Unstated expectations: How NNS students and ESL teachers depend on what content teachers don't tell them

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Abstract

The problem of syllabus design for an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course has led many university teachers to conduct research into the so-called 'needs' of their students. This paper critically examines such studies and finds they have problems with both their approach and methodology and uncovers their underlying accommodationist ideology. The study reported here is an exploration of multiple perspectives on the academic writing needs of a particular group of university students who are non-native speakers of English (NNS). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-year NNS macroeconomics students, their content tutors and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers at the University of Melbourne. One of the key issues for needs analysis and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) arising from the interviews is the perceived expectations of the markers of student writing/essays. This is discussed along with possible alternative interpretations of particular 'needs', thus highlighting the problem of definition in needs analysis. Finally, the implications of the accommodationist nature of academic needs analyses and EAP for students, academics and academic discourse are discussed.

1. Introduction

The number of students who are non-native speakers (NNS) of English admitted to Australian universities is increasing every year. Many of these students find themselves unable to cope with the academic and linguistic demands of doing a university degree in a second language. Universities with large numbers of NNS students typically have support services available which offer individual assistance and special classes for such students. The situation in North American universities is similar, except that they also have

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credit-bearing English as a Second Language (ESL) composition classes, compulsory in the first year of study.

Deciding what to include in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course has led many teachers to conduct research into the so-called 'needs' of their students. This has taken several approaches, including the study of: academic tasks; the perceived importance of various academic skills; NNS students' writing problems; and content course teachers' reactions to NNS writing. A major drawback of these studies, other than their mixed results, is that they either take only one approach or rely on only one source for information, limiting the usefulness and skewing the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, these studies do not make either their theoretical basis or underlying ideology explicit, but it can be shown that the adoption of the above approaches implies an objectivist ontology and accommodationist or assimilationist ideology, which leads to the uncritical induction of students into 'traditional' academic discourse.

This study explores, through semi-structured interviews, the various perceptions of the academic writing needs of international first year economics and commerce students at the University of Melbourne, held by the students themselves, their economics and commerce subject teachers, and ESL professionals. The purpose of the research is not to inform course design, as in a traditional needs analysis, but to raise issues relevant to the perception of academic writing needs.

The importance of writing for the development and demonstration of academic competence and to achieve academic success is well known (Ballard 1984; Leki & Carson 1994; Saville-Troike 1984). Large numbers of international students with limited English proficiency and little or no experience of the Australian educational system are admitted to the University of Melbourne every year. A sizeable proportion of these study in the faculty of Economics and Commerce. Past requests by this faculty for ESL support for these students and their low or sporadic attendance at such classes show that there is a need to look further into the perceptions held by the various relevant groups regarding the academic writing needs of these students. Any one person holds perceptions based on his/her place and experience in the academic discourse community and to ignore the perceptions of other significant groups is to undermine their importance and to do a disservice to the students, whom we are trying to help.

As 'experts', EAP teachers decide how to identify 'needs' of students—what and who to ask or observe. But how do the people involved identify them? This research will help us to better understand the perceptions and points of view of three particular groups of people regarding academic writing needs. The understanding gained from exploring the similarities and differences in perceptions will ultimately be a useful basis for the negotiation across relevant groups of a curriculum designed to address these needs.

2. Needs analysis

2.1 Types of needs—what, who and whose

There are almost as many definitions and types of 'needs' as there are needs analysis studies. While such a variety of classifications sometimes reveals some interesting ways of looking at needs, the distinctions and overlaps between them are not always clear, and the labels given to them not always very illuminating.

Mackay and Bosquet (1981: 6) list four types of need, distinguished by when they occur and who constructs them: "real, current needs"; "future hypothetical needs"; "student desires"; and "teacher-created needs". It is interesting that current needs are deemed 'real' when, depending on how they are assessed, they could be just as hypothetical as future needs. Similarly, why not student *needs* and teacher *desires*?

Hoadley-Maidment (1983: 40) also classifies needs according to who perceives them. She describes the needs analysis triangle: "teacher-perceived needs"; "company-perceived needs"; and "student-perceived needs". In the context of EAP, the "teacher" would be the EAP teacher and "company" the content teacher.

By contrast, Porcher's (1983: 22) definition of language needs focuses on what learners want to do or must do with the language (communicative needs), in the language (language needs), and what they must master to be able to carry out those particular language acts (linguistic needs).

These aspects would all fall into what Brindley (1984: 43-45) calls objective needs, which relate to both language proficiency level and the specific purposes the language will be used for. The alternative, of course, is subjective needs, relating to the learner's affective needs and desires regarding course content and the method of learning. These two types are often called target or product-oriented needs and learning or process-oriented needs respectively.

Determining these latter needs is ostensibly the crux of Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) very influential learning-centred approach to teaching ESP. The philosophy behind this approach is that the focus of language teaching should be on the learner and learning needs, as opposed to a language-centred approach where needs are defined in terms of language use. Notwithstanding this distinction, their ESP needs analysis, which they say is the "irreducible minimum" of such an approach to course design (p. 54), assesses both target needs and learning needs. The former include necessities, as determined by the target situation, which of these the learner lacks, and the learner's perceptions of his/her needs, or wants, and the latter include what the learner needs to do in order to learn. (But who decides this?) So the focus here seems to be whose needs; we are told they are the learner's.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 58) also refer to objective and subjective views of needs, that is, according to course designers and learners respectively. However, having just quoted Richterich (1984, in Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 56) as saying "a need does not exist independent of a person", their choice of terminology is somewhat unfortunate and misleading. It should be borne in mind that 'objective' and 'subjective', as used by both Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Brindley (1984), are meaningful only from the learner's point of view, and not in any absolute sense.

