Applied Language Learning

Research Article

Assessing the Needs of Foreign Language Professionals at a UK Government Department: A Case Study

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Graduates who typically have L1 English, have majored in one foreign language (FL, L2) or more at university and have gone on to occupy FL posts in the UK civil service have reported mismatches between their pre-employment L2 learning and the tasks they face in the workplace. Such reported divergences in UK civil service capability have not, however, been investigated in any detail to date. Correspondingly, to provide a more informed picture of the knowledge gaps of (typically) graduate language professionals working at a UK government department, a qualitative needs analysis was undertaken involving participants who principally carry out transcription and translation tasks into English from an L2. The needs analysis identified seven key gap subjects – stylistic understanding; slang; dysphemism/swearing and euphemism; humour; language and culture; multilingualism; and discourse analysis – but also pinpointed narrower questions vis-à-vis each gap subject that participants reported to merit particular attention. Examination of both the key gaps and narrower questions suggests that more formal familiarisation with subjects such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics and other linguistic disciplines vis-à-vis FL use would give graduate FL professionals more informed analytical scaffolding for exploring the seven gap subjects. Furthermore, insofar as the gap subjects and narrower questions are identified as important needs in their own right, the study's results suggest that knowledge of linguistics and associated disciplines is occupationally relevant. While the study is small in scale, its results lend support to calls to better integrate linguistics subjects into FL learning, including within professional development and higher education.

Keywords: *Needs analysis, Language for Specific Purposes, foreign language learning, curriculum design, professional development*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years concerns have been voiced by language professionals in a number of UK government (hereafter HMG – 'His Majesty's Government') departments that the foreign language (FL, L2) tasks assigned to them are sometimes inconsistent with the linguistic and cultural knowledge base formed during their pre-employment language learning (personal communications, p.c.). These language professionals, who typically have L1 English and have majored in one FL or more in university bachelor's/Honours programmes, predominantly transcribe and/or translate FL material into English. They report that colleagues with little-to-no FL experience frequently assume that they possess greater authority regarding their language, culture and society of professional interest than is typically acquired during undergraduate studies (p.c.). Assumptions might be made, for instance, that subtle questions of inference, nuance and (in)directness are covered in detail when FLs are being learned when this might not be the case.

An illuminating example of such reported divergences in FL programme content and the knowledge base required in one workplace can be seen in the results of an informal survey at one HMG department in June 2019. A questionnaire asked 106 graduates of 27 UK universities whether their FL degree (major) programme had sufficiently prepared them for professional language work – typically transcription and translation from the FL into English – in the organisation.[1] Table 1 shows the results (p.c.). It is worth noting that these survey data do *not* form part of the needs analysis exercise on which the present article is based – the needs analysis described herein was conducted in 2017. Be that as it may, the 2019 survey results are instructive where reported mismatches are concerned. They suggest low levels of academic attention paid to, and a perceived lack of professional preparedness regarding, certain important subjects relevant to FL work in the given workplace. More specifically, they suggest low levels of instruction and assessment in language variation, linguistics, discourse analysis, professional translation, and language as used in occupational contexts across the relevant FL programmes as a whole. Indeed, only about 8% of teaching and 7% of testing was reported to address linguistics and discourse. If accurate, these figures, together with those for teaching language variation (5%), teaching professional approaches to translation and interpreting (8%), and the study of applied language skills in occupational contexts (0%) suggest that dedicated analysis of significant aspects of real-life language use and professional application were absent from or under-addressed in many UK FL programmes.

Table 1
Reported FL Degree Programme Coverage and Graduate Preparedness for Employment (N=106)

Subjects	Approx. % proportion of teaching dedicated to subjects in programme	Approx. % of assessment dedicated to subjects	Approx. % of graduates who felt prepared for language work in the organisation
Speaking; understanding speech in the L2 across topics	20	19	51
Understanding written text	26	31	59
Linguistics and discourse	8	7	36
Variation in usage (e.g., register, dialect)	5	2	39
Culture (literature, film, history)	31	32	57
Professional approaches to translation and interpreting	8	9	46
Applied language in professional contexts (e.g., purchasing, law)	0	0	No figure given

Why such gaps or emphases in programme content existed (at least in the eyes of the survey participants) was not examined. There could be many reasons, and the study was more indicative than definitive. However, some considerations might well apply, singly or in combination. Some instructors might primarily associate employability with lexicogrammatical knowledge (Canning, 2009) and/or de-accentuate or overlook other competences integral to successful L2 communication (Amaya, 2008; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Correa, 2014; Roever, 2009; Sykes & Cohen, 2018). Additionally, some FL programme developers might not view linguistics (e.g., syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, as well as associated disciplines such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, translation and linguistic anthropology) as relevant (Correa, 2014; Hornsby, 2003) or sufficiently important. Some departments might choose not to offer linguistics within FL programmes through political (Coleman, 1988), systemic, resource or other constraints (Hyland, 2009; Miñana, 2017; Paesani, 2017). Gaps in knowledge or training might also prevent staff from adapting to evolving demands (Lomicka & Lord, 2018; Ryshina-Pankova & Byrnes, 2017). Finally, some instructors might rely heavily on more traditional textbooks (Maxim, 2004) or resist change (Lomicka & Lord, 2018; Maxim, 2004). Other factors might also obtain, of course.

