

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES CURRICULUM EVALUATION PROJECT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2013, The School of Foreign Languages (SFL) initiated a research project aiming to investigate the effectiveness of the English Language education programs at its two departments, Department of Basic English (DBE) and Modern Languages Department (MLD), and validate the effectiveness of METU English Proficiency Exam. To this end, a thorough needs analysis was conducted.

The following research questions were addressed to guide the curriculum evaluation process:

- To what extent are the goals and objectives relevant to the needs of stakeholders?
- To what extent do the existing instructional processes address SFL students' needs?
- To what extent do the materials used address SFL students' needs?
- How effective are the current assessment practices?
- What changes are needed to make the current SFL curriculum more effective?

NEEDS ANALYSIS PROCESS

This section presents the major stages of and important details about the needs analysis procedure.

Needs Analysis at the DBE

The first set of data was collected for program evaluation purposes. **Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 2612 students, 94 instructors and 1 administrator.** The second set of data were collected in the needs analysis stage. A questionnaire was **administered to 536 freshman students and interviews were conducted with 28 academicians from all faculties and 10 instructors from MLD.** The DBE leg of the project was completed in August 2014 and a report was prepared on the two aspects aforementioned.

Needs Analysis at the MLD

Data was collected in three stages. The first set of data was collected to evaluate the courses offered by the Department of Modern Languages. **In ENG 101, data was collected through questionnaires with the participation of 839 students. In ENG 211, 830 students and 29 teachers participated in the study.** The second set of data was collected from the faculty at METU through semi-structured interviews. A total of **38 academicians, from all faculties in the university were interviewed. The final set of data was collected from METU graduates and their employers via interviews. Semi-structures interviews were conducted with 40 graduates working in 19 firms, and 14 employers from 12 firms.**

FINDINGS

The data collected were analyzed rigorously by the SFL Research & Development team, and the validity and reliability of the results were ensured. The major points that emerged from the study, which will provide important insight for the renewal of SFL curriculum, are as follows:

Findings Related to DBE

1) Motivation and Logistics:

It has been repeatedly mentioned that **DBE students lack motivation to learn English**. Among the many reasons for this, those that recurred were not being aware of the demanding academic tasks in programs in their faculties and the notion among some students that the preparatory year is a “time for rest”. Although the DBE conducts a two-day orientation session to inform students of the expectations of the departments, these do not seem to serve their purpose. These sessions need to be re-modeled for more efficient outcomes. Additionally, the orientation sessions that are conducted by the departments were also considered inefficient in conveying the necessary messages to the students. As for the **logistics problems, the number of students that DBE receives each year increases**, which gradually makes the resources at the DBE become inadequate. As the one-year study at the department is an intensive period for the students at all levels, and the students are expected to experience an enlightening and challenging instructional period, every possible measure must be taken to discourage those students from *resting* at the DBE for a year.

2) Receptive (reading and listening) Skills:

Strategic, critical and intensive reading skills were found to be lacking in especially those students who studied at the lower levels (Beginner and Elementary) at the DBE although issues in reading were claimed to be related to the wider problem of **lack of interest in reading even in the mother tongue**. It was indicated that reading materials provided at the DBE were not sufficient and varied. Respondents suggested tasks similar to those that the students are expected to carry out in their departments.

3) Productive (speaking and writing) Skills:

As English language instruction at the DBE is based on the teaching of general English, rather than field specific English, the needs analysis focused on the types of tasks that are common to all disciplines. The ability to communicate in English was found to be an important constituent in the teaching and learning process; however, **oral communication was a weak spot for almost all DBE students**, except for those at the Advanced level. Written products of the freshman students were also criticized by the **faculty members who expected students to use simpler but clearer language in conveying ideas and building arguments**.

4) Issues in the Departmental Courses in the Freshman Year:

Some of the issues mentioned by the faculty as students’ language deficiency are rather related to **lack of an appropriate pedagogical approach in freshman courses**. In the freshman year, students need more guidance in the learning process. As the majority of our students (65–70%) are those that have learned no or very little English before coming to ODTÜ, to become active members in especially crowded classes, they need to be provided

with concrete and organized information, guidance in efficiently processing field related input in English, opportunities to participate in class discussions, and guidance in writing reports and essays.

