

# ПІДГОТОВКА ДО ЗНО

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## ZNO EXAM PREPARATION COURSE: IMPLICATIONS OF NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Danilina S.

sv.danilina@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2005-9363>

*Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv*

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**Abstract.** The paper proposes a practical framework of conducting the needs analysis as a constituent of exam teaching and discusses how the findings of these surveys can translate into an actual course design. The participants of the study are a group of five Ukrainian school-leavers, studying on an exam preparation course to take the ‘external independent evaluation’ (ZNO exam). The procedure correlated with the ‘triangulation’ theory, which envisages the use of several instruments to analyse learner needs to enhance the validity of their results. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (questionnaires, diagnostic testing, observations and informal talks) has been applied to assess the outcomes of the needs analysis, which reveals the learners’ motivation, learning needs, as well as the areas of grammar, vocabulary, and subskills that requires further training. The study has showed that in case the instructional design is based on the outcomes of needs analysis, the teacher can take more informed decisions as to have the course tailored to the actual needs of its participants. Such individualized approach turns learners into co-creators of the course and fosters a more effective and purposeful preparation on their part. Further research could focus on fine-tuning the framework of analysing learner needs to the requirements of any specific exam.

**Keywords:** needs analysis, exam preparation, ZNO, external independent evaluation, instructional design.

**Даніліна С. Курс підготовки до іспиту ЗНО: результати аналізу потреб  
Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка**

**Анотація.** *Вступ.* Вдала підготовка до іспиту ЗНО є засадничою для успішного вступу випускника загальноосвітнього закладу середньої освіти до закладу вищої освіти. Відтак дуже важливим видається ефективне планування курсу підготовки учнів до складання ЗНО. *Цілі.* У статті пропонуються практичні рекомендації щодо проведення аналізу потреб студентів як необхідного елементу курсу підготовки до іспиту, і розглядаються механізми втілення результатів аналізу потреб у структуру самого курсу. *Методи.* В експерименті брали участь п’ять випускників загальноосвітнього закладу середньої освіти, які готувалися до складання ЗНО з англійської мови. Процедура визначення потреб ґрунтувалася на теорії “триангуляції”, яка передбачає використання декількох інструментів, аби підвищити валідність результатів дослідження. Для оцінювання результатів аналізу потреб було залучено кількісні й якісні методи наукового дослідження (опитування, діагностичне тестування, спостереження і неформальна розмова), за допомогою яких було визначено мотивацію учнів, їхні навчальні потреби, лексико-граматичні труднощі, які потребували уваги. *Результати.* Дослідження демонструє, що завдяки використанню результатів аналізу потреб у розробці курсу підготовки до іспиту викладач може приймати обґрунтованіші рішення щодо визначення оптимальної послідовності тем занять, підвищення мотивації учнів, подолання психологічних труднощів, які можуть виникати під час підготовки до іспиту, тощо.

В контексті такого підходу до планування курсу учні перетворюються на співавторів викладача, що сприяє свідомішому ставленню перших до учіння. **Висновки.** Подальші дослідження можуть стосуватися розроблення універсальних засад проведення аналізу потреб студентів задля їх (потреб) застосування в розробці курсу підготовки до будь-якого іспиту.

**Ключові слова:** визначення потреб студентів, підготовка до іспиту, ЗНО, зовнішнє незалежне оцінювання, розробка навчального курсу.

**Introduction.** The ZNO (or school-leaving) exam is the assessment that Ukrainian school-leavers go through to enter higher education institutions. It is programme of studies an exit and entrance exam, which – in case it is successfully passed - secures pupils a budget place at a university of their choice. English ZNO is an exam that can either be required to enter a certain university faculty or, or it can be an exam that high-schoolers choose to take themselves to complement mandatory disciplines. Given its high stakes nature, there is a stable demand for effective ZNO preparation courses, which would identify and target the learners' areas of development, apply the long-proven practices of exam preparation, as well as address the students' challenging psychological condition. Needs analysis (NA) may serve as a valuable tool in this situation to tailor a course to the needs and wants of a certain group of students, and thus make it as effective as possible. It is therefore surprising that, unlike the plentiful research into NA in the realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the field of NA implications for exam teaching appears understudied. Meanwhile, the students enrolled on exam preparation courses are usually not less aware of their needs than ESP learners, and it would be beneficial to base the instructional design of exam preparation courses on the NA of future examinees.

According to language teaching methodologists (Munby, 1978 cited in Zhu & Liu, 2014; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 1990; Graves, 1996, 2000), every language teaching course should start by identifying the needs of its participants, with these data acting as guiding points for curriculum design. NA has been in the focus of attention of numerous scholars who explore the instructional design in the area of ESP (Robinson, 1980 cited in Richards, 1990; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 1990; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Long, 2005; Zhu & Liu, 2014; Mohammed, 2016; Khansir, 2016; Eshtehardi, 2017; Nimasari, 2018; Elsaid Mohammed & Nur, 2018; Baklazhenko & Savchuk, 2018; Schug, 2021), while the research that would concentrate on the approaches to NA in exam preparation courses has been scarce (Chiroque Chero, 2022), and its application in the development of General English programmes is altogether rare (Khansir, 2016).