Whatever the causal dynamics, the 2019 survey results pointed to perceptions that the respective university FL programmes as a whole paid insufficient attention to important questions of FL use such as linguistic variation and to related occupational practice such as professional approaches to translation, to name but two topics. These gaps in attention were correspondingly felt to have had implications for language professional preparedness for undertaking FL tasks allocated in the workplace. This can be inferred through certain data in the last column of Table 1 – for instance, only 36% reported feeling prepared for tasks in respect of their knowledge of linguistics and discourse – although results for preparedness varied across subjects and course content was not specified beyond the topic level.[2]

The question that lies at the heart of the illustrative 2019 survey – of how aligned university FL programmes are with the needs of language professionals in a particular workplace – resonates strongly in this article. In particular, the article discusses the results of a small-scale needs analysis at one HMG department in 2017 to ascertain its language professionals' specific linguistic and cultural development needs (thus going into more detail than the 2019 survey, for example). It explores the reported disconnect between the skills, knowledge and competences required of the language professionals and those learned primarily in higher education, and why mismatches might occur. Finally, it considers potential implications for higher education and employers.[3]

The Study: Research Questions

In 2017 an anonymous HMG department conducted a needs analysis to understand the professional development requirements of its language professionals. The questions posed were:

- Did pre-entry FL and cultural learning equip graduates/other newcomers sufficiently for FL work in the organisation?
- If not, what were the most important gaps that language professionals discerned in their own and others' knowledge?

These questions led to a third: How might any results be acted upon? The thinking was that if, when joining the organisation, FL majors had analytical repertoires that only *partly* matched the knowledge required in post, how might their needs be captured and acted upon? Here *acted upon* meant: (a) the potential development of in-house or combined internal/external language instruction to bridge gaps; and (b) contributing to any UK debate concerning the language and culture supply chain, particularly from higher education to employment.

Methods, Procedure, and Participants

The Value of Needs Analysis

Needs encompass "learners' goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, the situations they will need to communicate in, and the genres most often employed in them … [they] can involve what learners know, don't know, or want to know" (Hyland, 2009, p. 204). Needs can be complex, multifaceted and emergent (Bocanegra-Valle, 2015; Coleman, 1988; Hyland, 2009) and conceptually conflicting (Liu et al., 2011).

Needs analysis is a vital component of curriculum development. It can entail several methods, including questionnaire surveys, student learning journals, interviews and participant observation (for more see Bocanegra-Valle (2015); Brown (2009); Long (2005); Serafini et al. (2015)). Once learner needs are determined, appropriate objectives can be identified and a syllabus designed. The identification of teaching and testing approaches, development of teaching materials and evaluation of a “defensible curriculum” (Brown, 2009, p. 269) – one that is valid, relevant and meets learner and instructor needs – can then follow (Brown, 2009; Hyland, 2009; Long, 2005; Trace et al., 2015).

Needs analysis can support different levels and types of provision. It can inform required language capacity at national or societal levels (Brecht & Rivers, 2005); the needs of specific employers (e.g., Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2008; Serafini et al., 2015); or improvement in university language courses (e.g., Marina et al., 2019; Zakaria et al., 2017). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is undergirded by a strong needs analysis literature that includes occupationally-directed learning – for example, English for business, healthcare, science and technology, education, and the hospitality sector, among others (Serafini et al., 2015). Although the corresponding literature set is weaker for languages other than English, its research base has nonetheless grown (for more see Hyland, 2009 and Trace et al., 2015).

Procedure and Participants

To determine the gaps in language professionals’ knowledge bases, 36 language professionals from a single HMG department were interviewed as part of a formal needs analysis. To work in the organisation in question, the language professionals had to possess a bachelor’s/Honours degree in a FL (or equivalent experience) and pass entry tests in transcription and translation into a high standard of English. Once employed, they translated and/or transcribed from one or more L2 into English: some individuals worked with more than one L2, though it was more common to work with one L2 only. Among the subjects addressed in work tasks were serious crime, terrorism and military topics. The department made extensive use of its FL and culture capability. Because this capability was consistently in demand, time was limited for engaging participants for research purposes. Therefore, a multistage procedure involving different contributors was undertaken involving participant observation, literature review and group interviews.

Stage One: Background research was conducted to define the professionals’ linguistic and cultural learning needs and work context. This involved (a) direct observation informed by the author’s 15+ years of performing L2 (Russian) language tasks in the department – translating, transcribing, training, and quality checking others’ language outputs (i.e., checking the accuracy of others’ transcripts and translations); (b) direct experience (5+ years) of setting tasks and assessing performance levels required of language professionals on the organisation’s behalf; and (c) reviewing documentation outlining language role descriptions, including types of language work per role and expected proficiency (e.g., some professionals translated from an L2 while others checked those outputs). The review was augmented by paperwork describing the gradated proficiency levels assigned to language professionals and how associated assessments were undertaken per criteria defined by the department’s own language community.

On the basis of this research, six broad gaps were identified as areas where language professionals lacked key conceptual scaffolding to support their L2 work: structured knowledge of discourse analysis, stylistic understanding (including non-standard varieties, stylistic appropriateness), slang (as social dialect/practice), swearing/dysphemism and euphemism, humour, and the intersection of language and culture. In each case and in combination, the assessed learner needs had strong pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions – for instance, what L2 communicants look to accomplish situationally through swearing or humour. The definition of "language and culture" was intentionally broad and included sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic differences in communication. While the six gaps represented broad subject areas, it was determined that subsequent focus group examination would pinpoint more precise focal points for deliberation, should others agree about the gaps.

Stage Two: A 60-minute unstructured group interview was held with a convenience sample of five Russian language leads after all senior Russian language professionals had received an email seeking volunteers. The informants were known to the researcher and one another, and constituted 'expert insiders' (Long, 2005, p. 22) able to introspect about typical linguistic and cultural learning needs and their implications for the resultant product (transcripts and translations). Each had 10-30+ years of professional experience of producing transcripts and translations in the department; working with relevant L2 discourse genres; training and mentoring; and quality checking others' work. None had mother tongue (L1) Russian; however, all approximated to Level 4 on the Interagency Round Table (ILR) framework for translation and Level 3+ or 4 in audio translation (transcription).

