

Identifying students' needs when organising English for Specific Purposes courses

Autor: Araujo Portugal, Juan Carlos (Licenciado en Filología Inglesa, Profesor de inglés en Escuela Oficial de Idiomas).

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Abstract

This article focuses on the importance of needs analysis when organising an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. It begins by discussing the main characteristics of these kinds of courses. Then, it delves into the role of needs analysis in these kinds of courses and into what this analysis should be like. Finally, it presents an instance of an analysis through a questionnaire, which is used as a suitable tool to establish the needs of the participants in one particular ESP course. This questionnaire may be used as a model or adapted for other ESP courses designed for working professionals.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes courses, needs analysis, questionnaire

Título: Detección de necesidades de los alumnos al organizar cursos de Inglés para Fines Específicos.

Resumen

Este artículo resalta la importancia de la detección de necesidades de los alumnos al organizar un curso de Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE). Se hace referencia a las características principales de estos cursos, se examina el papel que la detección de necesidades de los alumnos desempeña en estos cursos, así como las características que el análisis para obtener esta información debe tener. Finalmente, presenta un cuestionario como ejemplo de instrumento para realizar un análisis para establecer las necesidades de los participantes en un curso de IFE. Este cuestionario puede usarse o adaptarse, para otros cursos pensados para profesionales en activo.

Palabras clave: Cursos de Inglés para Fines Específicos, detección de necesidades, cuestionario.

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MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF ESP COURSES

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are usually designed to serve English learners' specific learning goals (Liu *et al.*, 2011). ESP is often seen as a materials-driven rather than a methods-driven activity, with preference being given to materials that authentically represent the communities in which learners seek membership (Belcher, 2006, p. 137). Castro Álvarez, González Pérez, & Casar Espino (2015) claim that an analysis of the way in which ESP courses are usually taught reveals that there is a predominance of what Boswood (1990) calls a text-centred approach. In this type of courses, either the instructor or the author of the method used for the course preselects the written materials to be dealt with – authentic, modified or specifically created for the course – on one of the topics of a specific field of ESP. The textbook is used as the starting point to learn certain aspects of the foreign language such as new vocabulary, grammatical structures, word formation patterns, etc.

However, according to Castro Álvarez, González Pérez, & Casar Espino (2015), this traditional approach does not satisfy all the demands of the learners attending these courses, as it is impossible to cover all the aspects required in a certain profession. Similarly, it is impossible to cover or envisage all the contents necessary for any subject. This is even more obvious due to the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and particularly the internet. This is why these authors favour the problem-based learning (PBL) approach when it comes to teaching ESP.

In PBL, one of the main tenets is that the content is introduced in the way of authentic complex problems or situations from everyday life. This new approach demands from the teacher to have very good knowledge of everything related to the field of instruction, for which he or she might not be trained or prepared (Lopatina *et al.*, 2015, p. 137).

As Belcher (2006) states, there are few graduate programmes that prepare students for what they need in the field of ESP. Moreover, as many language teachers hold an Arts degree, many English language teachers all over the world may

find the technical content of areas of ESP learners who are or will be, say, chemical engineers or air traffic controllers, unfamiliar and even intimidating.

Nickerson (2005) points out that nowadays in ESP there is a focus away from proficiency to strategic communication strategies that are communicatively effective “regardless of whether the speaker or writer is a native or non-native speaker” (p. 396). As Rahman *et al.* (2009) remark, the emergence of the ESP teaching movement resulted from the English language needs of the learners for specific purposes in accordance with their professions or job descriptions.

Hutchinson & Waters (1987, p. 19) define ESP as an approach to language learning based on learners’ needs. According to these authors, ESP does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material or methodology. They suggest that the foundation of ESP involves the learners, the language required and the learning context.

According to Strevens (1988), in ESP four absolute characteristics and two variable ones may be distinguished. According to him, these are the absolute characteristics of ESP:

- a) It is designed to meet specified needs of the learners.
- b) It is related to content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
- c) It is centred on language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and on the analysis of discourse.
- d) It is in contrast with General English.

As for the variable characteristics, he says that:

- ESP may be restricted to the learning of the skills to be learned (e.g. reading only).
- ESP may not be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) also distinguish between absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. According to them, these are the absolute characteristics of ESP:

- It is designed to meet specific needs of the learner.
- It makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves.
- It is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register, etc.), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

These are the variable characteristics of ESP according to both authors:

1. It may be related or designed for specific disciplines.
2. It may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English courses.
3. It is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level.
4. It is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students, but it can also be used with beginners. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system.

ESP has traditionally been divided into two main branches (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Munby, 1978; Robinson, 1991; Strevens, 1980):

- English for Academic Purposes (EAP).
- English for Occupational Purposes (EOP).