Meanwhile, as Burgess and Head (2005) and May and Maley (1996) point out, teaching exam classes is special due to several reasons: clear common objectives and ; high motivation of the students, availability of quality resources, the learners' desire to practise, revise, and do homework, the sense of achievement that the learners and the teacher share in case the exam has been successfully passed; at the same time, an exam preparation course should be well structured and planned in advance, it calls for much discipline and advanced time management skills on the part of the teacher, with less opportunity for creativity and spontaneity than on a regular GE course, it should also avoid the tedious repetitive imitation of exam tasks at the expense of a balanced approach with a variety of tasks and activities. Given the above, it is essential that an exam preparation course cater specifically to the needs of a particular group of students to avoid the risk of overrelying on teacher intuition, as the learners' actual needs and the way the teacher sees them may not always coincide (Schug, 2021).

I have come across several studies that looked into the principles and implications of NA for an exam course design. C. A. Chiroque Chero (2022) explores the needs of Peruvian young learners enrolled on a preparation course for the Cambridge A2 YLE Flyers exam. The author systematises the data on the learners' objective and subjective necessities, lacks, and

wants using a ‘triangulation methodology’, in which the findings of his research are cross-validated. The instruments employed are self-made questionnaires, a diagnostic assessment, and an observation of the students’ speaking activities. Reza Eshtehardi (2017) offers insight into the NA of a multinational groups of students preparing to take academic IELTS. Based on the questionnaire compiled from the surveys of Naunton, Hughes, Hutchinson, and Waters and on diagnostic testing, the objective and subjective data about the learners’ needs were collected (motivation, learning styles, learners’ preferences, and the problematic areas they are likely to face in the exam). It is also worth noting insightful research conducted by Evanthia Avgerou (2016), who assessed the needs of Greek junior high school learners in terms of their wishes, objective and subjective needs, and their overall view on the “utilitarian” vs “communicative” benefits of knowing English. Although not directly related to designing an exam preparation course, the study, which proposes a framework for conducting learners’ NA, aspires to stimulate amendments to the language curriculum of Greek state-owned schools and make it more in line with that of the private institutes, which train students for English exams organised by universities of international renown (Avgerou, 2016).

In recent decades, needs analysis (or needs assessment) has been defined and classified by numerous scholars: Hutchinson and Waters (1987) split needs into target needs (what the learner needs to do in a target situation), further subdivided into necessities, lacks, and wants, and learning needs (what the learner needs to learn to act in the target situation); Brindley (1989, cited in Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) categorises them as objective and subjective or process-oriented or product-oriented. According to Baklazhenko and Savchuk (2018), the subjective needs category is particularly important as it defines the individual preferences of the learner, and is crucial to the development of individualized programmes of studies which have proved their effectiveness. Berwick (1989, cited in Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.123) defines needs as “a gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state” and distinguishes between ‘felt’ and ‘perceived’ needs. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) view NA as a combination of all previous approaches, including assessing the learners’ necessities, wants, subjective needs; their present and target situation and the discrepancy between the two, i.e. the students’ lacks; learning needs, and even the ‘means analysis’, i.e. the information on the environment in which the learning will take place. In his seminal article, West (1994) offers a broad survey of the field of NA, including its history and a variety of its interpretations.

Despite numerous approaches to NA and interpretations of the term, it could be generalised that NA is commonly defined as a gap between the learners’ skills and language use in the Present Situation vs the Target Situation, which needs to be filled by a course of studies.

When it comes to teaching an exam preparation course, K. Graves’s interpretation of NA seems particularly relevant, as she views it as a *teaching tool* making the learners more aware and purposeful in their learning (1996); and as a dialogue between the teacher and students, an ongoing process throughout the course that helps learners see themselves as active participants of the learning process, gain a sense of ownership and control of their studies, reflect on their learning, identify their needs (2000). All of these factors are essential for an effective exam preparation course, on which learners should assume responsibility for both the process and the outcomes of their learning, feel ‘in control’ of their studies, gain experience as autonomous learners, consciously studying both in and outside of the classroom. Harmer (2007) suggests that this feeling of *agency* enhances the students’ motivation to learn.

Graves (1996) points out that NA is not to turn into a “one-time only process” but should be “ongoing in its development and use” (p. 16); NA overlaps with language assessment at the start of the course; with diagnosing language needs throughout the course;

and with evaluation when gathering the information as for how the learners' needs have been addressed by the course (Graves, 2000).