Perhaps one of the most disconcerting practices has been to differentiate between 'real' or 'actual' needs and students' mere 'wants' or 'desires'. This, along with the untenable objective-subjective dichotomy, implies that what the learners themselves want or believe they need is somehow less real or valid than what other people say they need.[1] Even in a learner-centred approach, it

[1] This attitude is probably due to the 'expert-novice' distinction, where students are not thought to be either fully aware of or capable of expressing

seems the learners' views are canvassed and consensus about what to teach negotiated mainly to understand and maintain learner motivation (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 58).

So it can be seen that the concept of language needs is still not clearly defined, owing to the lack of distinction and even contradictions between the various terms used (West 1994: 3). Richterich (1983: 2-3) has criticised the interpretation of needs as being either too narrow, where language skills and content are the focus, or ideological, where personalised teaching systems are conceived to cover everything from expectations and demands to interests, motivations, and so on. The narrow interpretation, he says, "serves only to delude us into thinking that the teaching is centred on the learner, because in the end he [sic] is still made to learn content". As for the ideological interpretation, "being all and nothing, the concept is no longer operative". He continues (p. 3):

> *It is no doubt futile to endeavour to seek and impose an unequivocal definition of this concept, one of whose characteristics is precisely that it is felt, expressed and interpreted by individuals differently according to time, place and circumstances. We must therefore accept the manifold and even ambiguous sense which it can be given...What is essential is not so much to give an accurate definition of the word 'need' as to measure pragmatically the educational, ideological and political effects, scope and impact in the actual process of teaching and learning.*

In sum, the concept of 'needs' has multiple and ambiguous definitions, and, as we shall see, the same also applies to the approaches to finding out about them.

2.2 Gathering needs information—how and when

The particular concept of needs adopted in any individual needs analysis clearly influences the approach to finding out what those needs 'are'. West (1994: 8-12) describes the most common forms of needs analysis. The first, *target-situation analysis* (TSA), treats needs as 'necessities' and the data gathered often constitutes the goals of the language course. Where needs are seen as 'lacks',

their 'real needs'.

deficiency analysis is employed to determine the gap between what the learner must be able to do, which may then be used to inform the actual course syllabus. This type of approach has also been called *combined TSA and present-situation analysis* (PSA) (Robinson 1991). Where the focus is on learning needs (teaching and learning), *strategy analysis* can be used to determine appropriate methodology. Finally, *means analysis* is sometimes used to take account of external and resource constraints.

While the above classifications seem distinct enough, other writers use slightly different ones. Jordan (1997: 23-28), for example, discusses PSA separately but includes *deficiency analysis* as part of *learning-centred approaches* to needs analysis to describe Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) approach, which also includes a large element of TSA. It could further be argued that Hutchinson and Waters (1987) also include *strategy analysis* in their determination of learning needs, and that this is part of a larger *learning-situation analysis*, as exemplified by the list of information they advise gathering (pp. 62-63). For an EAP needs analysis, Jordan (1997: 28) lists necessary information to be collected, which can be classified as TSA and *deficiency analysis*.

Once the approach has been settled on, the next decision involves the data-gathering method. Berwick (1989: 56-61) suggests that this could be either *deductive*, where information from questionnaires, surveys, etc. is used to design a course, or, less commonly, *inductive*, where courses are generalised from observations and case studies. Upon closer inspection however, this turns out to be another false dichotomy. Any method which uses specific empirical data as the basis for course design is by definition inductive. Jordan (1997: 30-38), on the other hand, avoids sweeping classifications and lists no fewer than fourteen possible methods of data collection, including various types of tests, self-assessment, classroom observation, surveys, structured interviews, learner diaries, case studies and previous research.

Finally, timing must also be considered. While there are many arguments for conducting the needs analysis either before, during or after the language course, the consensus seems to be that it is best as an on-going process (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 59; West 1994: 5).

2.3 Conclusion

It should be clear by now that *what* 'needs' are, *whose* they are, *who* to ask and *how* and *when* to find out about them are neither simple nor well-defined matters. The one question that has not been considered here yet is perhaps the most important: *why*? (Or ultimately, *for whom*?) The most common (and most obvious) answer is 'to help the learner'. But as we have already seen in the slippery definitions of the concept of 'needs', we should be wary of being lulled into a false sense of security regarding the reason for needs analysis, as we shall see in the next section.

3. Previous studies of academic needs

Since the late 1970s several studies have enquired into the academic needs of non-native speakers (NNS) of English at tertiary level, with the ultimate aim of developing adequate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curricula and support services. As well as targeting different levels and disciplines, these studies have taken a variety of approaches to needs assessment, sometimes combining one or more, including the study of:

1. **academic tasks**, through surveys of *students* and *content course teachers* and examination of *actual assignments;*
2. **the perceived importance/use of various academic skills**, again through surveys, often involving the rating or ranking of skills, according to *NNS students, content course teachers* or *both;*
3. **content course teachers' reactions to NNS writing**, through having teachers rate particular writing problems and errors for acceptability, etc.;
4. **NNS students' writing problems**, identified through surveys of *ESL teachers, content course teachers* and *NNS students,* interviews with both *composition course teachers* and *NNS students,* and analysis of *NNS writing.*

This is a convenient way of dividing and describing EAP needs analysis studies but they should not be thought of as entirely discrete categories. However, the first two approaches above can be classified as target-situation analysis and the last two as deficiency analysis, although it should be remembered that deficiency analysis by definition includes an element of target-situation analysis, or at least assumptions about the target situation. Examples of studies taking these approaches are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Previous studies of EAP needs

