

A task-based needs analysis for Australian Aboriginal students: Going beyond the target situation to address cultural issues

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ABSTRACT

While needs analyses underpin the design of second language analytic syllabi, the methodologies undertaken are rarely examined. This paper explores the value of multiple data sources and collection methods for developing a needs analysis model to enable vocational education and training teachers to address the needs of Australian Aboriginal students from remote communities who speak Australian English as an additional language (EAL). Adopting a task-based approach to needs analysis, data were gathered from educators, students, potential employers and Aboriginal community members using interviews, observation and document collection. The findings highlight the benefits of a needs analysis for triangulating multiple data sources and methods to identify the actual target tasks, including social workplace interactions as well as cultural issues. These findings have implications for all language needs analyses, particularly for EAL students from non-Western cultures.

Keywords: needs analysis, second language learners, task-based language teaching, Indigenous learners, vocational education and training

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research into second language needs analysis (NA), particularly for occupational purposes, raises concerns about the ability of traditional NAs to facilitate the development of a syllabus that can effectively prepare those who

speak English as an additional language (EAL) for the workplace (Long, 2005b). Most traditional NAs focus on the linguistic forms (e.g. grammatical features, vocabulary, discourse structures or notions and functions) of the target language, but rarely prepare students for the dynamics of the

workplace. Moreover, teachers who design language and literacy syllabi seldom have the resources to systematically collect and analyse relevant data that would enable them to identify the actual language and literacy tasks that learners will encounter in the workplace and the cultural issues that may need to be addressed to assist students' transition into the workplace.

This situation is particularly true for vocational education and training (VET) teachers who have the technical knowledge and practical expertise (e.g., using particular tools for specific situations), but not the linguistic and pedagogical background nor cultural understandings to cater adequately for the learning needs of their EAL students. This is in contrast to (but not necessarily complementary with) EAL specialist staff who may offer students generic language and literacy support. Even when it includes trade-specific vocabulary (e.g., tool names) or workplace discourse (e.g., answering the telephone), it can seldom prepare learners for the dynamics of the communicative encounters (Belcher, 2006) of the various occupational communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Consequently, neither VET teachers nor support staff can adequately prepare EAL students for the language and literacy demands of the workplace.

To address these issues, a systematic task-based NA methodology was used in this project to develop an evidence-based model for VET teachers. The research was undertaken at a Western Australian boarding school which specialises in VET for Aboriginal high school students, most of whom come from remote communities and speak Standard Australian English (SAE) as an additional language. It was envisaged that the development of such a model would be of assistance to education staff at the focal school, and at other Indigenous VET schools, and potentially, the principles underpinning it could inform others using NA for a task-based approach. While the project itself is described in greater detail elsewhere (Oliver et al., 2012), this paper focuses on the NA methodology used in the research, presents some of the findings and draws some conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Overview of the development of a task-based approach to needs analysis

Second language NA research has its roots in the 1970s work associated with the Council of Europe Modern Language Project (Trim, 2007) which developed a framework for describing language learner needs for occupational purposes. Although the framework shifted the focus from grammatical structures to what learners needed to do with language, the checklist of needs was largely informed by intuition and the unit of analysis remained linguistic (Gilbert, 2005; Long, 2005a). Therefore, early second language NAs not only failed to consider the environment in which learners would use the language, but were also unaccommodating of the many variables that affect second language learning.

Subsequent theory has recognised the gradual 'non-linear' (Long & Norris, 2000, p. 866), non-categorical, developmental nature of second language acquisition, and the involvement of both innate and environmental factors which enable or inhibit language development. This interactionist perspective (e.g. Gass, 2003; Long, 1996) initially underpinned the communicative approach, but this was later replaced by a task-based syllabus design, which ideally is informed by the tasks that learners are likely to encounter outside the classroom. Thus, in recent times, task-based language teaching has become the cornerstone of second language pedagogy.

The term *task* has been defined as:

a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning. (Nunan, 2004, p. 4)

Rather than the intuitive tasks of early models, however, the task-based syllabus is now evidence-based through systematic data collection

and analysis, including actual workplace communication (Long, 2005a). Task-based learning has particular relevance for high school VET programs, and for the current project, because it responds to the immediate needs of students and because the concept of task is easily understood by all stakeholders.

