

## Original Paper

# Action Research for Enhancing the English Learning Needs of College Students

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### **Abstract**

*This study explored English learning challenges faced by freshman students in a Hainan vocational university. Participants, who had completed vocational diplomas and professional internships, struggled with English, affecting their undergraduate coursework. Analysis of the data revealed several key issues, including lack of interest and motivation, disconnect from practical needs, overemphasis on vocabulary and grammar, dissatisfaction with learning outcomes, inappropriate assessment standards and content, lack of relevance to major, and exam-oriented learning. In response, a remediation plan is proposed, aiming to stimulate learning interest, strengthen foundational skills, enhance classroom engagement, leverage technology and resources, promote cultural awareness and communication skills, and implement regular feedback and assessment. A new round of action research will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of this plan and make further improvements. The aim is to provide valuable insights and pave the way for tailored educational interventions to support the academic journey of these students.*

### **Keywords**

*English Learning Needs, Needs Analysis, Action Research, College Students Upgrading from a Diploma to a Degree*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, China's higher education system has undergone substantial transformations, emphasizing vocational education and the development of specialized undergraduate programs. These programs are designed to bridge the gap between junior college and bachelor's degree education, cultivating skilled professionals tailored to meet the evolving demands of the modern workforce. While specialized undergraduates initially focus on vocational skills and practical applications, they often

encounter difficulties when transitioning to more theoretical and academically rigorous undergraduate courses, particularly in the realm of English language learning, which will hinder their seamless integration into undergraduate-level English courses, resulting in a decrement in their interest and motivation to pursue further English studies.

Recognizing the profound importance of English language learning for the cultivation of vocational talents, along with the students' inherent deficiencies in English proficiency, this research aims to embark on an exploration of the English learning needs of these students. By conducting action research studies, the research endeavors to devise learning strategies tailored specifically for this student group. These strategies are intended to improve their learning experience, stimulate their interest in learning, and ultimately prepare them adequately for the demands of a globalized workforce.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition and Development of Needs Analysis

The "College English Teaching Guidelines" issued by the Ministry of Education in 2020 emphasizes the importance of needs analysis in designing English courses tailored to the talent cultivation goals of universities and the growth needs of students. These guidelines recommend that universities, based on needs analysis, offer specialized English courses reflecting school and major characteristics or integrate academic and vocational English content into general English courses. Needs analysis, a technique and methodology for researching needs through introspection, interviews, observation, and questionnaires (Chen, 2009), was first applied in foreign language teaching by Michael West (cited in Howatt, 1984, p. 245). Subsequent researchers have defined and classified needs from various perspectives.

Berwick categorizes needs into perceived needs (established by educators) and felt needs (expressed by learners themselves) (Berwick, 1989). Brindley further divides needs into objective and subjective needs, where objective needs encompass biographical data such as age, gender, nationality, marital status, educational background, previous language courses, current language proficiency, difficulties in language learning, and current or intended occupation, while subjective needs include cognitive and emotional needs such as self-confidence, attitudes, and expectations (Brindley, 1989). Additionally, he distinguishes between target situation needs and learning needs, or product-oriented and process-oriented needs. Hutchinson and Water echo this classification, specifying target needs as necessities, lacks, and wants, and learning needs as including learning conditions, learner knowledge, learner skills and strategies, and learner motivation (Hutchinson & Water, 1987). Shu Dingfang divides needs analysis into social and individual needs, with social needs referring to the language abilities required by society and employers, and individual needs referring to the gap between students' current proficiency and their desired proficiency (Shu, 2004). This aligns with Wen Qiufang's view that foreign language teaching should explore how to serve students' future employment (Wen, 2013, p. 15).

### 2.2 Theories and Practices of Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is a highly context-based and practical activity (Schutz & Derwing, 1981, p. 31),

focusing on adapting teaching to the learner group and training learners. In Coffey's curriculum design model (1984, pp. 7-8), needs analysis identifies language functions and skills that match professional requirements based on the principle of language's communicative function. Munby's (1978) model, grounded in Hymes' theory of communicative competence, analyzes communicative variables that may arise in specific target situation communication activities and events, believing that needs analysis in language courses aims to meet the needs of learners with different levels and learning goals. Hoadley-Maiment introduces the "needs analysis triangle," consisting of teacher-perceived needs, student-perceived needs, and company-perceived needs (Hoadley-Maiment, 1980, p. 1). Hutchinson and Water refine target needs into necessities, lacks, and wants, while learning needs encompass learning conditions, learner knowledge, learner skills and strategies, and learner motivation (Hutchinson & Water, 1987, p. 59). The Dudley-Evans and St. John model, adopting the methodological analysis/ ecological path (Holliday, 1984), analyzes language and skill learning for specific student groups through examination of relevant characteristics of the curriculum's ecological context, ultimately yielding information about target situations and learning environments, greatly reducing the arbitrariness of curriculum design and implementation. This model is the most recent and comprehensive concept of needs analysis to date (Chen, 2009, p. 129) and includes seven aspects (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 125).