Approach	Type of information	Method of gathering information	Source of information	Example studies
target-situation analysis	**academic tasks**	surveys	*students*	Kroll 1979; Ostler 1980
			content course teachers	Bridgeman & Carlson 1983; Eblen 1983; Casanave & Hubbard 1992; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland 1993
		examination of	*actual assignments*	Horowitz 1986; Braine 1989
	the perceived importance/ use of various academic skills	surveys, often involving the rating or ranking of skills	*NNS students*	Ostler 1980; Christison & Krahnke 1986; Leki & Carson 1994; Frodesen 1995
			content course teachers	Johns 1981; Bridgeman & Carlson 1983; Eblen 1983; Gee, Huxley & Johnson 1984; Casanave & Hubbard 1992; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland 1993
			both	Zughoul and Hussein 1985
deficiency analysis	**content course teachers' reactions to NNS writing**	rating particular writing problems and errors for acceptability, etc.	*content course teachers*	Vann, Meyer & Lorenz 1984; Santos 1988
	NNS students' writing problems	surveys	*ESL teachers*	Vann, Meyer & Lorenz 1984;
			content course teachers	Bridgeman & Carlson 1983; Eblen 1983; Gee, Huxley & Johnson 1984; Casanave & Hubbard 1992
			NNS students	Christison & Krahnke 1986; Frodesen 1995
		interviews	*both composition course teachers and NNS students*	Crowe & Peterson 1995
		analysis of	*NNS writing*	James 1984

Early studies of academic needs assessment involved surveys of students about what tasks and skills they thought were necessary to successfully complete their studies (e.g. Kroll 1979; Ostler 1980). This is useful in that, as Horwitz (1987) notes, students may resist or lose confidence in classes that fail to meet their expectations. However, asking students to *predict* what skills they are likely to need in future courses, as both Kroll (1979) and Ostler (1980) did, is not going to reveal whether an ESL class is "serving the *real* needs of its students" [emphasis added] (Ostler 1980: 489).

Later, researchers went to faculty members (i.e. content course lecturers) to find out what tasks and/or skills were needed by students in their disciplines (e.g. Johns 1981; Bridgeman & Carlson 1983; Eblen 1983; Casanave & Hubbard 1992; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland 1993). While this seems a reasonable way to gain more reliable information, if the categories of skills were not too broad to be really useful (e.g. Johns 1981), they were predetermined and closed. Although useful for collecting large amounts of information quickly, this approach imposes certain structures and schemes on respondents, and as such risks guiding the respondents to answer in ways they may otherwise have not. The studies that did include open-ended questions or 'other' categories in questions reported very few responses (Casanave & Hubbard 1992; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland 1993). This may have been because the respondents felt it was too much effort compared with merely circling a given item, or because they were unable to articulate their needs in the absence of a prompt. A related problem is that different researchers and teachers use different labels to describe what may or may not be different tasks or skills, thus complicating any attempt at comparability.

In order to avoid forcing preconceived genres on respondents or receiving conflicting labels from them, Horowitz (1986) classified 54 actual handouts for writing assignments from 17 departments at a U.S. university into seven categories, being careful to develop a classification scheme with "enough specificity to capture essential differences among tasks and enough generality to place into the same category essentially similar tasks" (p. 449). He then, in very broad terms, describes the "generalized American academic writing task" (Horowitz 1986: 455), a perhaps overstated claim considering that the data came from only one university. However, Horowitz's taxonomy was successfully applied by Braine (1989) to 60 out of 61 undergraduate science and technology writing assignments at another U.S. university. The last assignment was put in its own specially formulated category even though it seemed to meet Horowitz's (1986: 449) criterion of being essentially similar to the tasks in an existing category. So again, different researchers use different labels even when they are trying to use the same ones. However, both these researchers agree on the controlled nature of most of the writing tasks studied and also advocate topic-centred or subject-specific writing instruction, in Horowitz's (1986: 455) words: to "simulate university writing tasks" drawing on "a body of shared information". This seems a reasonable recommendation, based as it is on a study of the actual writing tasks students encounter; however, the typical L2 writing teacher's lack of control over the necessary content is not considered (Spack 1988).

In another attempt to avoid the possible problem of students misunderstanding predetermined categories, Christison and Krahnke (1986) used open-ended interview questions to find out from students how they used English in academic classes and what they found difficult or easy about it. The terms used by the students were then explored by the interviewers to determine more precisely their meaning. While this does seem a much more valid and appropriate means of getting at learner needs than closed questionnaires, it is debatable whether it would lead to an "objective" account of "current realities" as the researchers claim (p. 64), especially since knowledge about and attitudes towards language are often idealised and misconceived, as they concede on the previous page. After categorising the students' answers, Christison and Krahnke (1986: 76) conclude that the receptive skills of listening and reading are used far more than the productive skills of writing and speaking and should therefore receive more attention than they normally do in ESL classes.

As far as content course teachers' expectations of student writing quality go, Bridgeman and Carlson (1983) concluded that while different disciplines do not uniformly agree on writing task demands, most content teachers put more emphasis on sociolinguistic than grammatical competence, and felt they evaluated ESL writing more on content than form. Similarly, Eblen (1983) found that the overall trend of content teachers from five different faculties was to rate ideas and organisation as more important than grammar and coherence. More specifically, Casanave and Hubbard (1992) found that humanities professors rated writing skills as more important overall for evaluation than did the physical science professors.

Instead of asking subject teachers what they expect from students, some researchers have actually got teachers to rate NNS student writing (e.g. Vann, Meyer & Lorenz 1984; Santos 1988). The humanities professors in Santos' (1988) study rated the language in NNS essays more severely than did the physical science professors, implying that these humanities professors see writing skills as more important, as concluded by Casanave and Hubbard (1992). However, in an earlier study of teacher reactions to errors, Vann, Meyer and Lorenz (1984) found that the science and engineering lecturers consistently rated errors as less acceptable than the humanities lecturers did. A warning should be heeded before taking the results of these error reaction studies as indicative of L2 writing needs: both these studies used isolated sentences containing common errors (although Santos (1988) also included the entire essays) and asked teachers to rate them on a scale of acceptability (and, in the Santos (1988) study, comprehensibility and irritability). While providing some insight into how these different teachers react to certain errors, such an approach may not reflect actual evaluation practices by content teachers in content courses.