According to Richards (1990), conducting NA "requires the use of a variety of formal and informal data-gathering procedures" (p. 2). Such data-gathering instruments may include observation, interviews, tests, questionnaires, role-plays, the analysis of communication breakdowns, etc. (Richards, 1990). Long (2005) emphasizes the importance of conducting NA through multiple procedures, both qualitative and quantitative, to ensure its validity, such an approach is referred to as 'triangulation' (p. 28).

Being equipped with the arsenal of NA techniques, language assessment tests and evaluation questionnaires, the teacher who runs an exam preparation course should at the same time be aware of the risk of overloading their students with too much testing. The danger of losing sight of teaching at the expense of overblown testing has been recognized by May and Maley (1996), Alderson and Wall (1993), Baxter (1997). The instructional design of an exam preparation course would ideally adhere to the principle expressed by Hughes that testing should be "supportive of good teaching, and exerting corrective influence on bad teaching" (2003, p. 2).

To address the hypothesis of this study that a thoroughly conducted NA can translate into an effective exam course design tailored to the needs of a particular group of students, the research aims to: 1) offer a practical framework of conducting NA for an exam teaching course, which may be of practical help for teachers working in exam teaching in general, and in ZNO preparation domain in particular. The novelty of the research lies in the fact that there has not been much investigation into the principles of designing NA survey for exam preparation courses, let alone studies to do specifically with ZNO; 2) discuss the implications of the NA for the instructional design of an actual ZNO preparation course.

**Methods.** The group comprised 4 girls and 1 boy aged 16-17 (n=5), of B1/B2 level according to CEFR, bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian. Before teaching them the ZNO preparation course I had taught General English classes with an emphasis on speaking in this group for six years. The teenagers studied in the 11th form of secondary school and took ZNO at the end of that school year (ZNO in English was one of the three exams whose score the learners had to submit to the university of their choice to be admitted). The group was taught privately and was not affiliated with any official educational institution.

Before we started the course, the students had been informed of my intention to use the results of the questionnaires, their written work, tests and mock exams for the purposes of the article. They were advised that their names would not be disclosed in the research, and they were free not to give their consent with no further consequences. All the learners gave their oral consent to participate in the study.

*Instruments and Procedure* The quantitative method was employed to assess the results of the questionnaires and tests that the learners completed. The qualitative method was used to do observations and informal interviews about the course. The NA was conducted in line with Long's (2005) triangulation theory which postulates that multiple sources of information on the NA enhance its validity.

At the start of the course, the learners were offered a *NA questionnaire* and *diagnostic testing*. My experience of teaching the group and talking to the teenagers and their parents had formed my own vision of their motivation, learning styles, and preferences, which had to be compared to the learners' answers to establish their subjective needs. The questionnaires were based on the checklist put together by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) to collect data on the learners' 'target situation' and 'learning needs'. Because the checklist was initially composed with an ESP course in mind, it had to be adapted for my teaching situation given my familiarity with the group and the obviousness of their 'target situation', i.e. mastering

the knowledge and skills to pass ZNO with a desired score. Thus, the questionnaire sought to gather information on the learners': 1) *motivation* to do the course and *attitude* to the exam; 2) *learning styles*: here it was essential to compare the students' feedback against my view of their learning preferences, sensitive experiences they may have in class, as well as their self-study habits; 3) *needs* related to the ZNO course design per se: this part aimed to reveal the subjective difficulties that the learners felt they would face in ZNO through a self-rating set of answer options. The identified difficulties had to be later cross-checked in an objective way against the outcomes of the diagnostic testing.

The *motivation* part featured the following questions:

- 1) Do you like English? (*yes / no*) - to assess the learners' motivation;
- 2) Why did you decide to take ZNO in English? (*The university requires it / This is my own choice / Your own answer*: this option was offered because the previous two did not sound exhaustive);
- 3) Whose idea was it to do some preparation for the English ZNO exam? (the option included: *my idea / my parents' idea / my friends' recommendation / your own answer*);
- 4) Do you think you actually need this course? Why (not)? (*open-ended question*);
- 5) Imagine you had the same chances to obtain a high score in any ZNO exam, would you still choose to take ZNO in English? (*yes / no*) – to re-evaluate their intrinsic/ extrinsic motivation;
- 6) Do you think English ZNO tasks will adequately measure your knowledge of English?
- 7) Do you think English ZNO has a clear structure and understandable criteria of assessment?
- 8) Do you aim for a particular score in English ZNO?
- 9) Are you going to use English after leaving school? If yes, how?
- 10) Do you think learning English will help you in life? If yes, how?

The remaining five were open-ended questions.