The researcher encouraged open and spontaneous discussion to understand what the informants saw as key knowledge gaps. Notes were taken contemporaneously and subsequently assessed. Unaware of the researcher's initial conclusions, the participants determined that pre-entry learning brought significant gaps – the six topics identified in Stage One, less euphemism. However, they added another: understanding multilingualism. None had formally learned discourse analysis – i.e. "the close reading of *actual use of language along with other multimodal resources* for the purposes of dissecting its structures and devising its meanings" (Waring, 2018, p. 9; original emphasis) – although all agreed on its methodological value when it was raised and explained.

Stage Three: Time constraints precluded repeating Stage Two across analogous language communities. Consequently, a focus group was formed of ten lead language professionals representing different language communities across the department. The communities were: East Asian languages (Mandarin Chinese and Korean), African languages, Iranian languages,[4] Arabic dialects and Indo-Aryan languages.[5] These insider 'domain experts' (Long, 2005, p. 27) constituted a convenience sample, having responded to an email seeking senior-level volunteers.

The communities represented varied in composition. Some had small numbers of native speakers of their FLs of interest; however, most language professionals across the communities either held a bachelor's/Honours degree in their L2(s), or – less commonly – learned them *ab initio* through private sector and/or in-house instruction. It was recognised that, where language communities had such L1-L2 diversity, the research question on whether pre-entry learning equipped language professionals for FL work in the organisation could elicit diverging insights. At the same time, however, there was also room for convergence, such as language professionals lacking structured knowledge of disciplines such as discourse analysis, regardless of their background.

The Stage Three focus group examined the Russianists' determinations from Stage Two as part of an incremental analytical approach (Brown, 2009; see also Coleman, 1988, and Zhu &

Flaitz, 2005, on sequencing focus groups and remits). Participants were free to confirm, challenge, amend, reject and/or replace the Russianists' findings in two 60-minute sessions. Discussion showed high levels of participant engagement and was facilitated by the same moderator as Stage Two (the author). The moderator's main role was to present and – where needed, explain – the Stage Two (Russianists') findings; encourage open deliberation and exchange; and probe for clarification. Notes were taken both contemporaneously and post-interview. The Stage Three group confirmed the Russianists' gaps and corresponding needs as important, valid and relevant to language communities department-wide.[6]

Stage Four: Four focus groups were arranged to elaborate the needs confirmed in Stage Three. They comprised convenience samples of representatives from four language communities – Russian (11 participants), Indo-Aryan languages (4), Iranian languages (4) and Chinese (3). The last two were selected partly due to their greater use of *ab initio* learners and the Indo-Aryan group for its mix of L1 and L2 speakers. Each informant volunteered to participate after a general call to their respective language communities, with one individual (in the Indo-Aryan group) previously involved in Stage Three. Unlike Stage Three, this phase comprised participants with greater variation in professional experience and competence, including staff that had completed university or *ab initio* instruction 1-2 years previously. It also involved two native speakers in the Indo-Aryan group. Interviewee competence spanned ILR Levels 3 to 4+ in translation and 2+/3 to 4+ in audio translation. All focus groups were set the same questions, and sessions – conducted over three months – lasted 60-90 minutes in total per group. Discussion was open and enthusiastic and led by a moderator. Notes were taken contemporaneously and *post hoc*. The more elaborated needs identified by the Stage Four groups are outlined in Results.

Merits and Demerits of the Data Collection Method

The use of participant observation and focus group interviews meant that the data collection methodology was qualitative. This presented some methodological challenges. The first concerned consistency in the definition of perceived needs. Learners and their needs are not homogenous (Coleman, 1988). Needs "mean different things to different participants, carry marked political implications" and are influenced by stakeholders' teaching and learning beliefs and agendas (Hyland, 2009, p. 204). It is not unknown for some studies to point, for example, to divergences about desired degree programme content between faculty (Marina et al., 2019; Maxim, 2004), while some students (Lenard & Pintarič, 2018) and educators (Canning, 2004) have judged professional relevance differently from employers.

Secondly, informants' views of their own capability entailed self-assessment. If uniquely subjective, self-assessment can occasion questions about data reliability. Its accuracy can be influenced by factors such as personality traits, learning style, previous learning experience, L2 proficiency and skill assessed (e.g., Birjandi & Bolghari, 2015; Blanche, 1988; Brantmeier et al., 2012).

Finally, a lack of quantitative data might limit representativeness and validity. Two of the strengths of questionnaire-based surveys, for example, are that they can enable larger cohorts to be surveyed and their uniformity can bolster reliability (Liu et al., 2011; Long, 2005). Similarly precluded were other methods such as the testing of departmental language professionals to acquire statistical data for error analysis.

Despite these challenges, however, it was decided that the limitations of a qualitative-only approach could be satisfactorily mitigated:

- Firstly, regardless of their L2(s), each participant typically undertook the same type of transcription/translation duties and was accredited a proficiency level based on the same overarching departmental assessment criteria by multiple third parties.[7] This helped to ensure cohort consistency and validity in the identification of local and/or wider needs;
- Secondly, interviewing – sometimes accompanied by other methods such as observation – has been successfully applied in other studies of learner motivation and curricular relevance (e.g., Galishnikova, 2014; Kember et al. 2008; Talif and Noor, 2009);
- Thirdly, some research suggests that advanced L2 learners *can* produce accurate self-assessment, and if anything might tend to underestimate their capability (Blanche, 1988; Brantmeier et al., 2012);
- Fourthly, a combined data collection approach offered triangulation of sources and methods (e.g., Bocanegra-Valle, 2015; Brown, 2009; Long, 2005; Serafini et al., 2015).

No less importantly, the participation of insider experts at each stage was also integral to establishing valid and relevant needs (Long, 2005). Stage Two and Three participants in particular had typically reached ILR Level 4 or 4+ in translation, 3+, 4 or 4+ in audio translation (sometimes in multiple L2s) and enjoyed 10+ years' experience of FL work in the organisation: they knew their communities' patterns of language use (Coleman, 1988), work contexts and needs. Moreover, they had considerable experience of in-house language training and knew the professional development and other challenges facing the department's language community more broadly. Their ability to identify and situate individual and shared community needs within larger landscapes as informed participant observers in their own right was pivotal.