Interestingly, one of Santos' (1988) recommendations is more emphasis in EAP classes on lexical choice, as lexical errors were seen by all professors as most serious. Taking an altogether different approach, Leki and Carson (1994) went to the students themselves to find out what they thought they needed most from EAP classes to help them succeed in content course writing tasks. The single most expressed desire was for more work on vocabulary. At first this may seem to be a reflection of the students' perceptions of what their content teachers expected or valued; however, an analysis of their responses indicated that these students were more concerned with issues of time and efficiency—having a larger vocabulary leads to quicker and more efficient writing.

The final approach to L2 writing needs considered here is the study of NNS writing problems. One way to do this is to look at a student's actual writing. James (1984) analysed the 'mistakes' which led to a breakdown in meaning in the thesis of a Brazilian PhD student of Sociology of Medicine at the University of Manchester. Unwilling to make general claims about particular errors based on only one case, he concludes that "students need help with what they find most difficult" and this "can only be discovered by observing them at work on the job" (p. 112). This assessment is appealing in its simplicity. What is not made clear is that students must be aiming for some standard, otherwise they wouldn't have any difficulties. But what standard? Whose criteria are they trying to fulfil? And why?

Exactly whose criteria is also left unmentioned in the following studies of NNS writing problems. In Vann, Meyer and Lorenz's (1984) error gravity study, ESL teachers were asked for samples of "their most common and troublesome student errors" (p. 430). But troublesome in what way, and for whom? While there is some overlap with the types of errors focussed on by the pilot subject teachers in Santos' (1988) study, the differences show that neither of these studies of errors is sufficiently comprehensive to make claims about supposed 'needs'. Similarly, from professors' answers to an open-ended question asking them to list what they saw as major problems in student writing, Eblen (1983: 345) reports that just over half concern problems associated with "communicative maturation", especially organisation, and the rest with "standards of edited American English", especially conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation. How meaningful these categories and the subcategories are, however, is not clear. For example, when is 'grammar' different from 'sentence structure', and can these, along with 'word choice' (standards of edited English), always be separated from problems of 'clarity' (communicative maturation)? Asked to rate particular categories of writing problems of their NNS doctoral students, the teachers in Casanave and Hubbard's (1992) survey indicated that the biggest problems involved accuracy and appropriateness of grammar and appropriateness of vocabulary. Areas such as organisation and development were also rated as fairly problematic. Casanave and Hubbard (1992) conclude that problems concerning grammar may be the most persistent for learners. However, Crowe and Peterson's (1995) interviews with composition teachers revealed that their undergraduate Asian students had most trouble with transition, unity and cohesion, the interviews with the students themselves revealing probable explanations for this.

While Crowe and Peterson (1995) asked both teachers and students about writing problems, it seems from their discussion that most credence was given to the teachers' diagnoses, the students' comments only being used as supporting evidence. This appears then to be a case of triangulation in the positivist sense, where a supposedly fixed point in reality is arrived at by the intersection of two or more lines of observation (Lynch 1995). This is also indicative of the objectivist stance of all these studies, which treat writing needs as 'out there' somewhere waiting to be discovered. As can be seen from the variety of possible approaches to needs assessment and sources of information, writing needs could be more usefully seen as various (and not necessarily convergent) perceptions of what is expected or useful.

What aspects of L2 academic writing are seen as 'useful' to students, though, depends on one's ideological and political stance. In Crowe and Peterson's (1995) study, for example, skills that will enable students to pass their composition course are seen as useful, regardless of what is expected in their content courses. In fact, it seems that the only purpose these students have in doing the composition course is to comply with university regulations, as they "have little trouble clearing the hurdles of their other required courses" (Crowe & Peterson 1995: 30). So instead of preparing them for the writing requirements of content courses, this compulsory composition course does nothing for the students except become "the bane of their academic existence" (ibid.).

In all the other writing studies mentioned here, the tasks, skills, or grammatical aspects deemed useful for students are those that are perceived as helping them to succeed at university. This may be seen as taking a realistic or pragmatic stance, one devoid of ideology or politics. But as Pennycook (1989: 612) argues, since "knowledge is socially constructed ... it therefore always reflects the interests of certain individuals or groups [and] is inevitably inscribed in relationships of power". This implies that the ideological position of these needs assessment studies is one that supports the academic status quo. Benesch (1993: 711) calls this "an accommodationist ideology", one that endorses "current power relations in academia and society". This is especially hard to avoid in situations where ESL programs are marginalised, as they often tend to be.

3.1 Conclusion

The problems arising from this previous research into academic needs in general and academic writing needs in particular concern the approach, methodology and ideology.

A major drawback of the studies discussed here is that they either take only one approach to needs assessment, e.g. classifying tasks (Horowitz 1986; Braine 1989), or they may combine two or more approaches, e.g. identifying expected writing skills and student writing problems (Bridgeman & Carlson 1983; Casanave & Hubbard 1992), but rely on only one source for their information, usually content course teachers. Where two sources are used, only one approach is taken (Zughoul & Hussein 1985; Crowe & Peterson 1995).

As for methodology, closed questionnaires have been extremely popular for data gathering. While these are useful for collecting large amounts of information, and are easy to code and perform statistical tests on (during which process 'needs' are averaged and individuals ignored), they impose certain structures and schemes on respondents. Studies that assign categories arising from the data (e.g. Christison & Krahnke 1986; Horowitz 1986; Crowe & Peterson 1995) may be more valid, although there is always the risk that the researchers still impose their perspective *post hoc*. Unfortunately, where labels and categories have been used at all (*a priori* or not), they are sufficiently different to complicate comparison of results across studies.