The *learning styles* part contained the following questions:

- 1) Do you like being in the English lesson? (*yes / no*) What do you (dis-)like about it?
- 2) What classroom activities do you like the most? (a list of 11 classroom activities was offered with the answer options: *I like it / It's OK / I dislike it* and a space for possible comments);
- 3) Do you feel uneasy when you make a mistake? (*Yes / No*);
- 4) How do you like mistakes to be corrected? (5 answer options given);
- 5) How do you prefer to learn grammar? (with options to do with inductive or deductive way of learning);
- 6) How do you learn best? (the first three answer options had to do with the visual, auditory or kinaesthetic mode of learning, the fourth option was 'your own answer' to see if any students viewed themselves as having multiple learning modalities, and to check if my previous assumptions about the learners' preferential way of learning were correct);
- 7) Do you like to have time to think before you speak?
- 8) How do you develop your English skills outside of the classroom? (some answer options given and a space for the learners' own response as well – students could choose multiple responses).

The *ZNO needs* part offered the following questions:

- 1) What part of ZNO do you think is the most difficult? *Please rate from 1 (most difficult) to 4 (least difficult)* (The names of the parts were given);
- 2) What part of ZNO do you think you need most training in? *Please rate from 1 (most important) to 4 (least important)* (The names of the parts were given);



- 3) What do you want to change in terms of your ZNO skills during the course? (*open-ended question*);
- 4) How much time to do homework do you have during a week?
- 5) Would you like General English activities to be integrated into the course, or would you like to focus only on the skills needed to pass ZNO? (space provided for their response);
- 6) In terms of General English skills and competencies what would you like to improve? (names of skills and systems were provided, sts could choose multiple responses);
- 7) What topics are interesting for you to discuss? (12 topics given and a space for their own answer – students could choose multiple responses).

For the reason of getting ‘more uniform answers’ (Taylor-Powell, 1998, p.5) and easier summarizing, most questions were either close-ended or offered response options and ‘your own answer’ space. This was done to make sure that all relevant responses were included in the list, following Taylor-Powell’s (1998) recommendation.

The second instrument employed in my NA was *diagnostic testing*, used to identify the learners’ strengths and weaknesses (Hughes, 2003) and “gather information about the current state of the learners and their desired one” (Graves, 1996, p.101). To assess their current state, the students were offered to do the whole ZNO mock exam, which consisted of listening, reading, and use of English parts, as well as a modified writing part, and complete my self-made grammar and vocabulary diagnostic tests (DTs). According to Burgess and Head (2005), conducting mock exams helps to alleviate the learners’ anxiety by making them familiar with the content and structure of the exam. The test was *integrative* because it tested various skills by stimulating the learners to use a variety of language (Harmer, 2007).

To provide for the test validity, Hughes’s (2003) recommendation was followed, i.e. tests should be direct whenever possible, and representative of the task the students will have to perform in the exam. As for writing, the test should meet the following exam specifications: operations, types of text, addressees, length of the texts, topics, dialect and style. In ZNO examinees write a sample email which may express different functions (request information, express thanks, arrange an appointment, etc.); be 150-180 words long; written in any standard variety of English; keep to an informal or formal register. Based on these specifications, the group had to write two short email samples, one in informal style (writing an email to a friend sharing the student’s impressions on the abnormal snowfall we had had some days before), the other in formal style (applying for a summer job in an American youth camp).

To cover the vocabulary and grammar items which might have been left out in the mock exam, the learners sat a discrete-item grammar test and a vocabulary test, the latter included an open- and multiple-choice cloze, and a word formation exercise. The tests were based on ZNO exam specifications provided by the official site of the Ukrainian centre for the assessment of the quality of education at: [https://testportal.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Programa\\_2020\\_inozemni.pdf](https://testportal.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Programa_2020_inozemni.pdf)

The learners completed the questionnaires and tests in the classroom setting to make sure they could turn to the teacher for help in case there was something they needed to clarify. Various types of tests, as well as non-distracting conditions close to those of an actual exam had to ensure the test reliability (Hughes, 2003) and provide a more objective overall picture of student ability (Harmer, 2007).

**Results.** The learner needs identified for the proposed framework of the course design were analysed prior to the start of the course through several tools: questionnaires, a mock exam, and diagnostic tests. Such tools serve the purpose of the ‘triangulation method’ in Long’s (2005) terms to promote the NA validity and aim to reveal the group’s subjective and objective needs, learning needs, wants, their target situation and their present situation,

and their lacks, i.e. the gap between the two 'situations'. The findings are presented in percentages and frequencies of occurrence.