5) Issues regarding the Extended Term

The extended term was launched in the 2011-2012 academic year when the number of students that started out as Beginner/Pre-intermediate increased to an unprecedented high number (960). **Previously, this group had a 30-hour teaching week with two teachers sharing the load. As this was no longer logistically feasible, the teaching hours had to be cut down to 25 hours a week.** Consequently, the total teaching hours in the academic year decreased from 960 to 800 hours. There was a loss of 160 hours of instruction which had to be remedied. In addition, earlier complaints of students about the six-hour/day program being too loaded and exhaustive were also taken into consideration and thus **the extended term (150 hrs.) was implemented as a solution to remedy the loss of contact hours, and to satisfy student needs by spreading absorption time.** Table 1 shows the student number and success rates before (2008-2011) and after (2011-2015) the extended term program.

Academic Year	Student Numbers	Success Rates (%)
2014 - 2015	627	48,30
2013 - 2014	840	55,59
2012 – 2013	1197	61,04
2011 – 2012	960	61,56
2010 – 2011	914	52,69
2009 – 2010	571	42,73
2008 – 2009	482	41,08

Table 1

As can be seen in Table 1, the success rates declined in the last two years. One reason for this drop is that **Vertical Transfer students, who are academically low achievers compared to regular METU students, are all placed in the Beginner/Pre-intermediate group.** Their numbers were 114 (13,5%) in 2013-2014 and 130 (20,7%) in 2014-2015. Another reason can be attributed **to the changes made in the program by the DBE administration.** Hence, to increase student success rates again, a pilot program is being implemented in the 2015-2016 academic year.

Findings Related to MLD

1) Practice of Reading, Writing, and Listening Skills

Reading and writing were reported to be the strongest skills, sufficiently practiced in MLD courses. Still, students majoring in social sciences believed that **reading skills could be given more emphasis**. In addition, although most graduates were satisfied with their writing skills, **limited vocabulary and formal writing were two problem areas**. Moreover, the listening materials and tasks used in English lessons were criticized for their **inauthenticity**. Finally, students expect the reading and listening tasks to be more **relevant** to their departmental studies.

2) Speaking Activities and Social English

Overall, it is thought by the participants that presentation skills are taught and students' confidence is increased effectively, especially in ENG 211. However, some students and instructors stated that **presentations are artificially delivered and too structured. The discussion/debate and role-play tasks are well-intended but need improvement**. Overall, these tasks were stated to be more effective than presentations in improving spontaneous speech. In terms of the implementation of these activities, **action can be taken to increase student motivation**. It was commonly believed **speaking activities were relevant to students' career needs than departmental needs**. Participants also added that **there should be more pronunciation practice**.

There was general consensus among the graduate participants that the university did not develop speaking skills. **Speaking emerged as the weakest point**. ENG 211 Academic Speaking Skills was reported to be the most effective English course, especially in teaching presentation skills. However, both faculty members and graduates pointed to social English as an issue. **Graduates felt incompetent in using English in social contexts**. They lacked confidence in their speaking skills, and **fluency was an issue in spontaneous speech**. Faculty members stated that it is a part of academic life, and should be practiced in English courses. The majority of the professors were METU graduates, and they said that their weak social English skills was a problem when they went abroad to pursue their career. They observed that their students had the same problem.

3) Issues in Departmental Courses

Overall, Turkish use is tolerated in the lessons in the departments. Most professors said that they switched to Turkish when the students did not understand the lesson. When there were international students in the class, Turkish use decreased. **Second, students are not sufficiently equipped to meet the academic demands**. The students were reported to be better at reading and listening than at writing and speaking. Additionally, students lacked the competence and confidence to ask questions and participate in classes. Students' inadequate academic skills and limited general world knowledge were a concern for most of the professors. **It was repeatedly highlighted that ODTÜ "was not international enough"**. If its image as an international university were enhanced, this would increase students' exposure to English. Finally, **none of the participant groups thought that technical/field-specific English should be taught by SFL**. They all emphasized the importance of developing general English, especially speaking skills.

4) Assessment

Teacher feedback was revealed to be the main strength of MLD courses. Students stated that teacher feedback helped them improve their English, and they highly appreciated it. **However, the assessment components of ENG 101 and ENG 211** received criticism.