Finally, none of these studies makes explicit its theoretical basis or ideological underpinnings, but it can be shown that the adoption of these approaches implies an objectivist ontology, as evidenced by Christison and Krahnke's (1986: 76) statement: "we believe that the present study is a step in determining what those actual needs are". This objectivism has led to inappropriate approaches to needs assessment. These studies also imply what Benesch (1993) calls "accommodationist" ideology, leading to the uncritical induction of students into traditional academic discourse. What are often framed as student needs in effect turn out to be institutional demands. Therefore, any pedagogical implications arising from this research will merely serve to uncritically maintain the normative status quo, a situation Benesch (1993) objects to.

A way forward would be to explore L2 writing needs from multiple perspectives within one setting. An indepth understanding gained by way of interviews of not just content teachers', but also ESL teachers' and NNS students' perceptions may bring to light the various issues associated with teaching and learning in an academic discourse community, and may ultimately lead to more reflective practice.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

In order to gain a more indepth understanding of the various perceptions of writing needs than previous research has afforded, the target groups in this study are relatively small. International first year economics and commerce students at the University of Melbourne, their economics and commerce subject teachers, and ESL professionals from the Centre for Communication Skills and ESL at Melbourne University were approached, with four students (S1-S4), three economics tutors (M1-M3) and three ESL teachers (E1-E3) agreeing to take part in the study. Each of these people discussed their perceptions of the academic writing needs of international first year economics and commerce students at the University of Melbourne in *semi-structured* interviews, in that there was no list of predetermined questions but a list of topics and issues to be discussed (Nunan 1992). Each group of interviews followed a schedule to ensure certain topics and information were covered across interviewees within each group (see Appendix A), but no *a priori* categories of needs, skills, difficulties, etc. were used to avoid the problems associated with the imposition of such categories, as discussed above ("Previous Studies"). Differences in the topics covered in the schedules between respondent groups included types of background information and topics relating to the participants' academic roles. However all participants were asked to comment on samples of written work, the importance of language and their perceived requirements for a special course for NESB Macroeconomics students. Each student brought to the interview a copy of an economics essay they had done during the year. Of these pieces of the students' writing, two (W1 and W2), which were both samples of the first assignment for the Macroeconomics course, were copied (unmarked and anonymous) and given to all the teachers to read before their interviews. Thus, the essays provided a starting point for discussion in each interview.

The style of interview in each case was *informal* in that topics were raised and discussed in conversational style (Cohen & Manion 1989: 307). The pace was relaxed and the focus was on the opinions and perceptions of the interviewees, who were encouraged to expand and clarify what they said. Scope was also given for them to digress and take the discussion in another direction. In this way, the interactions were likely to be richer than in more controlled interviews, thus producing sometimes unanticipated data, but data which is important to the interviewees (Measor 1985).

4.2 Validity

Characteristics of the interviewer and interviewee, power imbalances and performing are commonly seen as threats to internal validity in interviews (Block 1995; Cohen & Manion 1989) and as such should be recognised (as they are not really able to be controlled for). However, if we conceive of the interview as an encounter that shares many features of everyday life, rather than one having bias which the researcher feels the need to control, we see that "there are not good interviews and bad in the conventional sense. There are simply social encounters" (Kitwood 1977 in Cohen & Manion 1989: 312) and the notions of reliability and validity become redundant. They are, in fact, only appropriate if working within a paradigm which adopts a realist ontology. Here, it is assumed that there are "multiple constructed realities" (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 37); thus a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology are adopted. Within such a framework, credibility (to those being researched) rather than validity, as traditionally conceived, is striven for (Davis 1992). One way to do this is to use triangulation, not in a positivist, objective truth-locating way, but one that seeks to gain insight into multiple perspectives (Lynch 1995).

4.3 Data Analysis

All interviews were summarised from the audio recordings and interesting and illuminating quotes were transcribed. Common themes were drawn out of the data and coded for similarities and differences between individuals and groups.

So, judgments as to themes, issues, similarities and differences are all personal and subjective, in line with the relativist ontology discussed above. To claim otherwise would not only be inaccurate, but also delusory. When the researcher is also the interviewer—the 'participant-analyst'—their interpretations of the public 'first record'—the transcriptions—are inevitably based on their unique 'second record' of understandings formed during the process of data collection, or what Hull (1985: 29) calls *black-market understandings*. Like Hull's (1985) research into pupils' perceptions of induction programs in British schools, my task here is to give a critical reading of the interview data by disclosing significant aspects based on my second record black-market understandings and providing extracts from the first record transcriptions as supporting evidence.

5. Results and discussion

One of the most restricting aspects on writing and judging writing as far as both the students and ESL teachers were concerned was the expectations of the marker:

S3: Actually, we have no idea what, what's expected ... no examples ... had to guess.

S4: Maybe I don't really get the idea what the teacher expect.

E1: Often where I start from is the structure of the assignment or the essay, but it's more difficult for me to do that with these because I don't, even given *this* [assessment criteria], I don't know what a good assignment would look like.

E3: It looked as though they probably needed more detailed guidance as to what the questions were really asking them to do.

E1: [re designing a special course for NNS economics students]:

> You need to negotiate with the people setting the assignments, with what they expect and that would affect what the focus would be.

This is of course perfectly understandable from the students' point of view—they want to get good marks—and in this particular situation, also from the ESL teachers' perspective—they are not the ones marking the essays, and in order to assist such students, they need to be aware of the markers' requirements for a good essay.

However, when I asked the macroeconomics tutors how they communicated their expectations to their students, it seemed that they didn't always have strict requirements:

> M1: I don't tell them a great deal about, in terms of content or what they should be saying. In fact the only thing I would say to them in that sense is um you know, there is no 'right' answer, it's up to you to see what sort of answer you come up with ... trying to emphasise that idea that there's judgments required as to what's required and what's not required in your essay.

> M3: I actually don't mind when a student goes out on a limb and does something a little different. I always mention that to my students ... provided you back it up.

This lack of clear guidelines for doing an assignment was troublesome for S3, who finds that essay questions are often broad, with "too many" possible answers:

> S3: We are not told what restrictions or specific things you're supposed to look into it ... we are supposed to make our own assumptions and not to make unnecessary assumptions. Not really sure what are the necessary ones. We are restricted to a word limit and of course we would like to bring in all theories.