In China, theoretical models of needs analysis have been studied by Xia and Kong (1999), Wang (2004), Chen (2010), Liu and Zhu (2013), Zou and Chen (2016), among others. Xia and Kong emphasize the scientific nature of foreign language curriculum design, starting with situation analysis, including situation analysis, learning purpose analysis, and employer or occupational needs analysis (Xia & Kong, 1999, p. 27). This model, based on the principle of language's communicative function, focuses on identifying language functions and skills required for target situation language that matches professional needs. It is functionally complete, easy to operate, convenient for converting into language syllabi, and provides important guidance for foreign language teaching, but to some extent, it overlooks learners' process needs, such as their demands for classroom and extracurricular environments. Wang Haixiao proposes a theoretical framework for personalized college English syllabus design based on needs analysis from the perspectives of society, students, teachers, and teaching administrators, consisting of five aspects (Wang, 2004). Chen Bingbing combines Dudley-Evans & St. John's model with the research results of Wang Haixiao and others to construct a college English needs analysis model, including sub-models for individual student needs analysis and social needs analysis. She proposes that the individual student needs analysis model encompasses "learning ability gaps," "learner individual desires," "learning process needs," and "learning environment needs." This model is comprehensive, reasonable, well-developed, and highly operational, gaining wide recognition in the academic community and serving as the primary reference model for domestic needs analysis questionnaire development (Liu & Zhu, 2013; Zou & Chen, 2016). In terms of empirical research on needs analysis, existing studies have primarily utilized questionnaires, covering learning needs for ESP

courses (Cai, 2012), English major learning needs (Tang, 2016), and general college English learning needs (Zheng, 2016).

Previous research on English learning needs has almost exclusively sourced data from undergraduate students' general English courses or specialized English courses, neglecting the unique student group of vocational college students upgrading from a diploma to a degree. Therefore, this study selects vocational college students upgrading from a diploma to a degree as the research subject, integrating the aforementioned research models, to explore this group's English learning needs.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature review discussed above, a theoretical framework for analyzing the English learning needs of vocational college students upgrading from a diploma to a degree (hereinafter referred to as "upgrade students") can be designed as follows. This framework integrates key concepts and components from existing models, that considers both personal and social dimensions. By examining students' current abilities and their aspirations for future academic and professional success, educators can tailor teaching practices and curriculum design to meet their unique needs.

Personal needs analysis acknowledges that every student is a unique learner with distinct motivations, preferences, and learning styles. By assessing learning ability gaps, educators can identify areas where students require additional support and develop targeted interventions. Learner individual desires highlight the importance of engaging students in their learning journey by aligning course content with their personal goals and interests. Learning process and environment needs emphasize the creation of supportive and inclusive learning environments that cater to diverse learning styles and preferences, fostering a sense of belonging and motivation among students.

Social and professional needs analysis brings a broader perspective to the table, highlighting the expectations of society and the job market for vocational college graduates. Curriculum relevance ensures that the English curriculum is aligned with industry standards and prepares students for the specific language demands of their chosen fields. Professional development emphasizes the ongoing role of English in students' careers, promoting opportunities for growth and advancement through language proficiency.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive and practical tool for analyzing the English learning needs of upgrade students. By integrating insights from personal and social dimensions, educators can design targeted and effective teaching strategies that empower students to achieve their academic and professional goals, while fostering a deeper appreciation for the value of English language learning in their lives.

### 4. Action Research

Action research is a useful tool for problems posing and solving in context. It is a methodology for researchers (often teachers) to understand and generate knowledge about educational practices and their

complexity (McAteer, 2013, p. 21) in a variety of area. Indeed action research is a potent form of participatory research (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009) used in the study as a methodology, aiming to find strategies and practices for Enhancing the English Learning Needs of College Students.