The key for task-based language learning and the starting point of this approach is the needs analysis (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006; Long & Norris, 2000) whereby evidence collected from a wide range of sources using different methods (e.g. Cowling, 2007; Long, 2005a) is developed into a set of relevant and assessable learning tasks.

Task-based needs analysis methodology

Contemporary NA studies have benefited from exploiting a range of different sources and methods to obtain a variety of perspectives and increase the validity of the tasks, however, only a few closely examine the efficacy of the methodology (Gilbert, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; Long, 2005a). For example, Jasso-Aguilar (2005, 1999) undertook a study of the English language needs of Waikiki hotel maids (mainly from Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Filipino backgrounds) with a view to introducing a specific language program. Data were collected using participant observation, questionnaires and interviews with maids (insiders), and their supervisor and the hotel's assistant general manager (outsiders). The study foregrounds the merits of participant observation to capture valid communicative experiences and to identify additional potential informants. Triangulation of these data highlighted inconsistencies between insider and outsider perspectives regarding the language demands of the job and raised issues of power in the workplace with respect to whose needs would be served by the intended language program.

Long's (2005a) NA research with flight attendants was undertaken to weigh the benefits of various (insider and outsider) sources, qualitative and quantitative methods, and possible source-

method configurations for identifying tasks. Sources included documents such as the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (US Employment Service, 1991) and manuals, and data from flight attendants (insiders) and graduate student applied linguists (outsiders/experienced travellers). Data consisted of flight attendants' and applied linguists' written introspections and unstructured interviews as well as audio-recordings of workplace discourse.

While workplace manuals and recorded workplace discourse provided accurate information on some tasks, complementary data sources (e.g., written introspections) and methods (e.g., interviews, non-participant observation) were needed to contextualise the language and determine the frequency and importance of tasks. Outsider data were less useful since they focused only on in-flight interactions with travellers, whereas insiders could identify more tasks and workplace settings, provide more technical terms and specific discourse exemplars, and help prioritise the importance and frequency of tasks. Long concludes that combining a variety sources and methods, and strategically ordering them, increases the quantity and quality of the data collected and enhances the NA.

In Gilbert's (2005) study of pre-service and in-service Spanish journalists' English language needs, data were collected using a range of sources, including discourse samples, both written (emails, articles) and oral (telephone conversations), outsider-participants (journalism scholars, company representatives), and domain experts (experienced employees). Methods included unstructured and structured interviews, questionnaires, print- and video-based texts, and a limited number of non-participant observations. Again it was found that domain experts (insiders) yielded higher quality data than outsider sources (company representatives and supervisors) who were unfamiliar with the complex components (sub-tasks) of tasks. Non-participant observation also increased the clarity of sub-task processes. Concurring with Long (2005a), Gilbert highlighted the impor-

tance of carefully ordering methods, noting that following one method (e.g. email collection) with another (e.g. an interview) facilitated the confirmation, amendment and/or augmentation of details and the collection of discourse exemplars. Also important was the sequencing of sub-tasks when presenting and practising them in the classroom.

Cowling's (2007) study of the English language needs of trainees for a large Japanese industrial company also exploited a wide range of sources and methods. Sources consisted of documents, management staff, learners, teachers and senior employees; and methods included an unstructured interview (with a sales director who oversaw the training section), a semi-structured group interview (with company teachers), an open-ended questionnaire (for learners in small groups), and an open-ended structured questionnaire for senior employees. Again non-domain experts (e.g. the sales director) provided the least useful information on tasks, while teachers and students provided important information regarding learners' language skills and concerns. Domain experts (senior employees) provided the most useful and accurate data on tasks. Moreover, these informants were aware of the need to explicitly teach learners about specific issues that frequently arose in cross-cultural encounters, including those for social purposes. Cowling (2007) points out, however, that while not all sources were accurate, 'casting a large net' (p. 429) to collect data facilitated triangulation, enabling information to be confirmed or disconfirmed.

