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## **Proposing a comprehensive framework for needs analysis in ESP – on the integrality of needs analysis in Business English course design**

**ABSTRACT.** The present paper discusses the importance of needs analysis in ESP. By delving into different theories, the author's overall objective is to scrutinize a wide spectrum of existing frameworks that would lead to a single, comprehensive model for needs assessment. The impact of the said approaches on course design is underlined with the particular example of Business English. Ultimately, the author unveils a framework which could serve as a basis for syllabus design in all types of ESP courses.

**KEYWORDS:** needs analysis, ESP, Business English, course design, syllabus design, target situation analysis, learning situation analysis.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Needs analysis (also known as needs assessment) has a vital role in the process of designing and conducting any language course, be it English for Legal Purposes (ELP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP), Business English (BE) or any other English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. Its centrality has been acknowledged by such prominent researchers as Munby (1978), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Berwick (1989), Brindley (1989), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Hamp-Lyons (2001), Finney (2002), Belcher et al. (2011).

The hands-on approach to language teaching in ESP constitutes the distinguishing element when compared to teaching EGP. Learners are taught to accomplish tasks in the foreign language that they are familiar with from

their professional environment. This kind of language teaching and learning brings the task to the forefront of the foreign language classroom (Hyland 2002; Nunan 2004; Willis 1996; Ellis 2003).

In the process of needs analysis, it is essential to establish whose needs we are interested in. This also involves consideration of not just one perspective or one context but multiple perspectives and multiple contexts. Needs may be investigated from the perspective of teachers, that of the learners or that of the employers who are funding the language course. Then within the learner group itself, perspectives on what can be learned, what should be learned and why will differ from one learner to another (Robinson 1991; Long 2005).

McDonough (1984: 29) states that the language needs of the learner should constitute the basis for a course development, because this piece of information will help in establishing coherent objectives, and taking subsequent decisions on the course content.

## 2. ANALYSING LEARNERS' NEEDS

It is important to be aware of the fact that any needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching – it is present in all sorts of training programmes – nor, within language teaching, is it unique to LSP and hence to ESP (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 122). Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Belcher et al. (2011) suggest that needs analysis is in fact a crucial feature of ESP courses. Basturkmen (2010) argues that needs analysis should be the defining, characteristic feature of LSP. In addition, needs analysis bridges the classroom situation, typically characterized by the presence of pre-service (rather than in-service) students, and the target environment, in which the newly acquired language skills will be used by course participants (Long 2005; Belcher 2009).

Before we delve into discussing different types of needs, it must be emphasized that there is a great difference between perception of a need in General English courses and ESP courses, such as Business English. In ESP teaching, the learner's needs are most often described in terms of performance, i.e., in terms of what they will be capable of doing at the end of a course of study. In the case of General English course, the goal is a general mastery of the language that can be tested on any language exam globally, the ESP course aims at preparing learners to perform a specific task or a set of tasks related to professional contexts (Richards 2001: 33).

It is considered that the needs of a General English learner, e.g., a school-child, are not specifiable. On the other hand, in the case of any ESP course,

where learners, sponsors and teachers know why learning English is needed, this awareness will have a great impact on the content of a course. Thus, what distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 53). Having that in mind, needs analysis has to be perceived as the cornerstone of ESP, which leads to a very focused course (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 122).

Hence, needs analysis is the process of establishing 'what' and 'how' of a course. Frendo (2005) states that it is a blend of information-gathering activities which use a variety of different perspectives. The power of needs analysis does not lie in simply collecting data but rather in its interpretation and use. Therefore, as indicated by Belcher (2009), the aim of needs analysis is to collect and examine information about the current situation, i.e., what skills and knowledge learners have before the course begins, and the target situation, which is where they would like to be at the end of the course. It is the understanding of this gap in the existing knowledge and skills of the learners, which leads to the course design.

Needs analysis requires a lot of teachers' work beforehand. Before a trainer can approach students, they should review the literature, research findings and available materials to obtain some background knowledge about the company or the prospective students' working environment. It is crucial, because the information obtained from clients or students will only be as good as the question asked and the analysis of the answers carried out (Sobkowiak 2008: 49–50). Thanks to such an attitude, a teacher would:

- know what questions to ask,
- not waste students' time,
- appear much more professional, and
- know how to analyse the data.

Berwick (1989: 62) posits that a very important point in any data collecting is to know in advance what will happen to the raw data and to the information derived from it. Much time and effort may be wasted in gathering answers which cannot be interpreted or lead to even more questions. We need to know exactly what we want to find out and what we will do with answers before we start.