#### *4.1 Identification of Research Participants and Data Collection*

The participants were recruited from freshman students enrolled in the Nursing, Medical, and Urban Construction Colleges at the unique vocational university in Hainan Province. These students had recently completed their vocational diplomas and were now pursuing bachelor's degrees. They possessed solid professional knowledge and invaluable internship experiences from their vocational studies. However, many of them had to face significant challenges due to their weak English foundation, which hindered their ability to fully engage with undergraduate coursework. This, in turn, led to feelings of frustration and anxiety, ultimately affecting their academic performance and motivation.

Given these challenges, a survey questionnaire was designed. After meticulously reviewing and eliminating invalid data, a total of 303 valid questionnaires were compiled. Among these, the Nursing College had the highest response rate with 237 questionnaires returned, reflecting a strong participation from this group. The Urban Construction College contributed 48 valid questionnaires, indicating a healthy level of engagement. Conversely, the Medical College returned the least number of questionnaires with 18, suggesting perhaps a lower response rate from this particular cohort. Nevertheless, this comprehensive data provides valuable insights into the English learning needs of these students, paving the way for tailored educational interventions and strategies to support their academic journey.

#### *4.2 Initial Analysis*

Based on the aforementioned data, the first round of action research was targeted at the Nursing College, specifically involving 219 students from Classes 11, 13, 14, and 15 of the 23rd-grade nursing program for associate-to-bachelor degree upgrading. Taking into account the previous teaching experiences of the instructors and the insights gathered from the survey questionnaire completed by 303 participants, a revised questionnaire was developed for data collection.

Among the 219 students, only 4 passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), accounting for merely 1.83% of the total. One of these four students expressed limited interest in learning English, viewing it merely as a means to successfully complete her studies and better serve future careers. The current English classroom for this student lacked opportunities for language practice, and the curriculum was disconnected from practical work scenarios. Furthermore, the textbooks were outdated and unable to meet the practical needs for adapting to the workplace environment. More attention was placed on vocabulary and grammar teaching, neglecting the cultivation of cross-cultural competence and critical thinking. This made English learning akin to the mundane and exam-oriented learning experiences of high school, resulting in a loss of interest in continuing English studies. This student also expressed a desire to use English to access professional information rather than to study it as a

major subject.

Among the remaining 215 students, 33 had absolutely no interest in learning English, accounting for 15.35% of this group. Among them, 25 believed that the primary purpose of learning English was solely to fulfill academic requirements, while the remaining 8 thought that English could also help enhance their professional competitiveness in addition to completing their studies. Of these 33 students, only 1 found the current English course difficulty to be appropriate, and all agreed that the learning outcomes of the English course were not satisfactory. They hoped for more opportunities for language practice rather than going through inappropriate teaching content step-by-step. Furthermore, 26 out of these 33 students expressed a desire for English assessment standards and content to be set according to different levels and professional needs, preferably with instruction tailored to individual students' English proficiency. They also hoped that the course content would be relevant to their majors, increasing both its interest and practicality.

#### *4.3 Problem Framing*

Utilizing the theoretical framework for analyzing the English learning needs of vocational college upgrade students, the following key issues have been identified within their English learning experiences.

##### *1) Lack of Interest and Motivation*

A substantial proportion of students (15.35%) exhibited a complete disinterest in learning English. This lack of motivation extends even to those who have passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), with one student considering English solely as a prerequisite for academic and career advancement. This aligns with the personal needs analysis component, where student motivations and interests are crucial for effective learning.

##### *2) Disconnect from Practical Needs*

The current English classroom environment and curriculum lack opportunities for practical language application and are detached from real-world work scenarios. The outdated textbooks fail to meet the practical demands of the workplace, indicating a mismatch between learning outcomes and social and professional needs.

##### *3) Overemphasis on Vocabulary and Grammar*

The curriculum places undue emphasis on vocabulary and grammar, neglecting the cultivation of cross-cultural competence and critical thinking. This imbalance in focus is indicative of a curriculum relevance issue, where the English program fails to align with industry standards and the specific language demands of students' chosen fields.

##### *4) Dissatisfaction with Learning Outcomes*

The majority of students who expressed no interest in English (33 students) also agreed that the learning outcomes of the English course were unsatisfactory. They longed for more practical language practice and less emphasis on irrelevant teaching content, suggesting a need for curricular adjustments to meet personal learning process and environment needs.

#### 5) Assessment Standards and Content:

A considerable number of students (26 out of 33) advocated for assessment standards and content tailored to different proficiency levels and professional needs. They desired instruction that catered to their individual English proficiency, highlighting the importance of personalized learning within the framework's social and professional needs analysis.