This conflicting desire for clear requirements on the part of the students and the relatively vague instructions given by the tutors could be translated into 'needs' in several ways. One interpretation is that students need to be made aware that they are expected to make their own judgments about relevant content and then (somehow) taught how to do this. However, the Singaporean students are already aware of this major cultural difference in academic expectations:

> S3: [In Singapore] Just study, strictly from the books ... the examiner or lecturer what they want ... here it's more flexible, discuss more, get more ideas.

> S4: Here we are taught to think more critically, while in Singapore it's like more of memorising what the teacher tell us to do.

Another interpretation would be to say that the tutors need to be more explicit in communicating their requirements to students, which would be an objective not of an EAP course, but of a more politically sensitive economics staff development session.

Or, the above conflict could be taken as a need for the students to be able to consult with their tutors when they are unsure of the exact requirements for an assignment. This avenue is in fact open to students, but they may not be aware of it. Whereas S3 says he consults tutors in different subjects all the time because he believes different markers have different ways of marking, S4 didn't think about asking her tutor for help at all.

As well as the communication of requirements being seen to be vague, S3 sometimes finds the actual wording of the questions unclear, as in the case of the assignment he brought to the interview. The question asked whether certain circumstances would result in "a movement along or a shift of the consumption function". S3 believed the answer was *both* and consequently asked his tutor if that was an acceptable answer to an 'or' question.

Again, this problem of question interpretation could be translated into at least three different 'needs'. Either a) the students need to be aware that they can consult their tutor if they can't understand the question, or b) they need to be shown how to analyse questions (this assumes the problem lies with the student and not the wording), or

c) the person who writes the assignment questions needs to be more careful.

When S3 said that different tutors have different ways of marking, he was referring to different subjects, but it is clear that even within this macroeconomics subject where the tutors are given the same assessment criteria, differences in marking are apparent. Especially surprising was the enormous discrepancy between M1 and M2's evaluations of W2. While both these tutors agreed that it was not as good as W1, M1 said he would give it about 15-16 out of 20, but M2 said he would fail it with about 3-4 out of 10.

The assessment criteria given to the tutors is also given to the students; however, each tutor uses those criteria differently. This variability is attested in a large body of literature on rater behaviour (e.g. Brown 1995; Hamp-Lyons 1991; McNamara 1996). M1 said his own preference is for evidence of additional reading and correct referencing, whereas M2 tends to downplay the correct bibliography criterion while focusing more on logical thinking, and M3 said a good essay goes straight to the point. All these macroeconomics tutors admitted weighting the criteria differently when it came to marking, sometimes not paying much attention to certain criteria while lumping others together. Although they are all provided with the same marking sheet where each criterion has a 5-point scale (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"), the actual mark given tends to be arrived at holistically.

> M1: When it comes to giving a mark, I guess it's more of a straight out subjective view of how good I think that question is, or how well they've answered it.

The marking guide provided by the macroeconomics lecturer is just that—a guide. Although there is supposed to be a correlation between that and the mark, it is not enforced and the tutors are aware that they do not all mark the same, but are not particularly concerned about it.

> M2: Although there may be some variation in teaching across the university ... we equip the students to deal with these things.... I used to worry about that more than I do now. I think

> that with experience, I can see that the good students do stand out, the bad students do stand out, and the other ones tend to come in the middle.

M2's comment that students are equipped to deal with variations in teaching and marking is interesting. How are they equipped? Whose job is it to equip them? The content teacher's or the EAP teacher's? It could be inferred here that this is one of the students' academic needs—to 'deal with' these variations. However, it could also be said that the tutors need to be more explicit about their personal focus in marking assignments, or that there is a need for moderation across tutors for every piece of assessment.

It follows that a target-situation analysis here would yield conflicting results. Leki (1995) also found differing teacher judgments of the same essays and points out that ESL classes are based on the assumption that "at least within the university, there is agreement on standards for writing beyond sentence-level concerns" (p. 40). Likewise, discipline-specific and adjunct EAP classes make the same assumption but within a particular discipline or subject area. In our case, a target-situation analysis may go even further to reveal the need for *tutor-specific* EAP classes.

Even when students are aware of the assessment criteria, they may have problems addressing them in a way that is acceptable to the marker. For example, evidence of reading beyond the prescribed text was one of the criteria for the first macroeconomics assignment. The writers of W2 provided this evidence, as was evident from their footnotes, but they did not always incorporate the outside material appropriately.

> M1: I don't know if they understand what they're actually writing about. OK so there's sort of a sense of, you know, we've been told to read widely, we've found this, it looks good, and I'll put it in.... It's one of those things you're a bit disinclined to criticise it 'cause they *are* doing as you've asked them to do.

So by attempting to fulfil one of the explicit requirements of the assignment—reading beyond the prescribed text—these students have failed to fulfil another unstated expectation: appropriate and relevant integration of outside sources.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Limitations of the Study

In order to explore in depth the various perceptions of academic writing needs in one particular context and the issues for needs analyses and EAP arising from these perceptions, this study attempts to address some of the problems of previous research into academic needs discussed in the "Previous Studies" section, such as by drawing on multiple sources for information, avoiding imposing preconceived categories on respondents, and gathering rich qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. However, the main limitations of the present study are due to its very exploratory nature and derive from the sample size and method of analysis.

Analysis of the data by hand was made manageable by the small sample size, but would become unfeasible in a much larger study. Furthermore, although preconceived categories of 'needs' were on the whole avoided, the researcher's perceptions can still be imposed when inferring categories from the data. While this would be a problem in a normal needs analysis, it is in fact a useful tool here, as one of the aims of this study is to show how varying and sometimes conflicting needs can be inferred from the same data.