RESULTS

Moderators reviewed the Stage Four data independently and then jointly to identify individual and recurring themes. Focus group responses are outlined in Tables 2-7.

Stylistic Understanding

Table 2 shows the wide-ranging questions that arose when participants considered questions of stylistics, including stylistic strength, formality and register, in their respective languages.

Table 2
Perceived Needs – Stylistic Understanding

Language/ Language Family	Comments
Russian	• What are the differences in colloquial Russian, *prostorechie* (a socially stigmatised demotic variety that indexes speakers as uneducated or uncouth) and swearing?
Mandarin Chinese	• Differences between official vs. unofficial, formal vs. informal Mandarin: only some levels of style understood by participants • Familiarity with genre (structures, registers); what is typical or missing? • Colloquial language: recognising its categorisation, form and function • How to understand informal language of all types to interpret interpersonal politics and relationships • Perceptions of Chinese accent/dialect (non-Beijing/Shanghai) • The relationship between style and power • Understanding choices stylistically (e.g., implicit meaning, dropped subjects)
Iranian	• Why educated speakers use colloquial language • How to better understand differences in register and what this says about speakers and their aims • How and why communicants accommodate to others stylistically
Indo-Aryan	• Understanding the use of swearing and euphemism from a stylistic perspective • Conventions regarding language and appropriateness

Needs largely concerned understanding differences between formal and informal language, and between varieties of the latter, chiefly because questions of register and variation were previously un- or under-addressed. The Chinese group understood high and formal literary registers such as those present in classical Chinese, official documents and newspapers. This meant, however, a weaker grasp of vernacular usage found online or in speech. The Russianists had difficulty understanding differences between some non-standard varieties, as did the Indo-Aryan and Iranian groups. For example, only Standard Pashto had been taught in courses, which were *ab initio* and somewhat limited in stylistic scope. The question of language ideologies was also apparent insofar as some participants associated the use of (normative) standard varieties with educated L2 speakers; non-observance of standard rules correspondingly pointed to educational deficit. This was the case with the Iranian group, for instance, who saw a link between Standard Pashto and education. Pashto speakers who used a lower, "bastardised form of the standard" with different grammatical and syntactic characteristics were believed to lack in education.

The Iranian and Chinese contributors effectively raised questions of language variation in wanting to better comprehend colloquial usage, including by educated speakers, and accommodation to speakers of other varieties (Iranian). These, along with other observations, effectively foregrounded sociolinguistic matters in this section. Finally, the Chinese group's need to understand how language can convey authority related to notions of power and rhetoric.

Slang

Table 3 outlines the points considered when interviewees explored the subject of slang in their language(s) of professional interest. Questions included motivations and social dimensions of use, among others.

Table 3
Perceived Needs – Slang

Language/ Language Family	Comments
Russian	• What slang is currently used? • How do speakers use slang in different groups/contexts? • Does slang change through time? • Is slang about snubbing the mainstream? • How to translate jargon into appropriate English, e.g., in technical translation (e.g., legalese, official registers)
Mandarin Chinese	• Countercultural usage: why and how is it created? • Does slang involve appropriation? • How to understand Internet Chinese
Iranian	• How to understand what slang is and how it is manifested • Cryptolect: how is meaning hidden?

Indo-Aryan	• How to understand slang and why it is used
	  • Identity?
	  • Group status?
	  • Caste/social stratification?
	• Why is there so much borrowing from other languages in slang?
	• How to understand dialects and their specificity: social, geographic

This subject had generally not been taught in previous instruction (all) – sometimes because L1 educators generally avoided it (Russian). If anything, informants had encountered it during residence abroad (Russian, Chinese, Indo-Aryan), especially in vernacular communication.

When it *was* taught, teaching was considered outdated (Russian). Either way, participants expressed difficulty in identifying it (some confusing social and geographic dialects), in interpreting usage (Internet Chinese) and in understanding its purpose (all groups). Notably, some Iranian language professionals claimed no great difficulty in understanding the semantic meaning of slang items in context, but still lacked a finer understanding of the subject, including in pragmatic terms.

Swearing/Dysphemism and Euphemism

Table 4 includes the questions raised by the groups with regard to dysphemism (mainly described in terms of swearing) and euphemism. Factors identified included, *inter alia*, illocutionary force, motivation, appropriateness and interpretation.

Table 4

Perceived Needs – Swearing/Dysphemism and Euphemism

Language/ Language Family	Comments
Russian	• What is swearing? • What links are there to taboo or other socially unacceptable behaviour? • When is swearing appropriate? • What impact does it/is it designed to have, if any? • Is there an in-group/out-group dimension to its use? • How to translate swearing: the function of the word/phrase and how to convey this

Mandarin Chinese	• How to evaluate swearing and emphatic force
	• When/in what context is swearing used? To express frustration?
	• What/who is the target of insults?
	• How to gauge level of insult
	• Euphemism: how to identify it, especially in colloquial Chinese
	• Why is euphemism used?
	    • To avoid conflict?
	    • To avoid showing feelings, keep or appear composed?
	    • To test the water to get another's point of view?

Iranian	• What are the functions of swearing, and why do some people use it and others not? • Non-swearing dysphemism, especially references to animals: why does it occur? • Euphemism: why is there a lack of euphemism in some interactions?
Indo-Aryan	• What is the emotional aspect of swearing? • Is it used for emphasis and intensification? • How does swearing relate to taboo in Punjabi? • What are the gender and cultural aspects of swearing?

- Women as targets of swearing
- Perceptions of (young) women swearing in Punjabi
- What cross-cultural differences are there in women swearing in Punjabi vs. mainstream British cultures?
- Euphemism: its functions
- Talking about sex: which euphemisms are used?