*Part 1 of the questionnaire* looked into the students' motivation and comprised both open and close-ended questions, as well as some questions with a space for the learners' own responses. The findings of this part are summarized below in the frequencies of the responses:

- 1) Do you like English? YES (5/5);
- 2) Why did you decide to take ZNO in English: university requirement (2/5); my choice (2/5), "because I'm bad at other subjects" (1/5);
- 3) Whose idea was it to take the course? My parents' (4/5), "a collective decision" (1/5);
- 4) Do you need this course? (all the students responded positively citing different reasons: a high score in the exam (2/5), improve my English (1/5), I like the group (2/5);
- 5) Imagine you had the same chances to obtain a high score in any ZNO exam, would you still choose to take ZNO in English? YES (5/5);
- 6) Do you think English ZNO tasks will adequately measure your knowledge of English? (NO 4/5: the exam is too easy; there is no speaking part; because of the stress; it depends on luck; YES 1/5);
- 7) Do you think English ZNO has a clear structure and understandable criteria of assessment? YES (2/5); NO (3/5): "I don't remember them"; "The listening part is poorly recorded"; "Criteria of assessing reading are not clear";
- 8) Do you aim for a particular score in English ZNO? YES (5/5): from 170 to 195/200;
- 9) Are you going to use English after leaving school? If yes, how? For my future job (3/5); for travel (2/5);
- 10) Do you think learning English will help you in life? If yes, how? – It is an international language, it opens the world (2/5); to travel and speak to people (2/5); to earn a higher salary (1/5).

The findings of *part 1* demonstrated a combination of the learners' intrinsic ('I like English', 'I'll choose English ZNO in any case') and extrinsic ('University requirement', 'my parents' choice', 'English will help me in life') motivation; the initiative rather on the part of their parents to take the preparation course; their positive attitude to the preparation course and some reservations they felt as for the ZNO exam; and their ZNO 'target situation', i.e. the score they aim for.

*Part 2* of the questionnaire sought to analyse the students' *learning styles*. The results of this part are summarized below:

- 1) They all like being in the English classroom;
- 2) Preferred classroom activities: communicative tasks of various formats; listening to recordings and writing less popular; 1 dislikes competing with groupmates;
- 3) Attitude to mistakes: 3/5 feel ok about making mistakes; 2/5 feel embarrassed;
- 4) Mistake correction: 2-during speaking; 2 after speaking; 1 in whole class feedback;
- 5) Learning grammar: inductive learning (3), deductive (1), inductive+deductive (1);
- 6) Learning best: 3 visuals, 1 auditory+visual, 1 kinaesthetic + auditory;
- 7) Time to think before you speak: No (3/5), Yes (1/5); Sometimes (1/5);
- 8) Self-Study: all practise English outside of the classroom (watch films, listen to vlogs and podcasts, speak to people).

The results of part 2 served to raise the teacher's awareness of how the students imagined a comfortable learning environment so that their learning conditions could be brought closer to this vision during the course, another objective was to check if the teacher's assumptions about the group's learning styles corresponded to their own view. The last question was necessary to see if the students were exposed to English outside of the classroom and to plan what kind of homework would be realistic for them to do.

Part 3 of the questionnaire addressed the students' *needs immediately related to the ZNO course design*. The results of this part are summarized below:

- 1) The most difficult ZNO part: Use of English (UE) (3/5), writing (2/5);
- 2) Priority ZNO part: UE (3/5), writing (2/5);
- 3) Expectations of the course: Improve writing (1/5), improve UE (3/5); revise to feel more confident in the exam (1/5);
- 4) Time to do homework: 2-3 hours per week;
- 5) General English integrated into the course: 4/5 want GE integrated into the course;
- 6) GE priorities: Most popular: speaking, vocabulary; less popular: reading, grammar;
- 7) Interesting topics: music, friendship, art, travel, technology, history, sport, social networks, and books.

This part showed what the learners subjectively needed (or *wanted*) in terms of their exam preparation, i.e. their 'present situation', through rating ZNO parts in the first two questions and then highlighting their personal needs in a less controlled way in question 3. The priorities indicated by the learners had to be later cross-checked against the outcomes of diagnostic testing. The last three questions were needed for the purposes of the actual instructional design.

The results of *the mock ZNO exam*, which included three parts of the actual exam (except Writing) revealed the following problematic areas, viewed as *objective needs*:

*Listening*: Failure to attend to minor details, which leads to the wrong answer;

*Reading*: No habit to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context;

Jumping at the first seemingly appropriate answer without analyzing the rest;

Occasional failure to see synonymous keywords or phrases;

*UE*: Prediction of syntactic structure;

*Lack of collocational knowledge*

*Hypothetical conditionals*

Verb patterns

Noun+noun phrases (*a 17-year-old girl*)

Passive constructions ('he is reported to be...')

Figure 1 summarises the results of the mock ZNO exam in percentages.