THE ROLE OF NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP COURSES

It is widely accepted that ESP practitioners and teachers evaluate their courses to improve and promote their effectiveness (Rahman *et al.*, 2009). As these authors state, ESP course design should start from analysing learners’ particular needs. Future language use, goals and objectives, content and appropriate teaching materials can be

determined on the basis of learners' needs. Moreover, these authors believe that evaluation should also be integrated into the design process to ensure that the goals and objectives are achieved.

García Mayo & Núñez Antón (1995) agree with this idea and add that the first step in the construction of any language syllabus or course is to define objectives. They state that, whenever possible, these objectives should be based on an analysis of learners' needs and these needs, in turn, should be expressed in terms of particular types of communication in which the learners will need to engage.

A language needs analysis is a prerequisite for designing a language course in the ESP setting (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Munby, 1978; Robinson, 1991). Needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a focused course (Brown, 1995; Chambers, 1980; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Jordan, 1997; West, 1994). Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) also state that "needs analysis is the process of establishing the *what* and *how* of a course" (p. 121). As García Mayo & Núñez Antón (1995) stress, needs analysis is not peculiar to just language teaching and should be an ongoing process.

Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) say that the main sources for needs analysis are the learners, people working or studying in the field, ex-students and documents relevant to the field, clients, colleagues and ESP research in the field. Ibáñez Amézaga (1993) considers that the opinions of those people working in the field should become one of the basic filters used when identifying and analysing students' needs.

Rahman *et al.*, (2009, p. 51) highlight that when taking into account information on students' needs, goals and objectives, course designers need to establish which aspects will be included, emphasized, integrated and used as a core of the course in order to address students' needs and expectations.

However, in her research study, Ibáñez Amézaga (1993) reveals that 84% of the students surveyed – students at Spanish Business Colleges – answered that their language teacher did not ask them about their needs in relation to the subject. The teachers surveyed confirmed this, and Ibáñez Amézaga (1993) points out that the frequency with which they seek their students' opinion is strikingly low. Surprisingly, according to this author, these students seem to be perfectly aware of the demands of the labour market, have clear instrumental motivation regarding their immediate needs and are dissatisfied with their level of achievement in the language.

Eslami (2010) seems to agree with Ibáñez Amézaga, and illustrates it with the situation in Iran. According to Eslami, since the courses organised by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology were not based on any systematic needs analysis, the programme designer's goals do not seem to have been fulfilled (Atai, 2000; Eslami, Eslami-Rasekh, & Quiroz, 2007; Farhady & Hedayati, 2009; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Tahririan, 1990).

Her research study, similarly to other needs analysis studies in other contexts (Robinson, 1991; Ferris, 1998), reveals that there often discrepancies among the perceptions of instructors and students. The results of her research study show that instructors may not always be the best judges of students' needs and challenges. This is why, as Belcher (2006, p. 135) says, ESP specialists are often needs assessors, and then designers and implementers of specialised curricula in response to identified needs.

By encouraging learners to discover their own needs, many ESP professionals look forward to "promoting a greater sense of ownership of learners and making a more consistent identification between need and want than is often achieved in ESP programmes" (Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006, p. 404). This is important because as Liu *et al.* (2011) state what students need is not always what they lack. The findings of their research study show that students do not always perceive all language skills as equally desirable, necessary or insufficient; and that the reasons behind devoting efforts to develop a particular skill is not always to make up for their lack of competence in it. Quite often their belief of needing this skill for their career or academic goals might also play important roles in their own perception of their needs.

Even though a student may wish to polish or acquire language skills in a specific area, their wants could be undermined in the face of their perceived language needs in another skill in order to fulfil their long-term or short-term academic and/or professional goals (Liu *et al.*, 2011).

These authors also consider that instructors and educators should help students become more aware of the complexity of their needs and the importance of taking suitable English for General Purposes (EGP) or ESP/EAP courses to acquire the specific language skills that the students might not initially perceive as necessary, desirable or insufficient.

Belcher (2006, p. 135) states that ESP assumes that there are problems or lacks that education can ameliorate. What is specific about ESP is that it assumes that these problems are unique to specific learners in specific contexts, and thus must be carefully delineated and addressed with tailored-to-fit instruction.

In conclusion, it might be said that there seems to be general agreement as for the importance of needs analysis when designing a Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) course (Belcher, 2006; García Mayo & Núñez Antón, 1995; Liu *et al.*, 2011; Moslemi, 2011; Rahman *et al.*, 2009; etc.). Brown (1995) defines needs analysis as “the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate definable curriculum purposes to satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” (p. 36). Belcher (2006) adds that needs analysis is seen in ESP as the foundation on which all the decisions are, or should be, made. Rahman *et al.* (2009) state that it is the first step to design a language course which is appropriate and which can meet learners’ needs.