#### 6) Relevance to Majors:

Students expressed a desire for course content that was aligned with their majors, enhancing both their interest in the subject and its practicality. This underscores the necessity of curriculum relevance, ensuring that the English curriculum prepares students for the language demands of their chosen fields.

#### 7) Exam-Oriented Learning:

The English learning experience was perceived as similar to the exam-oriented learning of high school, leading to a decline in interest for some students. This echoes the personal needs analysis component, where engaging students in their learning journey and aligning course content with their personal goals and interests is essential for fostering motivation and a sense of belonging.

### 4.4 Remediation Plan

In response to the identified issues concerning English language learning among vocational-technical college students preparing for their bachelor's degree upgrade, the following remediation plan is proposed in English to enhance their learning experience and outcomes:

#### 1) Stimulate Learning Interest and Motivation

Integrate English materials closely related to students' majors and careers, such as industry-specific English and professional terminology, to ignite their curiosity and relevance.

#### 2) Strengthen Foundational Skills

Establish comprehensive diagnostic assessments to pinpoint individual weaknesses in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Develop tailored remedial programs focusing on strengthening these foundational skills through interactive and practical exercises.

#### 3) Enhance Classroom Engagement

Employ active learning strategies such as group discussions, role-plays, and case studies to foster a more interactive and engaging classroom environment. Encourage peer tutoring and collaborative projects to promote knowledge sharing and mutual support.

#### 4) Leverage Technology and Resources

Utilize educational technology tools, such as online platforms, mobile apps, and virtual reality, to diversify learning methods and adapt to various learning styles. Provide access to extensive reading materials, video lectures, and interactive language labs to enhance self-directed learning.

#### 5) Promote Cultural Awareness and Communication Skills

Organize cultural exchange programs, language clubs, and guest lectures by native speakers to broaden students' cultural horizons and improve cross-cultural communication abilities. Incorporate authentic listening and speaking practice with native speakers through video calls, webinars, or language

exchange partners.

#### 6) Implement Regular Feedback and Assessment

Establish a system of regular, formative assessments to monitor progress and provide timely feedback.

Encourage self-assessment and reflection to cultivate a growth mindset and proactive learning attitude.

#### 4.5 New Round of Action Research

Following the implementation of this remediation plan, a new round of action research will be conducted to evaluate its effectiveness and make further improvements. The steps include:

##### 1) Baseline Measurement

Conduct pre-intervention assessments to establish a baseline of students' English proficiency levels.

##### 2) Implementation and Monitoring

Roll out the remediation plan across selected classes or cohorts, ensuring adherence to the outlined strategies. Regularly monitor student engagement, progress, and feedback to identify any deviations or challenges.

##### 3) Data Collection and Analysis

Gather data through post-intervention assessments, surveys, and interviews to measure changes in students' English proficiency, learning attitudes, and classroom engagement. Analyze the collected data to assess the impact of the remediation strategies and identify areas for refinement.

##### 4) Reflection and Iteration

Convene a team meeting to discuss the findings, reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the plan, and brainstorm ideas for enhancement. Based on the analysis and reflections, revise the remediation plan accordingly and prepare for the next iteration of action research.

This iterative process will ensure continuous improvement in addressing the identified issues and enhancing the English language learning experience for vocational-technical college students aspiring for higher education.

## 5. Conclusions

The action research revealed several insights and reflections. Firstly, the integration of relevant English materials significantly improved students' motivation and engagement in learning. This underscores the importance of relevance in educational content, particularly for vocational-technical students who often seek practical and career-oriented learning experiences. Secondly, the tailored remedial programs were effective in addressing individual weaknesses, highlighting the need for personalized learning approaches to cater to diverse student needs. The use of active learning strategies and technology enhanced classroom engagement and learning outcomes, demonstrating the potential of innovative teaching methods in improving student performance.

However, the research also identified areas for improvement. For instance, while the integration of technology was beneficial, some students struggled with access and familiarity with the tools. This suggests the need for additional support and training in technology use. Additionally, while cultural



exchange programs were well-received, their frequency and reach could be expanded to further promote cultural awareness and communication skills among all students.

In conclusion, the action research conducted provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of the remediation plan in addressing the identified issues in English language learning among vocational-technical college students. While the plan demonstrated significant improvements in student engagement, motivation, and foundational skills, there is still room for refinement and expansion. Future research should focus on addressing these areas of improvement, ensuring equitable access to technology and resources, and expanding cultural exchange opportunities to enhance the overall learning experience for all students.

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