentation skills” comparatively higher than either the teachers or the businesspeople. Reserving a large section of the course for oral presentation skills seems justified when one considers at the high means given to this category by all groups of respondents. The means for “negotiation skills” were also significantly high. This compounded by the high means given for this variable by all groups in Question 1 strengthens the case for a Negotiation Skills input in the Business Communication course.
We found significant variance recorded in the analysis of writing skills between the opinions of teachers and businesspeople, with the latter attaching comparatively less importance to these skills than the former. "Letter and memorandum writing" had the highest means in both the teacher and business groups, reinforcing the justification for the amount of time spent on this in the course. Interestingly the means for "minutes and agenda writing" were significantly low (businesspeople: $\bar{x} = 2.8$; teachers: $\bar{x} = 2.67$; students: $\bar{x} = 2.83$).

The third category in Question 3, job-seeking skills, showed a marked discrepancy between the groups. Students place a higher importance on this skill than either teachers or businesspeople. This is perhaps not surprising, since students are the group that has a vested interest in succeeding in job-seeking skills. They may therefore perceive them as essential to their chances of success. Although the means for this category are lower than the other two, job-seeking skills are still considered comparatively important, and this could suggest to the course writers the need to introduce a job-seeking skills, possibly as separate course.

The significant discrepancy between the three groups in the category of communication skills was interesting. Students perceived communication skills as relatively important in the recruitment of new graduates, whereas teachers and businesspeople saw them as relatively less important. We discovered a significant discrepancy with "oral presentation skills", students again attaching a greater importance to these skills as an attribute sought in a prospective employee. There was also a marked discrepancy between the students' opinions of "negotiation skills", where they again viewed the importance of these skills much more highly than either the teachers or the businesspeople.

In the communication skills category in Questions 1 and 4, there was a low, but significant, correlation between the two questions in both the teacher and the business groups. The fact that the correlation was significant may show that there is a recognised connection between skills needed in business and those that are sought in a new graduate. However the fact that the correlation is comparatively low may indicate that those skills may not be expected before the graduate starts in the real business world, possibly a reflection of the fact that businesspeople consider that these skills can only be learned on the job, outside the classroom, or possibly that these skills cannot be ascertained in a job interview.

The correlation between academic skills in Questions 1 and 4 indicates that both teachers and businesspeople rate these skills as quite important and both think that they are taken into consideration when employing new graduates. Academic skills are relatively more easily assessed in a new graduate, and are skills that can more successfully be learned in school than on the job.
The lack of correlation of the students’ opinions in any category (except for a marginal correlation on academic skills) may indicate that although students have some idea of what skills are important, they are unaware of what is sought in a new graduate—further indication of the need for development of job-seeking skills and that students need more information about what is expected of them in the business world by businesspeople.

**Pedagogical implications**

Although this was a preliminary investigation, the results of the survey have had a direct impact on our Business Communication courses. In our 1992-1993 course, 16 out of 56 hours were given over to oral presentation input, presentation practice and feedback. The findings of our survey justify the amount of time spent on these skills in LANG 101, and we shall certainly reserve a similar amount of time for teaching and practising them in the 1993-1994 course.

The comparatively low importance attached to “minutes and agenda writing” suggests that it may not be a necessary inclusion in our course. Indeed, writing agendas and minutes had already been omitted from 1992-1993 course as the materials writers considered it to be inessential. The wisdom of this decision is now confirmed by our survey findings.

The great importance placed on “negotiation skills” by all three groups underlines the need for these skills to be given more prominent treatment in LANG 101. The 1992-1993 course did not contain any explicit teaching of negotiation skills and time has now been allocated in the 1993-1994 course for them.

The comparatively low importance attached to “honesty” by teachers and students, compared with the higher importance attached to this quality by businesspeople, seems to call for some discussion of business ethics in the Business Communication course. This is being considered in the revision of our 1993-1994 course.

The amount of importance attached to “good personal presentation” by all groups is interesting, and we are considering featuring a session on this aspect in preparing the students for their business visit in Phase One of the course.

The lack of correlation between the students’ opinions of the importance of certain skills and the qualities sought by employers appears to indicate a lack of awareness and information in this area. We are considering how to incorporate appropriate input into the course which will be helpful to our students.
Having a set of data that gives us an indication of the opinions of teachers, students and businesspeople in terms of what they perceive as important skills and essential tasks, means that the LANG 101 team does not have to write a course in a vacuum. We are now making use of the findings derived from our enquiry to inform our course design, to ensure that all three stakeholders in the course can be represented. The more information that can be gathered about the differing impressions of what communication skills are needed in the business world, the more accurately can teachers assess and accommodate the needs of both students and businesspeople.

*Note*

*An earlier version of this paper was presented by the authors at the 10th (AILA ’93) Congress of Applied Linguistics, at the University of Amsterdam, in August 1993.*
APPENDIX  Sample questionnaire for survey of businesspeople

English for Business Communication Questionnaire

1   Please number according to the scale below the skills that you think are important to be effective in business.

1 = not important  2 = not very important  3 = quite important  4 = very important

☐ Ability to negotiate
☐ Ability to make friends easily
☐ Honesty
☐ Ability to write good letters
☐ Good English grammar
☐ Ruthlessness in business deals
☐ Ability to “outsmart” your competition
☐ Good communication skills
☐ A good academic background
☐ Ability to adapt to different cultures
☐ Ability to take risks
☐ Creativity
☐ A positive attitude

2   Please list in the left column the main communication activities that you perform during an average business week. In the right column list the amount of time you spend on that activity according to the following scale:

1 = less than three hours  2 = three to five hours  3 = six to ten hours
4 = eleven to twenty hours  5 = more than twenty hours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3 Please number according to the scale below the business communication skills that need to be taught in a Business Communication course.

1 = not important  2 = not very important  3 = quite important  4 = very important

☐ Letter and memorandum writing
☐ Report writing
☐ Proposal writing
☐ Telephoning skills
☐ Minutes and agenda writing
☐ Meeting skills
☐ Negotiating skills
☐ Oral presentation skills
☐ Job seeking skills
☐ Interviewing skills

4 Please number according to the scale below the qualities that you would look for when employing a new graduate.

1 = not important  2 = not very important  3 = quite important  4 = very important

☐ Good personal presentation
☐ Excellent academic record
☐ Pleasant personality
☐ Ability to write correspondence in correct English
☐ Ability to speak fluently in English
☐ Ability to use initiative
☐ Sense of loyalty
☐ Good general knowledge
☐ Ability to communicate with people from overseas
☐ Good oral presentation skills
☐ Willingness to contribute to meetings
☐ Good negotiation skills
☐ Ability to speak a foreign language (e.g. Japanese)
☐ Capacity to work hard
Please list the skills that you think a new graduate should possess, but that are not usually taught in courses in higher education.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP
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References

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