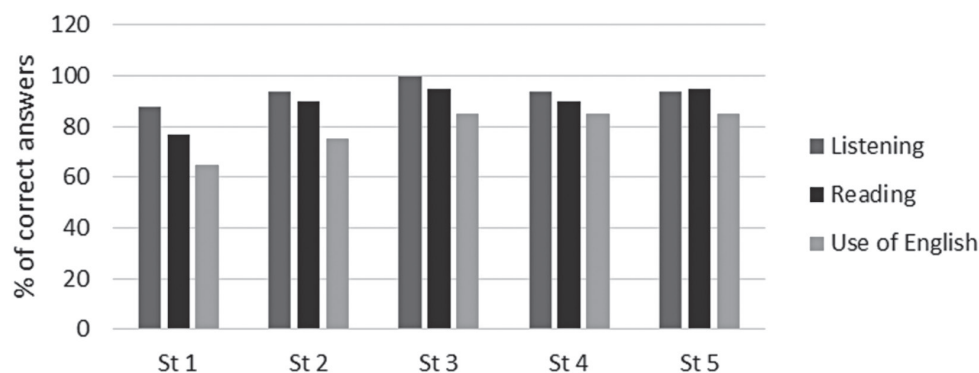


Figure 1. ZNO Mock Exam Results

Figure 1 displays that for most students the listening part of the exam turned out the easiest, with the number of correct answers ranging from 88% to 100%, followed by the reading part (77-95% of the correct answers). The most difficult part for all the learners proved to be the Use of English, with the percentage of the correct answers ranging from 65% to 85%. These results actually support the students' view of the UE part of the exam as being the most difficult for them and a priority to address on the course.



The *writing test*, in which the group had to write two texts (one in an informal, the other in a formal style that roughly corresponded to the ZNO writing tasks), highlighted the following problematic areas: *Stylistically inappropriate formulae*; *Awkward collocations*; *Wrong /absence of linkers*; *Underusage of phrasals and idioms*; *Perfect and Continuous aspects* (Figure 2).

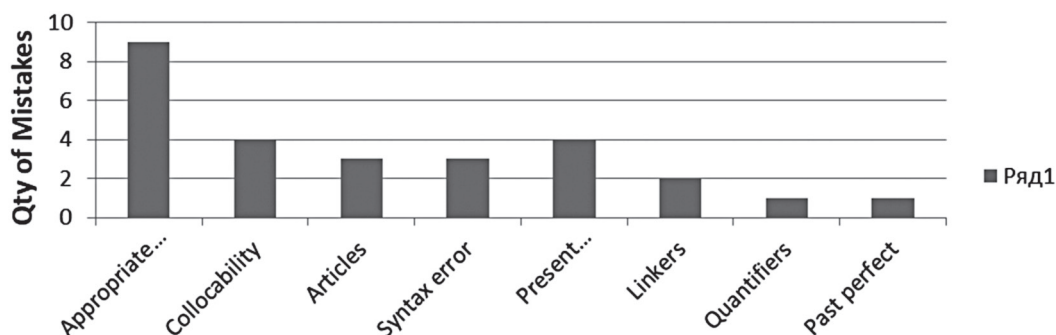


Figure 2. Writing Test Problematic Areas

The writing test signalled that the learners did risk having low results in the actual exam primarily not because of possible grammar and vocabulary mistakes but rather because they lacked the knowledge of stylistic conventions accepted in informal and formal emails. Among the identified lexical problems, collocability turned out an area of development because the awkward collocations encountered in the learners' texts would often spoil the impression of their work. Another notoriously difficult area, particularly relevant for the informal style, were phrasals (learners would rather go for one-word verbs) and the underuse of idioms. Grammar difficulties traditionally featured the perfect aspect.

To account for the grammar and vocabulary items that might have been missing in the mock exam, the students also wrote a grammar and vocabulary diagnostic test, put together based on the exam specifications set out on the official Ministry of Education site. The DTs highlighted the following areas of development: Grammar: *Hypothetical conditions & I wish*; Quantifiers with countable and uncountable nouns; *Would rather vs Had better*; *Present perfect*; Modals of obligation; Reported speech;

Vocabulary: *Prediction of word class*; *Collocability*; *Linkers of contrast*; Word formation. The findings of the DTs are demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4.