5) Need for Raising Awareness About the Importance of English

Faculty members and graduates accept that English is essential to succeed in academic endeavors, and today's global and competitive business world. Depending on the position and sector they worked, METU graduates reported that they used English at different levels of intensity, and they all acknowledged its crucial role in their career. In retrospect, however, the graduates thought that **students were not well-informed about the importance of English to succeed in their career and departments**. A number of graduates volunteered to attend as guests if career talks with students were organized. Participants also highlighted that language skills should be practiced in a way that they could be **transferred** to students' departmental performance and work after graduation.

Findings Related to METU English Proficiency Exam

Next to program evaluation and needs analysis at the DBE and MLD, English Proficiency Exam (EPE) was the third focus of the project that started in September 2013. The results of the PE-2013 project implicated **the need for a more robust approach towards test development in the light of the current theories in assessment, and a modern approach towards test validation**. Hence, since May 2015, SFL Research & Development team **has started working on a new test of English proficiency in collaboration with instructors from the DBE, MLD, and the EPE committee**. The new EPE will better represent the actual communicative tasks common in all disciplines, and therefore, will have a positive impact on instruction at the DBE and MLD, will be properly aligned to the CEFR, and the external examinations that are accepted at METU. Moreover, the validation framework used as part of the project will help analyze the test thoroughly both before and after test administration, and justify the decisions made based on the test scores.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings of the study, curriculum goals should be reconstructed to cater for the changing needs of stakeholders.

A major finding pertaining to what **content** should be taught in SFL curriculum relates to the long debated question of whether SFL should adopt an ESP approach. The results showed that problems with field-specific English are gradually solved as students take more departmental courses. For this reason and others that emerged in the research, SFL should not adopt an ESP approach. However, some ESP modules can be integrated to the current English program. Providing more reading material with greater variety was also suggested. It is also advisable that certain changes be introduced to the **materials** component of the curricula. The authenticity of texts and tasks in the curriculum should be evaluated to increase transferability of skills from English classes to departmental classes and to workplace. In addition, the pedagogical materials used to develop listening skills need to be updated so that the students will be better prepared to listen to more spontaneous, colloquial, and less structured speech. As for **instruction and learning experiences**, the traditional approach to language teaching should be abandoned in DBE, and a more communicative, process oriented approach be adopted to empower students to use the language communicatively. Major amendments should be made to learning experiences to remedy the speaking problem. More practice in interacting in English was recommended for the new curriculum. Action should be taken to combat motivational problems of students. For example, greater freedom should be allowed in topic choice in ENG 211, Academic Speaking Skills Course. Another integral part of curriculum, which is student **assessment and evaluation**, needs to be revised. Validity, reliability and transparency issues in assessment should be further evaluated by SFL. There may be need for practices ranging from teacher training, to double grading of papers and to exam archiving, which require considerable amount of investment.

Based on the results of the study, a set of interventions are necessary in the **present context**:

- Action should be taken both by SFL and METU administration to bridge the gap between students who start the university with low proficiency level and already proficient students.
- Students who have sufficient levels of English should be encouraged to be exempted from the preparatory class.
- Elective English courses for students with different needs and interests can be introduced. Some possible courses are English for Communication and Advanced Academic Writing.
- The international status of the university should be enhanced. There should be more extra-curricular activities in English to bring together Turkish and international students.
- The orientation programs should be improved according to feedback provided by the key stakeholders. Other awareness-raising activities should be introduced.
- Teaching force should be trained, which is necessitated by the changes in methodology and the alignment of the curriculum to the CEFR.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

1. The findings of the research summarized above are already being used in the **curriculum renewal project initiated by SFL**. In addition, the **Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been set as an external point of reference** for the revised curriculum. **Initial CEFR training has been provided for the committee members in DBE and MLD**. A further series of training is planned in the 2015-2016 academic year.
2. A **pilot program has been launched at DBE**. The outcomes of this program will shed light on the new syllabi design.
3. A **new version of METU-EPE is being developed** to bring about a positive impact on instruction at the DBE and to increase the validity of this assessment tool according to the language abilities specified through the needs analysis in this study.
4. **Training in assessment has been organized** both for DBE and MLD committees.
5. A **project (Tandem) to bring international students and Turkish students together** to speak has been initiated and will be piloted this academic year.
6. Some of the actions suggested in this report is beyond the scope of SFL, and will be discussed with the university administration.