Further to the above broad-based data collection, and for our study population, was the adoption of culturally appropriate methodology. In response to calls from Indigenous researchers to 'decolonise' research on Indigenous peoples (e.g. Smith, 1999; Yunkaporta, 2009; Fredericks & Adams, 2011), in this study we sought to establish the research by building rapport with students through a range of activities, but particularly those relating to sport. We also engaged students, staff and community members through informal interactions or 'yarning' for data collection, ensuring

that identity and world-view were not objectified by non-Indigenous interpretation. 'Yarning is more than just a light exchange of words and pleasantries in casual conversation. A yarn is both a process and an exchange; it encompasses elements of respect, protocol and engagement in individuals' relationships with each other' (Fredericks, Adams, Finlay et al., 2011 p. 13, after Martin, 2008). Fredericks et al. (2011) maintain that '[y]arning is a valuable research tool for Aboriginal people... because it allows for a relaxed familiar communication process within a known and culturally safe environment' (p. 13). Four types of yarning have been identified by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010): social, therapeutic, research topic and collaborative. In research topic yarning, the researcher needs 'to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research' (p. 38). To this end, research assistants were chosen for their prior experience of interacting with Aboriginal people and their ability to build rapport, and were approximately the same age as their particular interviewees.

Drawing on lessons from previous task-based NA research and on recent Indigenous responses to participatory research, the current project sought to:

1. empirically gather data documenting the language and literacy challenges that Aboriginal high school VET students encounter as EAL speakers; and
2. ascertain the Aboriginal students' needs in order that these can then be addressed in the cross-cultural context of the school and so that they can gain the skills that will enable them to participate effectively in the workplace.

If this could be done successfully in this unique context where the learners are Australian Aboriginal high school VET students, the findings of this research would then provide further support for the utility of a task-based NA approach in other contexts.

Australian Aboriginal VET students

Many Australian Aboriginal learners are affected by a constellation of issues associated with socio-economic disadvantage. Factors impacting on their educational achievement include: poor physical health, low social and emotional wellbeing, lack of academic support at home, low level of school attendance and an absence of quality education (Partington & Galloway, 2007; Zubrick et al., 2005). A significant issue that impinges on Aboriginal learners' acquisition of literacy skills, especially for those in remote communities, is that the language of the school is significantly different from their home language (Grote & Rochecouste, 2012; Malcolm & Konigsberg, 2007). About one-third of Aboriginal children living in remote communities speak a traditional language or a creole as their mother tongue, and even those who speak English at home speak Aboriginal English (AbE). As a non-standard dialect of Standard Australian English (SAE), the systemic differences between AbE and SAE at all levels of language, including discourse practices and cultural conceptualisations, can obstruct communication and therefore learning (Malcolm & Grote, 2007; Eades, 2010; Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2000; Sharifian, 2005).

As with many Indigenous populations around the world, Australian Aboriginal students have limited educational success in an Anglo-Australian centric education system. This is evidenced (arguably) by national standardised test results. In Western Australia, where this study took place, only 63.9% of Year 9 Aboriginal students achieved minimum standards in reading, compared with 92.6% of non-Aboriginal learners (ACARA, 2011). Because it is common for weaker students to remain home on national test days, these figures may not accurately represent the whole group (Partington and Galloway, 2007). School completion figures further testify to the inability of schools to address adequately the needs of Aboriginal learners, particularly in remote communities. In 2008 among Australians aged 20–24, only 31% of the Indigenous popula-

tion had completed (post-compulsory) Year 12, compared with 76% of non-Indigenous young people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The consequences of leaving school early are reflected in employment statistics, especially among those in remote communities, where only 41% of Aboriginal young people (aged 15–24) who were not enrolled in education or training programs were employed (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

One of the reasons that Aboriginal students in remote regions leave school early is the lack of high schools in or near their communities. An option for these students is to pursue qualifications in a limited number of trades through branches of their local registered training organisations (RTOs), where some work has begun to integrate language and literacy support into training packages (e.g., DEEWR, 2011b). Another option is to leave their communities to attend residential high schools in regional towns, such as the research site school in the present study. However, the level of language and literacy support provided for Aboriginal students in high school VET programs has not been well documented, despite the apparent need (Barnett & Ryan, 2005; Helme, 2005).