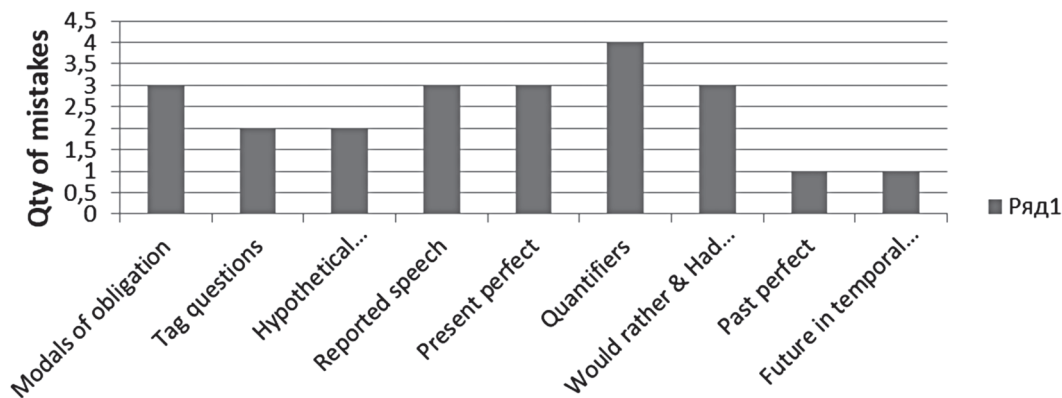


Figure 3. Grammar Test Problematic Areas Chart

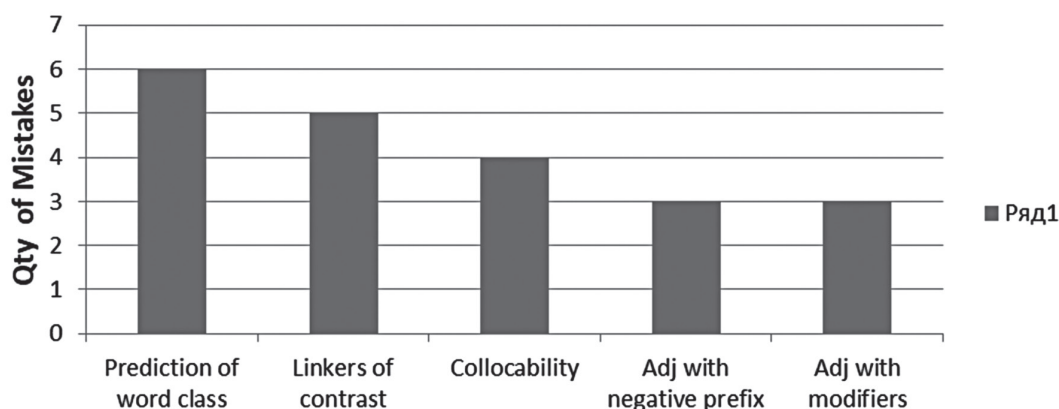


Figure 4. Vocabulary Test Problematic Areas

**Discussion.** The main objective of the research was to propose a practical framework of conducting the NA of a group of learners on an exam preparation course, an area rather understudied compared to the field of ESP, and suggest the implications the NA may have for an exam course design. The procedure of conducting the NA surveys drew on Dudley-Evans and St John's (1998) classification of needs: the *motivation questionnaire* covered the students' subjective needs and wants and the 'target situation' as seen by them, the *learning styles* part – their learning needs; and the *ZNO needs* part - their 'present situation analysis' and 'what is wanted from the course'; while DTs addressed their 'present situation analysis' and objective needs, the lacks of the students being the gap between the present and the target situations.

The outcomes of the NA served as a basis for planning the content and priorities of the course, therefore, the triad of instruments (questionnaires, mock exam, diagnostic testing) were used to enhance the NA validity, as suggested by Long's (2005) triangulation theory.

An important aspect of the NA, cross-validated in questionnaire 3 and the mock exam, and specified by DTs, were the learners' subjective and objective needs. Although Richterich (1983) maintains that as a rule learners are little aware of their needs and fail to formulate them in a clear way, the group's awareness of their needs and lacks is more in line with the remark of Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who argue that unlike GE, ESP students are more aware of their needs. The same observation is likely to hold for exam class students.

NA questionnaire 3 cites UE and writing as the group's learning priorities, these were confirmed by the outcomes of the mock exam and DTs, which also revealed specific subskills within reading, writing, and listening that needed further training. The course therefore was constructed to address primarily these areas and subskills, and first and foremost the points identified as problematic by both the mock exam and DTs (*italicized in the text above*), and aimed to:

- enhance the skill of analyzing the relationship between ideas in the sentence and predicting syntactic structures;
- revise hypothetical conditionals and *I wish* construction; Quantifiers; *Would rather vs Had better*; *Present Perfect vs Past Simple*, especially their functions in the context of writing emails;
- learn/ revise: conventions of writing informal and formal emails; the formulae and cohesive devices appropriate in the two registers; collocations and phrasals used in emails of different functions;
- revise the right strategies of doing Reading and Listening for detail exam tasks to benefit their exam performance and diversify the course;

– practise (meaning-focused) speaking, to put the group in the right mindset for the topic of the lesson and balance the content of lessons.

The instructional design of the course was driven by the logic of the structural syllabus, i.e. the principles behind organizing activities were building and recycling, and sequencing from the simple to the complex, from more concrete to more open-ended, with certain activities preparing learners for the next (Graves, 1996). The themes of the lessons were conceptualized within the group's topics of interest, which had to maintain the learners' motivation, and make learning more fun. Following the learners' wish to balance exam preparation with GE practice with an emphasis on speaking, each lesson also featured meaning-focused speaking tasks to counterbalance exam-like accuracy-focused exercises.