### 3. TYPES OF NEEDS

The concept of needs and needs analysis has evolved since 1960s and resulted in a confusing plethora of terms. Needs are described as 'objective' and 'subjective' (Brindley 1989: 65), 'perceived' and 'felt' (Berwick 1989: 55), 'target situation/goal-oriented' and 'learning', 'process-oriented' and 'prod-

uct-oriented' (Brindley 1989: 63). What is more, there are 'necessities', 'wants' and 'lacks' (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 55). All of these terms have been introduced to describe the different factors and perspectives which contributed to the development of the concept of needs.

To give a general view, objective and perceived needs are seen as derived by outsiders such as co-workers, teachers and sponsors from facts, whereas subjective and felt needs are those which represent the insiders' perspective and correspond to cognitive and affective factors. Thus, the abilities to follow instructions accurately or to participate in negotiations with foreign partners are regarded as objective/perceived needs, whereas feeling confident or being better at grammar and speaking stand for subjective/felt needs. Similarly, product-oriented needs derive from the goal or target situation while process-oriented needs derive from the learning situation (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 123, Frendo 2005: 16).

TSA Target Situation Analysis	objective, perceived and product-oriented needs, e.g.: <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I have occasional meetings with British colleagues.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Student X needs to read more widely.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I have to write reports.</i>
LSA Learning Situation Analysis	subjective, felt and process-oriented needs, e.g.: <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I need to see vocabulary written down.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I pick things up by listening.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I like problem solving.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I hate group work.</i>
PSA Present Situation Analysis	strengths and weaknesses in language, skills, learning experiences, e.g.: <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I find it difficult to write persuasively</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I get my tenses mixed up.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>My problem is finding the right word.</i>

Figure 1. Needs analysis

The said pairs can also be considered as corresponding to a 'target situation analysis (TSA)', a 'learning situation analysis (LSA)' and the third piece - a 'present situation analysis (PSA)' as depicted in Figure 1 (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 123). The target situation analysis concentrates on what the learner needs to do in the target situation. It can be further subcategorized into: (1) necessities; what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation, (2) lacks; the discrepancy between the necessity and what the learner already knows, (3) wants; what the learner actually wants to learn or what they feel they need. If the target situation analysis tries to establish what the learners are expected to be like at the end of the

language course, the present situation analysis attempts to identify what they are like at the beginning of it. Sobkowiak (2008: 60) notices that PSA estimates strengths and weaknesses in language, skills and learning experiences. If the destination point to which the students need to get is to be established (TSA), first the starting point has to be defined, and this is provided by means of PSA. Last but not least, the learning situation analysis (LSA) seeks an answer to the question who the learners are, why they have decided to take up the course, what their preferences are in terms of learning styles, strategies and techniques.

In addition to the needs analysis as provided above, conducting a means analysis is also advisable. Means analysis looks at the environment in which a course will be run: what is available in terms of equipment, facilities, time and materials, and what is not (Frendo 2005: 25–26).

All of the approaches mentioned above were included in the concept of needs analysis as devised by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 125), presented in Figure 2. According to the authors, needs analysis in ESP should encompass determining the following aspects:

- a. professional information about the learners: the tasks and activities learners are/will be using English for (target situation analysis and objective needs),
- b. personal information about the learners: factors influencing the way they learn such as their previous learning experiences, cultural information, reasons for attending the course and expectations of it, attitude to English (wants, means, subjective needs),
- c. English language information about the learners: what their current language use and skills are (present situation analysis),
- d. learners lacks: the gap between (C) and (A) (lacks),
- e. language learning information: effective ways of learning the skills and language in (D) (learning needs),
- f. professional communication information about (A): knowledge of how language and skills are used in the target situation (linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, genre analysis),
- g. what is wanted from the course (course expectations and requirements),
- h. information about the environment in which the course will be run (means analysis).

Other approaches to needs analysis have also been proposed, e.g., pedagogic needs analysis. The notion was put forward by West (1994), who stated that shortcomings of target needs analysis should be compensated for by collecting data about the learner and the learning environment. The term 'pedagogic needs analysis' covers deficiency analysis, strategy analysis or learning needs analysis, and means analysis.