The small number of respondents also precludes generalisability of the results. However, since this research is qualitative in nature, lack of external validity is not a relevant limitation. Rather, transferability to other contexts is possible with a sufficiently thick description (Davis 1992: 606). The account of the context and perceptions given here is no doubt too thin for completely reliable similarity judgments to be made, but more importantly, I believe consideration of the issues discussed above will still be useful in different contexts.

Credibility of the data interpretation could be enhanced by prolonged engagement and persistent observation and negotiation of my interpretations with the respondents. This latter technique, however, while it would seem necessary for true credibility, could be carried out *ad infinitum*. Therefore, my 'black-market understandings', as defined in the "Data Analysis" section, must suffice in this exploratory study.

6.2 Implications

The importance given to the marker's expectations by the students and ESL teachers is significant. While being perfectly understandable in the present context, it nevertheless reveals the accommodationist ideology underlying EAP. The usual critique of an accommodationist stance is that it treats academic discourse as monolithic, and assimilation into such a discourse involves eliminating differences, thus supporting the status quo, or the "fixed set of the beliefs and power relations that currently prevail" (Allison 1994: 620). Raimes (1991), for example, questions whether we should trust academic discourse communities as open and beneficial to students, or whether we should see them as powerful and controlling. Instead of blindly accepting their premises, perhaps we should be asking "Who learns to do what? Why? Who benefits?" (Raimes 1991: 422).

But what alternative is there to "composition as colonization" (Land & Whitley 1989: 289)? Shor (1992: 13) sees education as a "contested terrain" where students can either be socialised into autonomous and critical thought or into dependence and passivity. One approach to the teaching of second language literacy that tries to explain the social purpose of texts and the relations between participants is critical genre pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis 1993). Rather than merely inducting students uncritically into traditional academic discourse, this approach aims to instil in them a critical understanding of the discourses of power. But a warning is necessary here too. By setting itself up as the cure for EAP ills, critical genre pedagogy is in danger of becoming just another mandate for instruction. In a similar way, the most obvious alternative to writing within the academy is to write against it, but this keeps the writer firmly on the outside of the discourse, and thus powerless (Harris et al 1990).

However, there are more options than just to assimilate or subvert. What would be perhaps preferable, is for academics to be both critical of the discourse they operate within and open to change. In other words, the academic discourse community must be flexible, which is especially important in institutions like Melbourne

University which aim to be multicultural. Of course, change has occurred (if slowly) over the years and a 'monolithic' account of academic discourse is not in fact tenable. For this reason, the notions of academic discourse itself and the 'status quo' need to be considered further. This could be approached by investigating current shifts in academic discourse and changing expectations and attitudes of all participants.

7. References

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8. Appendix A: Interview Schedules

8.1 Interview Schedule—Student

Background
L1
English (where, when, how long)
Coming to Australia (when, why, who with)
How found Australia, university
Interest in economics
Other subjects
Relate macroeconomics to other subjects: demand, difficulty, expectations, marking, feedback ...

Essay(s)
Happy with marks? Surprised, expected ...
Agree with mark/comments? Why (not)?
Specific problems in essay(s). Why? Own opinion/told by whom?

Link to questionnaire
Follow up, expand comments
Specifically *your* problems, needs or ESL/eco/uni Ss in general?
Relate to other subjects
How do you go about writing an essay for this subject?
Which part is hardest? Why?
(Process, stages, strategies, follow any particular advice/rules/handout)

Special course: What to cover

8.2. Interview Schedule—ESL Teacher

Background
Academic disciplines familiar with
Teaching qualifications (where, when)
ESL/EAP teaching experience (where, when, S levels, L1s, etc)

Essays
Problems, weaknesses W1/W2
Assessment criteria (anything to add?) W1/W2
Mark? Pass/Fail? Which essay is better? Why?

cf. general experience with individual/group tutorials/credit courses
Needs/problems particular to NESB/economics/all Ss?

Special course: What to cover and why
Different needs for different subjects?

Importance of 'language'

8.3 Interview Schedule—Macroeconomics Tutor

Background
Economics
Other disciplines
Teaching (subjects, levels, Ss)

Essays (problems, weaknesses, mark) W1/W2

Expectations re writing
How transmitted to Ss
Important aspects re marking (cf. marking schedule) (aspects of 'good' essay). Which are own preferences/imposed criteria?
Importance of microeconomic knowledge
cf. professional economic writing
cf. NS vs NNS writing
Importance of language and its effect on marking

cf. other essay/assignment questions

Special course

9. Appendix B: Background Information

9.1. Students—Background Information

9.1.1. S1 (male; 19 years old)

Country of origin: Oromia
L1: Oromo at home (+ knows other languages)
Arrived in Australia: January 1995 to study; alone

English language experience

Started learning at secondary school (immersion) for 4 years (finished Yr 12)
Only used English at school, not at home or work

Perception of Australia
Already had brother here for 5 years
Took 6 months to get used to culture; missed family

University experience
Completed TAFE part-time accounting course
Began at MU in semester 1, 1996

Interest in Economics
Compulsory for Finance
Intends to do Year 2 economics (because it is important for finance)

Other subjects
Maths, Quantitative Methods; Accounting (no writing involved)

9.1.2. S2 (male; 20 years old)

Country of origin: Malaysia
L1: Malay (at home, speaks Mandarin and Hokkien + a little bit of English (mother is from English school in Malaysia) + speaks "lots" of other Chinese dialects, eg. Cantonese and Hakka)
Arrived in Australia: February 1995 to study; alone

English language experience
Exposed to English at home, from age of 4-5 (TV etc) but only knew a few words: "Learn English is like part of learning life."
Started learning English as a foreign language at (Chinese/Mandarin) school (Std 2, 8-9 y.o.). This was the first time learning grammar.

Perception of Australia
First time away, but didn't really experience culture shock
Sister had already been to Canada/US
"When I was young I was like destined to come overseas and I had to prepare myself like learn English and culture"

University experience
Foundation course at Trinity College.