These subjects had similarly not featured in previous learning, mainly for sociocultural reasons (all). Teachers of Iranian languages, for example, were guarded and uncomfortable talking about expletives: classroom discussion was considered inappropriate, in part due to graphic and/or sexual dimensions. The same tensions applied to Russian, Chinese and Indo-Aryan instruction. Consequently, the participants had encountered dysphemism, including swearing, *ad hoc*: in personal encounters, in-country immersion, and watching television (Russian, Chinese). So, while it was fairly easy to identify swearing semantically, it was difficult to understand why expletives were used and what illocutionary force obtained. Cultural sensitivity gave L1 speakers of Indo-Aryan languages solid pragmatic anchoring, but for others across languages the matter was less clear-cut. What taboos and transgressions were involved (Russian, Indo-Aryan)? What did the *use* of swear words and phrases mean (Russian, Iranian, Indo-Aryan) and what was their impact (Russian, Chinese, Iranian)? Who was able to use them, with whom and when (all)? What differences were there in levels of insult (Chinese, Indo-Aryan)? What other forms of dysphemism were there (Iranian)? How did swearing and dysphemism compare cross-culturally (Russian, Indo-Aryan)?

Some informants stated that they were not entirely unsighted, however. Some participants working with Farsi felt able to instinctively understand from the context that someone was swearing and could determine why – this was working, admittedly, with a low level of intuition and no formal conceptual framework to guide interpretation.

Discussions also showed this subject interleaving with others. For instance, questions of multilingualism and language ideologies arose where Urdu was described as a more formal, respectful language, while Punjabi was a vernacular language of less educated, agricultural workers. As “the best language to swear in,” Punjabi enabled more emotive expression. Moreover, questions of gender came into scope in two respects: (a) where targeting women (e.g., mothers, wives) through swearing was considered especially insulting in Indo-Aryan cultural practice; and (b) the right to swear. Although swearing in Punjabi was taboo, men could do so. Such behaviour by young women was regarded, however, as not “virtuous”. Understanding speakers’ latitude to use taboo terms or other dysphemisms and when rules might be broken was important.

Euphemism was also considered relevant. Understanding its function, what topics it typically referenced (e.g., sex in Punjabi, death in Urdu) and how it was conveyed (understatement, borrowing) was salient for those working with Chinese, Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages.

Humour

Table 5 outlines questions raised by the participants in respect of humour. These included, among other things, communicant intention, interpersonal implications, and recognition of typical humour types and targets.

Table 5
Perceived Needs – Humour

Language/ Language Family	Comments

Russian	• What is Russian humour?
	• What is “different funny”?
	• What are communicants trying to achieve?
	    • Does humour involve strategies to optimise social situations?
	    • How is humour used to negotiate relationships?
	• Why and how are stereotypes used (e.g., racism)?
	• How to translate puns and language play

Mandarin Chinese	• How to understand meaning: it can seem clear that something is a joke or funny due to laughter, but what does the speaker actually mean and what makes it funny? • How to recognise and understand humour online • How to identify and understand humour through cultural allusion and the use of stereotypes

Iranian	• Why a speaker finds something funny
	• Who are the typical targets of humour/jokes?
	• How to understand levels of formality and relationships when humour is used
	• What are the interpersonal dynamics?
	    • Identity?
	    • Common values?

Indo-Aryan	• What kinds of humour are there? • Why is stating the obvious funny? • Role of antithesis in humour; why people often criticise one another and laugh? • How is humour used to build rapport? • What contextualisation cues are used for humour?

This subject too was not typically studied pre-employment in any dedicated way (Russian, Chinese, Iranian languages). Understanding humour is difficult for language professionals, including heritage speakers with limited contact with their background culture(s). The key needs here concerned how to understand cultural allusions; what made an utterance funny; and what a social actor was trying to accomplish. The study of stereotypes, personal or social characteristics and typical targets was proposed by some informants as a possible gateway to better understanding (Russian, Chinese, Iranian), as was humour for social rapport.

Notably, the interpretation of humour sometimes rested on identification of laughter. Those working with Chinese and the languages of Iran felt able to discern when an interactant found something funny or amusing. However, different types of and conventions regarding laughter went unmentioned but undoubtedly require consideration.

The Intersection of Language and Culture

Table 6 shows the topics raised by the interviewees when addressing language and culture. The group identified a wide range of questions – for example, the role of religion in certain cultures, how language is used to reflect (and/or construct) culture and identity, recognising cultural practices, assumptions about the Other and rules of linguistic politeness.

Table 6
Perceived Needs – Language and Culture

Language/ Language Family	Comments
Russian	• What is culture? • Identifying different cultural environments • Understanding cultural narratives and perceptions • How to recognise and adopt Russian communicative cultural practices • What rules of interpretation are there in communication? • For instance, what does it mean if we believe Russian speakers to be shouting? • What are politeness rules? • What are the appropriate forms of address and history behind them? • What is the importance of kinship? • What can linguistic relativism tell us?
Mandarin Chinese	• More detail needed about written language and culture: how they correspond to social status, level of education, etc. • How, if at all, does the grammar and vocabulary of the language characterise its speakers? • How is language used to create and reflect identity? • Is language used to reflect or create imagined communities? • What links are there between language and political culture? • What resistance is there to Western practices in Chinese language and culture? • Identifying and interpreting stance in Chinese: are there cultural angles?
Iranian	• How to learn the cultural insights normally picked up during a visit/year abroad (for non-higher education *ab initio* students)

	• How/why do Pashto speakers try to avoid silence by phatic communion (e.g., greetings, even if this means repetition)? • How does language reflect the culture of individual speech communities? • What are the religious and ideological aspects of language use? • What are the gender dimensions of language use in society?
Indo-Aryan	• How is language used to create, present and reflect ideas of South Asian culture and ethnicity? • How is language used for social stratification? • How are identities performed, e.g., British Asian youth culture and use of slang? • Social identity: how are conformity and belonging represented linguistically by speakers of Indo-Aryan languages? • What assumptions do "host societies" have about smaller ethnic groups? • What are the use and perception of stereotypes based on? • How to understand essentialism and how language is used to reflect individual experience and heritage (the inaccurate homogenisation of "Indian culture") • The merits of collectivist vs. individualist labels for understanding South Asian societies • The merits of Hofstede's analysis for understanding South Asian cultures • The role of religion in South Asian cultures • Cryptolect within South Asian cultures: how and why?