Although some education departments have promoted the approach of explicitly teaching the differences between SAE and AbE through professional development and resources (e.g., Malcolm et al., 1999; Department of Education Western Australia, 2012; Deadly Ways to Learn Consortium, 2000), teacher awareness and understanding about AbE and, in fact, the language learning needs of Aboriginal students more generally, are limited (Oliver et al., 2011). Moreover, high school VET teachers rarely have sufficient background knowledge to teach basic interpersonal communication skills (Hill and Helme, 2005). This is consistent with other research findings exploring the extent to which oral language skills are taught in schools (Oliver et al., 2003), suggesting that teachers tend to focus on competencies that can be easily

assessed, for example, those in highly structured formats such as formal presentations or debates, rather than on the communicative needs of their students.

THE STUDY

The research reported here was initiated after the findings of a pilot study (Oliver & Grote, 2010) highlighted student and staff concerns about learners' English language and literacy skill levels and about the extent to which the school's current support adequately prepared students for the communication demands of the workplace. Given that students were EAL learners, it was determined that a systematic, task-based NA would best serve this purpose. Further, the approach was selected as most appropriate because using the *task* as the non-linguistic unit of analysis would make it more easily understood by all the participants – students, teachers and employers. Moreover, a task-based approach could facilitate the development of a task-based NA *model*, which could be used by each of the VET teachers to design a language and literacy syllabus to be integrated into their VET courses. From an Aboriginal learning point of view, task-based learning was seen as immediately relevant to the students' desire to benefit from equal opportunities in gaining employment. This is evidenced by the students' choice of vocational education. To date, it seems that NA analyses have not been previously applied to Aboriginal vocational instruction. The next section briefly describes the project components.

Setting and participants

The study was undertaken in a Western Australian, independent, Christian, Aboriginal Parent-directed School on the outskirts of a small rural regional centre. Situated on a large tract of agricultural land, the school's campus has numerous outbuildings for classrooms, workshops and sufficient land for a garden and farm animals (cattle and sheep) and for trade activities. As an RTO, the school caters for VET students with various trade aspirations, which meant the study

had to explore the tasks undertaken in a wide-range of job roles (Cowling, 2007; Gilbert, 2005). In addition to teaching English, mathematics and religious studies, the school offers Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) training packages in General Construction; Business and Administration; Hospitality; Tourism; Stock and Station (Rural Operations); Automobile Mechanics; Metals and Engineering; Land, Parks and Wildlife; and Outdoor Recreation. These courses are linked to a Structured Workplace Learning Program (SWLP) which provides learners with relevant work experience in local businesses.

Enrolled in these programs are approximately 70 Aboriginal high school students, aged 14–20 years. Most come from some of Western Australia's remotest communities where traditional languages are spoken, cultures are strong and oral traditions are maintained. Most students, therefore, speak at least one traditional Aboriginal language or creole (namely, Kimberly 'Kriol') as their home language, and AbE as an additional language.

A majority of the 19 staff members have been employed at the school long term, with a core group having more than 20 years' teaching experience. Nine are trained teachers, three of whom received their teaching qualifications prior to employment. The remaining group has trade qualifications, with two having acquired their teaching qualifications during their employment at the school. Although the majority of staff has Anglo-Australian backgrounds, three are Aboriginal, one is from Fiji and another from Papua New Guinea.

Data collection: sources and methods

Ethics application for the study was submitted to Curtin University's Human Ethics Committee and Protocol Approval was received early in September 2011 enabling commencement of data collection. Data sources comprised students, school staff, (potential) employers including local business owners and managers who supported students in SWLP placements, and an officer from the Aboriginal Workforce Development

Centre. In addition, members of the students' home communities were included to ensure that local cultural issues were taken into consideration and that the NA model would be culturally appropriate. RTO lecturers near the students' home communities were also included. Since RTO lecturers work closely with local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employers in the region, they were familiar with employment opportunities, employer expectations and the challenges that students faced accessing employment in or near their communities. Other sources included a range of training materials. An overview of these sources is provided in Table 1.