Lives in Missionary Training College–uses English as lingua franca
Began at MU in semester 1, 1996
Study not a problem since young; no subjects worry him

Interest in Economics
Loves Finance

Other subjects
Quantitative Methods; Accounting (no writing involved); Management;
Business Law (Semester 1)–least favourite then because involved a lot of English, understanding, readings, jargon

9.1.3. S3 (male; 22 years old)

Country of origin: Singapore
L1: Mandarin/English (+ knows other foreign languages–Japanese, French, German)
Arrived in Australia: January 1996 to study; alone

English language experience
Started learning at primary school (4-5 y.o.; immersion)
Believes the dialect of Chinese spoken affects the structure of English

Perception of Australia
Singapore very strict; more freedom in Australia (great!)

University experience
Did Uni in Singapore for 2 wks, but didn't suit, so came to Australia
"I wasn't adapting very well to the system"
Began at MU in semester 1, 1996

Interest in Economics
Has been doing economics and commerce for the last few years (and likes it)

Other subjects
Maths, Quantitative Methods (no writing involved), Management, (sem 1) Business Law, Japanese

9.1.4. S4 (female; 18 years old)

Country of origin: Indonesia
L1: Indonesian (+Mandarin at home)
Arrived in Australia: July 1995 to study; alone

English language experience
Started learning at (Indonesian) primary school (EFL) 12 y.o.
Went to Singapore to study for 4 yrs (immersion, 13-16 y.o.) with aunt (language was hard at first) then back to Indonesia for 6 months holiday

Perception of Australia
Not as busy as Jakarta

University experience
Trinity Foundation Course
Began at MU in semester 2, 1996
Has some mixed nationality friends from Trinity, but finds it hard to mix with Australian students (only in class discussions)

Interest in Economics
Compulsory for Commerce degree

Other subjects
Quantitative Methods; Accounting (no writing involved), Management
Will probably major in accounting

9.2 ESL Teachers—Background Information

9.2.1. E1 (female)

Teaching qualifications
RSA Cert TEFLA, Brighton 1986
MA (AppLing), MU 1994

Academic disciplines familiar with
Applied Linguistics;
Reasonably comfortable with Arts/Humanities, especially Psychology, Politics, History, Sociology;

Architecture (getting familiar, due to working with Architecture students);
Difficulty with Science and <u>not</u> familiar with Economics

ESL teaching experience
General English + English for Medicine, Business, Tourism to adults in Italy;
ELICOS, younger students, mostly Asians, General English and EAP;
Community Centre–Migrants;
RMIT Centre for English Language Learning–General English, EOP (migrants), then ELICOS and EAP;
Indonesia–University EFL Teacher training;
Language Testing Research Centre (MU);
CCS&ESL since 1995

9.2.2. E2 (female)

Teaching qualifications
DipEd, Melbourne State College 1980
GradDip TESL, Victoria University
MA (AppLing), MU 1994

Academic disciplines familiar with
Economics (undergrad degree 1975/6 and teaching method in DipEd 1980)
Applied Linguistics; Sociology (2nd major)
Comfortable with most subjects in Arts and Economic faculties (eg. accounting)
Least familiar with science

ESL teaching experience
1981-89 TAFE: Concurrent Support to students of Business, Secretarial and Computer Studies (intermediate level, mixed backgrounds: Polish, Vietnamese, etc) + English for Further Studies;
Private English College, general English;
English for Economics at TAFE: ELICOS students doing preparation for VCE/TAFE economics;
Holmesglen ELICOS (first time teaching overseas students)
CCS&ESL since 1990

9.2.3. E3 (male)

Teaching qualifications
RSA Cert TEFLA, London 1984
MA (AppLing), Monash University 1993

Academic disciplines familiar with
Humanities, rather than science;
Linguistics/Applied Linguistics (own discipline);
Not familiar with economics–closest is very basic training in statistics (but hardly relevant)

ESL teaching experience
(Linguistics at MU);
China: EFL, EAP, General and Applied Linguistics, some Language Teaching method, to Uni students (for 12 yrs)
+ 1994-5, Business and General Eng (undergraduate university) and some EAP built in;
ELICOS (Hawthorn Institute of Education), including IELTS & EAP skills;
EAP at Victoria University of Technology;
Hanoi, IELTS preparation;
CCS&ESL since 1996

9.3 Macroeconomics Tutors—Background Information

9.3.1. M1 (male)

Economics background
BEc (Monash University)
About to complete PGDip Ec (MU)

Academic disciplines familiar with
Economics
Politics (part of Economics faculty at Monash)
Engineering (started degree)

Teaching experience
1st year microeconomics and macroeconomics (tutor at Monash in 1991; lecturer/tutor at RMIT in 1992; tutor at MU in 1996);
All classes mixed background students, especially at RMIT;
Teaching 6 Macroeconomics classes at MU this semester.

9.3.2. M2 (male)

Economics background
BCom (Hons) (MU, 1991)
Management consulting (4 yrs: Australia, London, Toronto)
Research Assistant (Melbourne Institute – based in city & MU)

Academic disciplines familiar with
Economics
Commerce and Business-related fields (eg. Finance)

Teaching experience
Economics: Macro and Micro–introductory and intermediate levels (at MU on and off since 1992);
Business Statistics, Accounting, Public Finance (usually temporary/relief teaching at other universities too, some secondary level);
Teaching 6 Macroeconomics classes at MU this semester.

9.3.3. M 3 (male)

Economics background
BEc (Hons) (La Trobe University)
Currently doing MCom (Eco) (MU)

Academic disciplines familiar with
Only Economics

Teaching experience
Economics: Little private tutoring (Asian University students);
Started tutoring this semester at Melbourne Uni and La Trobe Uni (1st yr Microeconomics);
Teaching 6 Macroeconomics classes at MU this semester.