No definition of culture was given to groups to avoid constraining discussion. However, certain trends are noteworthy. The first is that, in their definitions, informants often cited various facets of cultural practice encountered in pre-employment instruction. Informants often referred to *Big C* cultural practices such as the study of film, literature, music and history (Russian, Indo-Aryan), although they believed them to represent only a certain snapshot of cultural practice. Those who had learned Iranian languages *ab initio* claimed to have received no formal instruction in cultural studies. They were thus keen to capture the insights they believed to be assimilated during university immersion learning.

The Chinese group differed somewhat in their appreciation of linguistic and cultural cross-currents as they had studied how the written language conveyed social status, level of education, etc. while also constituting a form of cultural practice. They had also briefly explored how culture is manifested phraseologically in everyday Mandarin (e.g., asking how someone is – literally translated as "Have you eaten?").

The question of gender arose. Those working with Iranian languages articulated a need to know more about gender in sociocultural practice and convention: certain societies were male-dominated and males were reported to have greater communicative latitude, including vis-à-vis swearing.

Chinese, Iranian and Indo-Aryan language participants reported a need to understand the function and role of stereotypes – in the Indo-Aryan case to explore host society assumptions about South Asian cultures and raise awareness of the perils of essentialism. Heritage speakers in this group underlined the need to understand and challenge cultural bias in FL analysis, and to understand how native speakers situationally construct, project and negotiate multiple identities.

Comments across all seven subjects concerned culture in one respect or another, and related to questions of sociolinguistics and linguistic and cultural anthropology. Some examples are identity, agency and whether a language can characterise speakers (Indo-Aryan, Chinese); language and social stratification (Chinese, Indo-Aryan); gender (Iranian); ethnicity (Indo-Aryan); religion and ideology (Iranian, Indo-Aryan); different cultural environments or communities (Russian, Chinese, Iranian); and language, power and political culture (Chinese).

Understanding pragmatics also emerged as a need: in one case this meant knowing more about linguistic politeness (Russian); in others rhetoric and stance (Chinese) and interpreting silence (Iranian, Indo-Aryan). The participants similarly articulated a need to learn about assumptions that groups share and how these influence practice, including communication (Russian, Iranian). Finally, cultural aspects of the more conscious non-disclosure of information interested the Indo-Aryan and Iranian groups.

Multilingualism

Table 7 shows the questions identified by participants when considering multilingualism. Propositions concerning (lexical) borrowing also featured in this discussion. The motivations behind code-switching and borrowing featured especially prominently.

Table 7

Perceived Needs – Multilingualism (and borrowing)

Language/ Language Family	Comments
Russian	• None were identified
Mandarin Chinese	• Why loan words and ephemeralisms are used in Chinese • Multilingualism and code-switching: functions and forms
Iranian	• What are communicants trying to achieve through code-switching? • For example: code-switching involving Dari, Urdu and English with Pashto • What are the social statuses of different languages or dialects? • Why does borrowing occur, especially from English? • Why do communicants use synonyms from another language to clarify?

Indo-Aryan	• Why do communicants switch codes?
	    • Identity?
	    • Solidarity?
	    • Specificity?
	    • Nuance?

- Does a word from another language carry a specific meaning or sense that can only be conveyed by that word?
- Why does borrowing occur?
    - To show level of education?
    - To show authority?
    - For prestige?
- What is the role of religion in multilingual contexts?

This topic was sometimes conflated with borrowing. Although it did not elicit any requirements from the Stage Four Russianists (although many Russian speakers do live, work and socialise in multilingual environments and the Stage Two group had recommended the subject), it was raised by others – particularly the Iranian and Indo-Aryan groups. These participants needed a deeper appreciation of how social status and power can be signalled through variation in languages/dialects, and of the functions of code-switching and code-mixing more generally.

Lexical borrowing, particularly from English, was noted by the Iranian group, who pinpointed a need to comprehend why communicants used synonyms from other languages. The functional dimensions of borrowing were similarly mentioned by the Chinese and Indo-Aryan groups (e.g., the potential use of borrowed terms to indicate authority).

Discourse Analysis

When outlined to participants in general terms, all agreed on the need for formal study of the subject. None had a background in it. However, they appreciated the potential benefits of understanding Conversation Analysis (e.g., turn-taking, adjacency pairs, preference), Interactional Sociolinguistics (e.g., contextualisation cues) and Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g., the relationship between language and power and the maintenance of ideologies).

Discussion and Implications

Let's recall the study's research questions:

- Did pre-entry FL and cultural learning equip graduates/other newcomers sufficiently for FL work in the organisation?
- If not, what were the most important gaps that language professionals discerned in their own and others' knowledge?
- How might any results be acted upon?

Across Stages Two to Four the answer to the first research question was consistent: pre-entry learning provided a solid enough basis for language professionals to secure employment through passing transcription and translation tests; however, they reported feeling underprepared for many aspects of their jobs.

Concerning the second question regarding learner perceptions of key knowledge gaps, these are outlined in Tables 2-7.

Regarding acting on the results, the following aspects were examined:

- Application of the results across languages and roles;
- Implications for educators;
- Course development to address the gaps (not examined here; see Davie, 2022).