The qualitative data collection process was non-linear and iterative (Gilbert, 2005; Cowling, 2007). The interviews with community members were purposely informal, usually conducted outside and in the presence of another Aboriginal community member whom the interviewee knew and who was bi-cultural and able to make them feel more comfortable and assist with cross-cultural understandings if necessary. Direct questioning was avoided and a 'yarning' environment was generated focusing on what they saw as the needs of their young people – especially English language skills – to get a job, do the job, and get along with other people at work.

Visits were made to the school monthly (approximately) over an 18 month period and lasted three to four days. Observations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), initially intended as being non-participant (see discussion of this below), were undertaken at the school and in local businesses enabling researchers to observe language and literacy practices in the classrooms, workshops and workplace settings. Handwritten field notes were later typed up to be analysed for emergent themes and to inform the on-going data collection process. Semi-structured informal interviews were conducted with key stakeholders (shown in Table 1) individually or in focus groups. Open-ended prompts were used to encourage interviewees to talk about workplace tasks and the English language and literacy needs of the students to engage effectively at work. When permission was granted, interviews were audio-recorded. Hand-written field notes and notes taken from interviews were typed into electronic files and analysed for emergent themes.

When the non-Aboriginal researchers interviewed AbE speaking participants, they took measures to ensure that no discomfort would be experienced by the interviewees. For example, prior to interviewing students, the research assistant had made multiple visits to the school, talking to students and engaging in sports activities

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF DATA SOURCES

Participant interviewees	No.	Description
Students	12	5 females, 7 males; 16–18 years old
School staff	19	VET teachers, principal, deputy principal, support staff
Employers	10	(Non-Aboriginal) employers associated with the school's SWLP
Employment Counselor	1	Aboriginal Workforce Development Centre (local representative)
RTO lecturers' institution	5	Lecturers providing language and literacy support in region of students' home communities
Aboriginal community members	57	Elders, family and other adult members of students' home communities
Training materials		
<i>Job Guide</i> (DEEWR, 2011a)	1	On-line resource providing lists of duties and tasks associated with various occupations
Sample workplace learning resources	14	Certificate and other training materials provided by VET teachers and RTO lecturers; other relevant documents

with them, which over time enabled him to develop rapport. Although all the researchers had extensive experience working and communicating with AbE speakers, Aboriginal colleagues were always available to assist on the rare occasion when it was necessary.

Collection of training materials yielded two types of texts: learning resources and a job description website. Learning materials were obtained from teachers and RTO lecturers opportunistically, either after observing a class or during an interview. An Australian Commonwealth Government document, sourced through the Internet, provided lists of tasks associated with the various relevant occupations (DEEWR, 2011a). For an overview of the data collection methods, see Table 2.

FINDINGS

This section describes the benefits and limitations of the different sources and methods, and discusses how they were used in the triangulation process.

Data sources: training materials

In terms of identifying workplace language and literacy tasks, the AQF learning resources and support materials (e.g., ANTA, 2003; Aspire Training and Consulting, 2008) provided more detailed information on tasks than the *Job Guide* website (DEEWR, 2011a). These materials included specific literacy tasks (e.g., comparing purchase orders against delivery dockets) and highlighted safety issues (e.g., following cleaning product safety guidelines); they also contextualized relevant technical vocabulary. Because most learning resources were written for a non-Indigenous audience, they assumed familiarity with Anglo-Australian cultural knowledge and prac-

tices. They were also unable to provide the nuanced, contextualized information that the various participants offered regarding the specific learning needs of the Aboriginal students. The *Job Guide* was useful to the extent that it provided a generic inventory of typical responsibilities for the relevant trades and occupations that could be used to confirm data obtained elsewhere. A limitation of both types of sources was that, because of their (necessary) focus on occupational tasks, aspects relating to social interaction at work were absent.

Data sources: VET teachers

Most of the VET teachers were domain experts because of their past trade experience and their current role as trainers in both the theoretical and practical components of the AQF courses. As such, they were informative regarding workplace tasks and, to a lesser degree, the associated required language and literacy skills. They also noted areas that learners had more difficulty with (e.g., estimating measurements). Their interview data were useful in confirming and prioritising tasks such as those pertaining to safety (e.g., equipment and product warnings recommending protective gear). Although the data they provided were not comprehensive, they offered examples of technical terms, noting common variant forms (e.g., carpentry tool names in metric and imperial sizes and colloquial abbreviations such as 'Get me a 2.4!'). VET teachers were also well positioned to distinguish between language and literacy tasks that are essential and others which students could probably get help with as required.