Linde López (1997) distinguishes two major streams as regards the meaning of needs and what needs analysis should imply in ELT:

- Goal-oriented or product-oriented, in which the language of the target situation is described and the syllabus is devised only on the needs the learner will meet in a particular communication situation.
- Process-oriented, in which the needs are seen primarily as a means of learning.

Apart from this, Rahman *et al.* (2009) refer to two kinds of needs analysis:

- Target Situation Analysis (TSA), which is a form of needs analysis that focuses on identifying the learners’ language requirements in the occupational and academic situation they are being prepared for (West, 1994). Therefore, this type of analysis refers to the kinds of tasks and activities learners will be using the language for in the target situation (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998)
- Present Situation Analysis (PSA), which tries to establish what the students are like at the beginning of their language course, investigating their strengths and weaknesses (Robinson, 1991, p. 8).

As said above, Liu *et al.* (2011) highlight that students do not perceive all language skills as equally desirable, necessary or insufficient. Sometimes, students devote considerable time and effort to a skill they are already competent at. In such a case, the reason for this is that they perceive it as necessary to succeed in their future career, e.g., for promotion, or in their academic goals, e.g., to pass an exam or obtain a qualification. Related to this, Liu *et al.* (2011) also state that learners in ESP courses hope to achieve successful performances either occupationally or academically.

When it comes to LSP courses, there are two main types of target audiences for these courses:

- Graduate or postgraduate students who have no work experience, but see these kinds of courses as useful to enter the labour market.
- Working professionals who want to improve a particular language skill or who see this kind of course as a way of promotion in their jobs.

Depending on the kind of students that will attend the LSP course, both their needs and the kinds of activities done will also be different. As well as this, the general level of proficiency in the language of these students will also play an important role when it comes to designing the contents and the types of activities and tasks that will comprise the course, as Moslemi (2001) and Eslami (2010) remark.

As already mentioned, Ibáñez Amézaga (1993) states that the opinions of the people working in the business world should become one of the basic filters used in the identification and analysis of students’ needs. This means that teaching tasks should not be detached from the real world. This is related to what Flowerdew & Peacock (2001) say about choosing content that is most relevant to learners’ goals and most likely to motivate students. According to Belcher (2006), using a narrow approach to LSP courses, i.e., one which focuses on immediate domain-specific language and related tasks, may prove most useful to graduate students, pilots or nurses.

Finally, as Eslami (2010) points out the use of technology, together with student-centred approaches to teaching, are key to developing an LSP course. Technology, such as digitized video and audio-streaming are vital to provide more opportunities of exposure to the target language by using authentic materials. However, not everybody has the same possibilities to access the internet and online resources, which means this is something that should be taken into account.

Besides, not all the students may have the same computer skills, which means this also has to be considered when devising the tasks and activities of the course.

AN INSTANCE OF A QUESTIONNAIRE THAT CAN BE USED TO CARRY OUT A NEEDS ANALYSIS

Questionnaires, together with interviews, seem to be the most common tools to establish students' needs. This questionnaire may be used as an example of a suitable tool used to identify the needs of the attendants to an ESP course, in this case to an online course specifically designed for helicopter pilots, taking into account all the above-mentioned factors.

Do you have any working experience as a helicopter pilot?

If so, how long have you worked as a pilot? Where? When?

Why do you want to do this course? Tick all the answers you consider relevant.

For promotion at work	
To improve a skill you need in your job	
To update your knowledge of the language	
Other reasons. Please specify them	

If you have no working experience, do you have any qualifications as a pilot? If so, which qualification(s) do you have?

Do you want to do this course to help you enter the labour market?

Do you have any qualifications in English? If so, which qualification(s) do you have?

When did you obtain them?

What was your level of English at the time?

(1.- very good, 2.- good, 3.- OK, 4.- bad, 5.- very bad)

How would you assess yourself at present as regards these skills and language elements?

(1.- very good, 2.- good, 3.- OK, 4.- bad, 5.- very bad):

	1	2	3	4	5
Reading					
Listening					
Speaking					
Writing					
Grammar					
Pronunciation					
Knowledge of work-related vocabulary					

What do you think you need to focus on in this course? Tick all the answers you consider relevant.

Reading	
Listening	
Speaking	
Writing	
Grammar	
Pronunciation	
Work-related vocabulary	
Other linguistic aspects. Please specify them	

Which of these aspects will you need when working as a helicopter pilot? Tick all the answers you consider relevant.

Reading	
Listening	
Speaking	
Writing	
Good command of grammar	
Good pronunciation	
Knowledge of work-related vocabulary	
Other skills or linguistic aspects. Please specify them.	

Can you access the internet easily?

How would you assess your computer skills?

(1.- very good, 2.- good, 3.- OK, 4.- bad, 5.- very bad)

Would you like to use online tools and resources in this course? Why (not)?

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