Application of the Results across Languages and Roles

Although the informants had different pre-employment learning experiences through inevitable variations in curricula and life paths, the more precise gaps identified in Stage Four showed consistencies in two respects: in the recurrence of specific questions (e.g., the role of stereotypes for understanding culture), and in the importance of comprehending:

a. what communicants are seeking to achieve;
b. how power and social distance are conveyed and interpreted;
c. the relationship between language variables and social groups;
d. how social actors build and negotiate relationships;
e. the expression and negotiation of identities;
f. 'non-standard' language practices: e.g., ideologies, linguistic form, social and pragmatic meaning;
g. pragmatic force;
h. others' sociocultural conventions and how these influence, are shaped by and are reflected in discourse;
i. cross-cultural and -linguistic comparison and implications for translation.

Subjects a-i suggest that the language professionals would benefit from a structured introduction to disciplines such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis to more profitably investigate the seven overarching topics (slang, multilingualism, etc.) and the associated narrower questions identified in Stage Four (shown in Tables 2-7). Discrete questions such as what slang is and how it might feature in social practice; when, why and with whom interactants might swear and so on can be explored as self-standing questions. However, effective examination inevitably draws discussants to fields such as pragmatics and sociolinguistics for conceptual anchoring and to better understand contexts of use. One can envisage where discussions might throw up concepts such as speech acts, speech aims, overt/covert prestige, identification and language variation, for example. A language-specific or -agnostic course on such subjects would certainly help to provide valuable scaffolding for better understanding the identified gaps.

There is also the question of whether such learning would benefit other HMG language professionals and those outside government. Insofar as the informants applied receptive skills in translating and transcribing from different L2s, their roles differed from those of HMG language professionals using receptive *and* productive skills (speaking, writing) – for example, diplomats who produce HMG messaging for embassy social media accounts, meet foreign officials, participate in media interviews, or engage social groups in an L2. Equally, the informants' job profiles diverged from those requiring productive skills in the private sector.

This distinction, however, is only one factor when comparing across professions. Investigating the seven gap topics (multilingualism, etc.), not to mention the propositions in a-i through disciplines such as sociolinguistics, can benefit other roles. Knowing how identities are manifested in discourse, for instance, is relevant when negotiating social and business relationships, as is recognising linguistic manifestations of power and social distance. Equally, knowing how to compare one's own assumptions and sociocultural norms with those of others is also essential (Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2008), especially as grammatical or lexical errors may lead to fewer adverse consequences in intercultural communication than failures in politeness (Rathmayr, 2008; see also Celce-Murcia (2007)).

Implications for Educators

Several considerations merit attention by educators. The **first** concerns occupational relevance. Tertiary-level FL programmes look to cater for learners with different motivations (Huhtala et al., 2019) and different goals (social, professional, intellectual, etc.). In all these cases relevance is important. In their study of professional programmes, Kember et al. (2008) report that demonstrating the relevance of abstract theories to the real world helps students to understand them; lends authenticity; stimulates; and motivates. The same principle clearly applies to FL learning, both general and occupation-specific.

However, while university departments, national agencies and others in the UK have been increasingly motivated "… to respond to changes in contemporary society and the changing needs of learners, with the aim of making languages more attractive, more accessible and more relevant" (*Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies* (hereafter 'QAA'), 2019, pp. 3-4), the present study suggests that FL major graduates in one organisation felt underprepared for important aspects of L2 work there.

Disconnects between higher education and the workplace are not new, and there have been calls for universities to better attune FL learning to employment needs (e.g., Lancereau-Forster, 2015; Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2008; Marina et al., 2019) – in many cases complementing more general L2 learning. Several benefits have been advanced, including better matching skills and learning to occupational activities such as securing employment (Enkin & Correa, 2018; Marina et al., 2019), navigating informal workplace exchanges (Holmes, 2005; Kaufmann & Grünhage-Monetti, 2003), and dealing with demanding situations (Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2008). Be that as it may, the present study suggests a need for reflection regarding how far FL departments have taken their work "… out into the world and test[ed] it against the pressing issues of our time" (Miñana, 2017, p. 421) and to what extent FL degree outcomes have become "tangible and more than vague 'global citizenship'" (Languages Forum, 2010). Many universities may insist that they already demonstrate relevance, among other outcomes, in majors programmes at bachelor's/Honours level. However, together with the informal 2019 survey (Table 1), the present needs analysis raises questions about how far initiatives to align the professional and academic have come and with what results, or at least how *explicitly* undergraduate FL programme content is linked to and driven by application in the workplace.

A **second** consideration concerns the intimation that FL majors know about and understand the structures, registers and, where appropriate, varieties of the L2, as well as the linguistic principles necessary for L2 work (QAA, 2019, p. 19). This aim aligns to some extent with Wyburd (2011, p. 5), who suggests that UK FL graduates develop "heightened literacy, textual analysis and oracy in [their] mother tongue" by examining grammatical, syntactic and stylistic accuracy, style and register in their L2 through courses involving written language and translation, linguistics, and examination of a wide range of L2 texts (e.g., historical, literary).

While this multifaceted aim is certainly appropriate, the needs analysis suggests that the provision of more formal translation studies, stylistic analysis or linguistics options – e.g., syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, as well as associated disciplines such as sociolinguistics, stylistics, discourse analysis and linguistic anthropology – in UK undergraduate FL programmes is patchy (see also the informal 2019 survey (Table 1)). Joint degree programmes in FLs and linguistics could well be an exception, of course, depending on their content.