Importantly, the VET teachers noted the need for students to develop their oral language skills for

TABLE 2: OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Methods	Description
Collection/analysis of documents	Sample learning resources; government website document
(Non-participant) observations	Undertaken at school site (classrooms and workshops; sporting events); SWLP workplaces
Semi-structured informal interviews	With students, VET teachers, support staff, employers, RTO lecturers, Aboriginal community members

undertaking workplace duties, for example, to indicate verbally that they understood their supervisor's instructions or to ask clarifying or information-seeking questions when necessary. Oral language for social purposes was also cited by some of these staff members so the students could develop relationships with their non-Aboriginal co-workers. Specifically they nominated the need to verbalise greetings, share personal background information and use 'appropriate' humour. Further, they noted that students needed to develop 'confidence' and be more 'proactive' when talking with non-Aboriginal people. Although some suggested that learners could develop their confidence in speaking English by practising in small groups or pairs, others advocated a 'tough love' approach: 'chuck[ing] them out in the workplace'. In addition, several VET teachers noted a need for learners to work on their 'soft skills', specifically 'work ethic', 'time management' and 'showing enthusiasm' for work. Zamudio and Lichter (2008) maintain that employers generally use the term *soft skills* to mean 'attitude, motivation, work ethic, and [interpersonal] interaction' (p. 567), however, their research suggests that what is often referred to as *soft skills* may be more akin to 'cultural competency and ability to interact with others' (p. 588).

The need for oral language development observed by VET teachers was confirmed by data provided by the English language and literacy support staff. Although they were outsiders in terms of workplace tasks, they were able to articulate students' SAE language and literacy skill levels and needs for workplace vocabulary. Their interview data were also useful in describing the school's approach to language and literacy teaching, which in turn confirmed data obtained through classroom and VET workshop observations. This was useful later when recommendations were made for curriculum modification in response to the findings of the NA itself.

Data sources: RTO lecturers

RTO lecturers were not language and literacy domain experts, nonetheless, as data sources they

offered useful information for confirming a number of assertions made by VET and support staff. This pertained mainly to students' general need for workplace-specific vocabulary, code-switching skills (i.e., the ability to move from one language to another) and general oral English language development, which was seen as a 'first step' to literacy development. Although one lecturer believed that many Aboriginal students' oral English language skills were 'adequate for what we need up here', he noted that even those with good SAE grammar had difficulty making themselves understood to non-Aboriginal people because of their Kriol pronunciation.

Nonetheless, data obtained from RTO lecturers confirmed VET teachers' observations that a key need for these learners is to develop the ability to verbalise, especially regarding whether or not they understood supervisor instructions and to ask clarifying questions when necessary. The RTO lecturers were also able to expand on these data, pointing out that asking clarifying questions can bring about *shame* in Aboriginal learners because posing such questions suggests a lack of understanding and therefore weakness. (The notion of *shame* is discussed in more detail below.) They also noted that asking clarifying questions and other Anglo-Australian discourse practices need to be explicitly taught and practised so learners can speak more confidently with non-Aboriginal employers and co-workers and to code-switch with confidence. This point was initially something that staff at the school demonstrated little explicit awareness about.

Data sources: employers

Most employers interviewed as part of the project operated small businesses such as restaurants, automobile repair shops, child care centres and small stores. Although they were often the manager, being small-scale enterprises they worked alongside their employees, so they could be seen as domain experts. As sources, their data were useful in confirming those obtained from VET teachers regarding the need for students to learn

tool names and other workplace jargon, adding that students might enjoy their work more if they were familiar with trade language. Employers also confirmed data from VET teachers that in some jobs (e.g., aged care, auto-mechanics) learners can get by with minimal written literacy skills, though most employers emphasised the need for some level of oral English language competency, for instance, to enable them to ask questions, give verbal (rather than non-verbal) responses, describe how tasks were completed and give instructions to clients (e.g., children in day care) and to socialise with workmates or clients (e.g., aged care residents). Employers seemed unaware that the students were EAL speakers, in fact one auto-mechanic shop manager reported having to dismiss one student because he would not speak at all. Overall, employers reported 'shyness' or 'quietness' and a need to build 'confidence', as did the VET teachers.