The *writing* component of the course progressed from informal in the first half of the course to formal in the second half. The idea behind it was that, as was evidenced by the students' writing test, informal writing was easier for them to tackle. The overall progression of the lessons was driven by the learning complexity of grammar items, as traditionally viewed by the structural syllabus. In the middle of the course, a writing-free lesson was offered to break the routine, shift the focus from exam-oriented tasks, and engage the students into a creative drama-based activity to have fun and address kinaesthetic learners' needs.

*Homework* was intended to reinforce strategies of learning discussed in the lesson and keep the students aware of their learning to promote their self-study skills.

The learners' *motivation* was identified by the NA as a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic, although at times, as Setiyadi and Wicaksono (2019) suggest, it is difficult to clearly tell between the two, as the desire to perform well in the exam (which is formally an external reason) "may be understood as a self-determined behaviour of intrinsic motivation" (p.8) Such behaviour is characterized by investing effort into an activity viewed as important to achieve a valued goal (Setiyadi & Wicaksono, 2019). In this light, it was crucial to form a positive image of the exam in the learners' mind-given their initially lukewarm attitude towards it, expressed in questionnaire 1 - which had to encourage them to see more sense behind preparing for the exam the best they could. Another mechanism to maintain the group's motivation was making them aware of the overall course design, which accounted for their needs, lacks, and wants, as identified by the NA; and conducting regular informal interviews, stimulating the learners to reflect on the activities they were offered.

The course also contained activities aimed at raising the learners' awareness of effective strategies to tackle skills and systems tasks both in the exam and in their self-studies and enhancing their language learning metacognitive skills (awareness of differences between languages, strategies of memorizing vocabulary, approaches to developing listening and reading skills, tackling difficulties that were bound to arise, etc.) to benefit their exam preparation and promote learner autonomy. This all had to foster their feeling of agency or taking control over their learning. The latter was an essential factor to contribute to their purposeful preparation, accounting for the fact that at the start of the course they did not assume much responsibility for the course, saying this was their parents who made a decision they should take it.

Some NA findings turned out surprising for me, for example the fact that 2 learners out of 5 felt embarrassed when making a mistake. Although throughout the six previous years of our speaking classes the teenagers had often been told that it was a natural thing to make mistakes when mastering a foreign language and the fear of making a mistake should not hinder their effort to communicate, some learners still did not seem persuaded. Thus, mistake correction feedback conducted in the lessons had to be done particularly tactfully keeping in mind that for some students it still remained a sensitive experience.

In line with Graves's suggestion that NA should be seen as an ongoing assessment, the course featured both the informal and formal assessment. The former included: 1) ZNO-

standard tasks homework and feedback in class; 2) the teacher's observation of learners' classroom participation and responsiveness; 3) a mini-questionnaire on exam strategies; 4) informal talks with the students as for the content and activities on the course.

The formal assessment featured two progress tests and a mock ZNO exam in the second to last class.

After the end of the course the learners completed a course evaluation questionnaire to look back at the benefits and shortcomings of the course, as well as on their learning gains.

The procedure of analyzing the learners' needs, which included assessment done throughout the course and evaluation after it, as well as the overall course design aimed at maintaining the learners' perception of themselves as co-creators and active participants of the course, agents in control of their learning, not just passive consumers of the instructional content.

**Limitations of Study.** The course described in the research addresses the learning situation of a specific group of students, and is subject to the limitations characteristic of a small scale study. Although the general framework of conducting and applying NA in teaching for an exam may be relevant for any exam preparation course, the content of questionnaires will have to be modified to suit the context of a different group of students, who might not have known each other and the teacher before the start of the course, while the diagnostic testing will have to be adjusted to the structure and requirements of any concrete exam, and the findings of NA surveys will obviously translate into other priorities on every particular course.

**Conclusions.** The aim of the research is to propose some practical guidelines for conducting a NA on an exam preparation course and to demonstrate how these findings can be translated into an actual course design. The data collected by the NA lead to more weighed decisions on the part of the teacher as to what to include into the course plan, how to sequence and prioritise course materials, and how to make the learning environment more supportive for future examinees, given psychological implications of exam taking. Both my teaching practice and observations of my colleagues evidence that it is a common practice to disregard conducting NA at the start of an exam course and rather go with familiar exam preparation materials, adjusting or complementing them with other resources along the way. It might be the case in exam teaching because it seems quite straightforward what the learners' objective needs and wants are, however, such an approach may result in lesser motivation, discouragement of the learners, and, consequently, poorer exam outcomes. Citing Schug (2021), this is not enough to rely on the teacher's intuition to design a programme that would cater to the needs and wants of a specific group of learners and works best in a particular learning context. Meanwhile, such 'custom-made' courses are of a particular relevance for exam teaching because important life prospects can be conditional on a successful performance in the exam. The potential of future research could lie in fine-tuning the procedure of analysing learner needs in the field of exam teaching, making its mechanism more uniform and accessible for teachers, and adjustable to the structure and requirements of any concrete exam, be it an internationally renowned exam, a school-leaving assessment, or a regular university exam.

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