Similarly, graduates' ability to "delve beneath surface meaning and to interpret intention" (Wyburd, 2011, p. 7), in line with the QAA's (2019, p. 18) statement that students should be able to "recognise implicit meaning", also requires closer inspection. There are undoubtedly cases where reference works, online data and knowledge of intertextuality and metaphor, for example, can aid interpretation here. However, given the HMG respondents' stated needs, one must question how much undergraduates' L2 metapragmatic awareness is *explicitly* developed (Amaya, 2008; Roever, 2009; Sykes & Cohen, 2018) and how far the QAA statement on implicit meaning actually reaches. The HMG interviewees sought enhanced pragmatic awareness; they saw "language as more than a compilation of the prescriptive grammatical rules that can be found in traditional grammar texts" (Correa, 2014, p. 169). However, their forays into the universe of implicature, inference and indirectness that lies behind the notion of implicit meaning to which the QAA refers appear somewhat limited. The same might be said of discourse analysis. While Wyburd (2011, p. 4) identifies the value of literary, cultural, historical and sociological courses for engendering critical textual analysis, no mention is made of discourse analysis, a centrally important discipline for textual analysis which both aids and leans on the building of metapragmatic ability and pragmatic capacity in an L2 (Amaya, 2008; Roever, 2009; Sykes & Cohen, 2018). Fostering greater awareness of these subjects would certainly help to meet the needs articulated by the given HMG language professionals.

A **final** implication concerns the purpose of universities. How does enhancing the professional relevance of FL programmes relate to the role and objectives of academia? Some might read any substantial recalibration of FL learning towards greater occupational relevance as jeopardising the intellectual and humanistic aims of academic departments or institutions (for more on this discussion, see Doyle (2019); Maxim (2004); Teichler (2016)). In particular, they may perceive a threat to literature and culture courses, and/or to critical thinking. The HMG interviewees, however, neither sought the supplanting of such aims, nor perceived the relevance of university FL programmes in zero-sum terms. If anything, they saw cultural competence as relevant to their professional endeavours. Analysing culture and semiosis in global, local and *glocal* contexts could certainly help to meet their professional needs.

However, as was intimated in the Introduction, to pursue humanistic and intellectual goals while demonstrating professional relevance requires effective communication. The UK's University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and employers have long emphasised the need for collaboration to better align undergraduate FL programmes with workplace demands (e.g., British Academy, 2013; *CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey Report 2019*). Options suggested by the UCML for cultivating productive relationships with employers (and others outside the academy) include, *inter alia*, reciprocal visits to enable staff and students to better appreciate the importance of FLs *and* intercultural knowledge in occupational settings, and employer involvement in guiding curriculum development and/or review (Collis, 2011). Inasmuch as universities would benefit from such cooperation – for example, it might help some educators to recalibrate their approaches and provision as part of ongoing professional development[8] – employers would gain by better appreciating the typical limitations of tertiary-level FL learning and, consequently, the imperative of continuous professional development. Cooperation of this kind might therefore nurture and fine-tune the linguistic and cultural agility that employers require (Cambridge Public Policy Strategic Research Initiative, 2015) and help managers/employers to develop more realistic expectations of employees, where those are poorly understood.

CONCLUSION

Using combined qualitative methods, this study sheds light on knowledge gaps and learning needs that language professionals at one HMG department reported to have arisen due to omissions in pre-entry learning – typically undergraduate FL major programmes. Filling these gaps was considered important for their professional purposes. The gaps identified were: stylistic understanding; slang; dysphemism/swearing and euphemism; humour; the intersection of language and culture; multilingualism; and discourse analysis. Deeper exploration established a more precise set of requirements for each gap subject, but also indirectly illuminated underlying sociolinguistic, pragmatic and other questions that, if investigated, would aid professionals' understanding and analysis. A conclusion to emerge from the analysis was that a fundamental knowledge of linguistics and related disciplines could help to explore competences beyond the linguistic (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 2007) and provide important scaffolding for more informed and productive analysis of the seven gap subjects.

Ultimately, the study represents a single investigation involving 36 language professionals undertaking translation and transcription tasks at an individual UK civil service department. Its results should accordingly be understood within the methodological, institutional and occupational contexts within which they were obtained. For example, in view of constraints on contact time with participants, the present study by necessity aimed to determine fairly general trends. What patterns or results would more surgically targeted investigations yield? Furthermore, would a needs analysis involving similar cohorts in other organisations record the same gaps? And would it raise any questions regarding the alignment of the professional and academic and, if so, with the same focal points (e.g., promoting more formal examination of sociolinguistics, more actively fostering explicit pragmatic awareness)?

Nonetheless, even if representing a single, limited endeavour, it is hoped that the present study provides helpful and relevant insights for colleagues insofar as it illuminates needs that a given professional community believe went unmet in pre-employment FL provision; lends a basis for potential remedies to be further researched and developed, locally or otherwise; and adds weight to calls for greater coordination between employers and instructors, particularly in higher education, to enhance preparedness for the workplace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all needs analysis participants, those who provided helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article and the article's anonymous reviewers. I am also grateful to those who facilitated the study and provided consent and ethical review for the research, and (particularly) to my fellow moderator for her valuable contribution.

NOTES

1. The survey was conducted to obtain an indication of general trends only. Most respondents had a bachelor's/Honours degree. A small number (quantity unknown) had a post-graduate degree, typically a Masters in Translation and/or Interpreting.

2. For deeper discussion of curriculum content and professional relevance see, for example, Doyle (2019), Ruggiero (2014) and Teichler (2016).

3. For reasons of confidentiality, this article does not provide specific examples of the language professionals' work or of L2 materials featuring in their assignments.

4. This group of languages in the Indo-Iranian sub-family includes Farsi, Dari, Tajik, Kurdish, Balochi and Pashto.

5. This is a language group in the Indo-Iranian sub-family. It includes languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali and Gujarati, among others.

6. The needs corresponded to Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) target needs as *necessities*, *wants* and *lacks* (cited in Bocanegra-Valle, 2015, p. 69).

7. Although this process itself was essentially qualitative, the overarching framework and associated assessments were routinely reviewed to optimise and ensure applicability across the organisation's greater language community.

8. I am grateful to one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for this helpful observation.

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