Data sources: students

Data obtained from Aboriginal students provided a different cultural perspective on student behaviour. For example, instances of *shyness*, *quietness*, and *lacking in confidence* were described using the AbE expression *getting shame*. One student explained that the reason many students get shame is a lack of experience talking to non-Aboriginal people. He explained that 'students that didn't grow up around white people, they normally speak their own way of speaking. They haven't been around white kids to learn how they speak [SAE]'. Another student noted that 'communicating with [non-Aboriginal] people is the hardest [part about work]. They don't understand me... It takes weeks to feel comfortable around someone'. He added that talking on the telephone to a non-Aboriginal person was 'frightening', and when he did not understand instructions, 'asking for a different way to explain things' brings about shame. These data confirmed those obtained from the RTO lecturer who hypothesised that students did not like to ask clarifying questions because it showed weakness.

In the AbE research literature, the concept of *shame* is described as feeling shy or embarrassed, usually as a consequence of being singled out from the group, either for praise or criticism (Grote & Rochecouste, 2012; Malcolm & Grote, 2007). A further interpretation is provided by Yunkaporta (2009):

Shame – An Aboriginal social mechanism to maintain balance between independence and relatedness. This Aboriginal English term can equate to notions in Standard English of shyness, embarrassment or the breaking of a protocol or taboo (p. xii).

However, it has been observed that 'there have been huge changes in recent years in relation to people displaying 'shame'... Nowadays, showing 'shame' is more dependent on a student's upbringing (personal communication, J. Herbert)' (Oliver, Rochecouste & Grote, 2013, p. 6). Most students in our cohort, however, had had limited contact with non-Aboriginal people in their home communities, except with those in positions of power (e.g., non-Aboriginal teachers, police officers, doctors). Hence they frequently reported *getting shame*. Students provided suggestions on how they might overcome this situation. One stated that they 'need more time [in class] before they go out to work', pointing out that 'the school doesn't teach us that much about how to talk with other [co-workers]'. They also disconfirmed some VET teachers' view that a 'tough love' approach would work by maintaining that more practice would make it less likely for students to quit their SWPL job: 'start teaching us work stuff, like what someone will say to you'. Additionally, students highlighted a desire for more opportunities to meet and interact with non-Aboriginal young people 'so we can get used to talk the different ways' and 'just get to know the other people'. One noted that 'last term we had a [sports] carnival with other students from town. I was nervous at the start, but it was really useful.' Another suggested meeting SWPL employers before going to the workplace.

Data sources: community

Data from community members confirmed students' experiences of shame when talking to non-Aboriginal people. Rather than a 'tough love' approach, they suggested activities that would help students, not only to engage more confidently with non-Aboriginal people, but to teach them to advocate for their own interests. They suggested workshops to build self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth, instituting student councils in schools to develop leadership skills, and raising teacher expectations of student abilities. However, their data also confirmed concern about English language skills, with some indicating a need to extend their existing code-switching skills. Some community members also took a more functional view of literacy, noting that young people needed to learn how to fill out forms and manage their own bank accounts on the internet. Community members with employment experience also stated the need for young Aboriginal people to develop 'soft skills', with one pointing out the need to explicitly teach students about workplace cultural practices that would be unfamiliar to them, such as how calling in sick needs to be done each day, not just the first day of an illness, and that a question such as 'Can you drive?' is not just one about ability but also about the legality of doing so.

Benefits and limitations of the methodology

As a method, collecting written texts, particularly AQF learning resources and support materials, yielded sources that were useful for the identification of technical terms and workplace literacy tasks of the various trades, for the process of triangulation and for expanding on data obtained from interviews and observations.

Observations at the school were essential to familiarise research team members with the operations of the school, staff and students as well as the VET and language and literacy programs. It facilitated informal chats before and after class as well as during breaks, providing opportunities to

organise interviews with staff and students and obtain copies of learning materials. The method also provided opportunities to observe the approaches to language and literacy teaching and learning; how learning resources were used as well as the discourse practices (e.g., who talks when and how much) used in classrooms, in workshops (e.g., automobile mechanics) and in the field (e.g., checking on cattle delivering calves).

Observing students at their workplace was sometimes difficult because of space considerations, safety issues and employer concerns about interference with their operations. Nonetheless, the limited access that was granted, usually during employer interviews, enabled researchers to observe some communicative interactions that took place, in terms of identifying the speakers, topics and purpose of the interactions as well as the collection of some samples of language use.

Whilst non-participant observation was the intention, in some school settings this was problematic – such as when a fence pole needed to be held, or when students required a licensed driver in the vehicle cab with them, or when the students' well-being or safety was paramount (including during the appearance of snakes, unsettled livestock, etc.). Even so, researchers were able to observe how learners interacted with teachers, employers, co-workers and clientele which facilitated the confirmation of data obtained through interviews. Interviewing was perhaps the most effective data collection method with educators (VET teachers, support staff, RTO lecturers) and Aboriginal community members. While there were diverse views on some issues, these perspectives enriched the data and facilitated the triangulation process, so that data could be confirmed, disconfirmed and augmented through further inquiry. Although students, some community members and Aboriginal staff did not always have the meta-language to talk about specific language needs, the interview method provided a forum for illuminating cultural matters, such as 'getting shame', that can create obstacles to successful transition into the workplace. The interviews also provided the means for

students to express their need and desire for more classroom practice to help them overcome shame or at least better prepare them for the workplace.

Several Aboriginal community members provided important information about their desire for young people to improve their SAE skills which would enhance work opportunities that they themselves had not had. Moreover, their interviews highlighted a more holistic understanding (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; Zubrick et al., 2005) of Aboriginal young people's needs in their future roles as family and community members (e.g., computer skills to enable them to manage their bank accounts on-line and SAE language skills to communicate their interests).

Finally, it should be noted that making multiple visits and spending time to build relationships and rapport prior to the data collection and exercising cultural understanding during them were critical to ensuring that valid and reliable data could be collected. Establishing positive relationships with students and community members allowed them to feel comfortable about expressing their views. As such, the collection of data was based as much on relationship development as it was on methodological approach.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to describe the merits of employing a task-based approach to a second language needs analysis. The study shows that such an approach facilitated the use of naturalistic methods (document collection, unstructured interviews, non-participant observation) while keeping the data collection process focused on identifying needs and tasks. As such, needs could be identified from written texts and used to elicit information from interviewees who came from different professional and cultural backgrounds, with varying levels of education. Tasks emerging from these needs were also observable so could be recorded with some degree of validity and reliability, and used for future syllabus planning and for designing language learning tasks that addressed the functional and cultural needs of the learners.

Collecting data from a variety of sources and using different methods over a period of time proved useful in yielding a large quantity of data which could then be triangulated to enhance the validity of the findings. While each source and method (and combinations of them) had their strengths and weaknesses, they complemented one another. For example, the need for oral language to ask clarifying questions about an assigned task and for social purposes was absent in the written documents, but emerged in interview data obtained from various sources and confirmed in non-participant observations in the workplace. In addition, the methodology was not only systematic, but respectful to the Aboriginal participants: one that built upon relationships and cultural sensitivity. 'Casting a large net' (Cowling, 2007, p. 429) to collect data from community members also raises issues as to whose needs are being served (Belcher, 2006; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005). For example, while community members' data demonstrated a resolve for their young people to advance their language and literacy skills in SAE so that they could obtain employment, they also wanted their young people to develop other practical skills that would improve their personal lives and those of their families and communities.

Overall, therefore, the needs analysis methodology adopted in this project was extremely useful for documenting the language and literacy needs of EAL Aboriginal high school VET students. As indicated by previous studies, the multiple sources of data available to the researchers provided unique perspectives. In this case, the need to up-skill future generations of Aboriginal people for community success and continuity would also be addressed by their gaining employment skills.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for the pilot study was provided by Australian Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA); an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (in partnership with AISWA) underwrote the main study. Debra Bennell advised us on cultural matters; we would like to acknowl-

edge and express our thanks for her contribution. We are also most grateful to all our participants who willingly provided such a rich set of data.

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