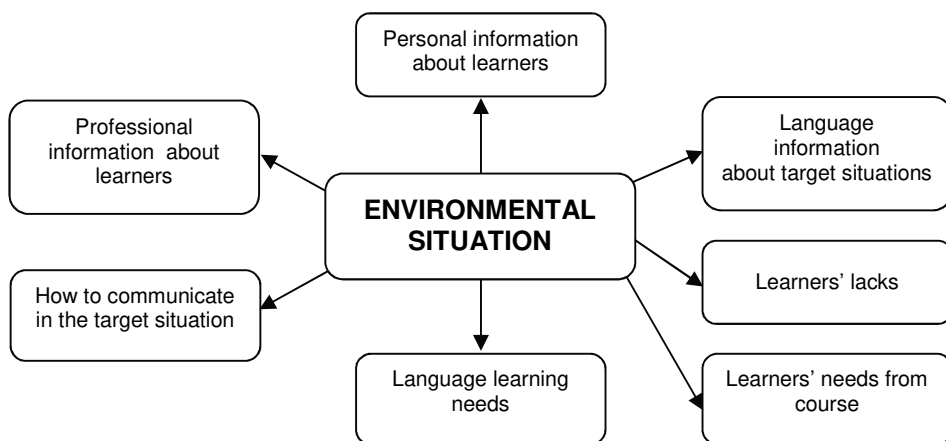


Figure 2. What needs analysis establishes (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 125)

#### 4. BUSINESS NEEDS

In the case of teaching Business English, understanding business needs is of critical importance. Such courses imply taking into consideration the needs of a sponsor, i.e., a company or a head of department, as they also have certain perspectives and/or demands on what should be covered during the course. It has to be kept in mind that a company pays for training, therefore it expects that this will lead to a kind of profit, such as: more motivated employees, more effective negotiators, better presenters or managers (Frendo 2005: 26).

As has already been mentioned, in order to obtain information on business needs, it is advisable to learn as much as possible about the company before the course commences (Frendo 2005: 26). Another important aspect to be taken into account, thoroughly analysed by Ellis and Johnson (1994: 57), refers to the various functions of the learners, the jobs they are performing as well as their place in the company's hierarchy. Even if the learners have not started their jobs yet, it will be possible to predict the overall category they are most likely going to fit into, and as a result, to estimate their future needs and, on this basis, what should be included in the course. The authors distinguish between three job categories: managerial, technical and secretarial/clerical positions, and provide a general outline of needs for each group.

In addition, Ellis and Johnson (1994: 62–65) took into consideration departmental differences within a company and their impact on the training needs of people who belong to them. They differentiated between the needs of marketing and sales, human resources, finance, and production. The area

of business which each learner deals with will have great influence on their business needs, as well. For instance, engineers will be more eager to learn about materials, technical specifications, describing processes and comparing old and new systems. Specialists in finances will be more interested in the language of financial documents and reports, negotiating deals and loans, whereas marketers and sales people will be especially involved in the process of getting a product to the customer, terms of payments and delivery (Ellis & Johnson 1994: 62-70). The next step is finally meeting the various stakeholders: learners, sponsors, HR department and finding out what they are expecting the teacher to provide (Frendo 2005: 27).

## 5. SOURCES AND METHODS FOR NEEDS ANALYSIS

As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 132) claim, the main sources for needs analysis may be the following:

- learners
- people working or studying in the field
- ex-students
- documents relevant to the field
- clients
- employers,
- colleagues
- ESP research in the field.

In order to evaluate the needs in a thorough and reliable way, it is crucial to gather as much information as possible. It is the instructor's task to analyse available documents, investigate how compatible the existing ESP research is to the new educational context as well as interview all the persons concerned whose ideas and opinions might be useful at a later stage.

We may collect data for needs analysis using various methods, e.g.:

- checklists and questionnaires
- structured interviews
- observations
- analysis of authentic spoken and written texts
- discussions
- assessments.

In general, questionnaires are more wide-ranging than checklists and need a very careful construction, whereas checklists are narrower in terms of scope and may be used to determine facts and attitudes. Preparing a good questionnaire is difficult, especially when one has to deal with a large number of learners and, as a result, a lot of data is to be analysed. All question-

naires should be piloted before they are used on a large scale, and the results should be examined using statistical techniques. They are recommended rather as one among several methods for obtaining information than the only one applied (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 133).

Structured interviews are extremely useful in needs analysis since they are carefully planned and consist of questions which may be planned in an effective way and selected in advance. They are time-consuming, however, they provide a lot of valuable information that the teacher may not otherwise obtain. The interview should be limited in time and preferably recorded, so that the interviewer can focus on active listening, not just note-taking. The real art is to gain the maximally relevant information in the minimum time. It is important for interviewers to be able to listen actively, summarise and ask open questions whenever it is needed (Robinson 1991).

On the other hand, observation may cover a variety of activities, such as watching a particular task being performed to work-shadowing, i.e., following everything an individual does for a block of time, e.g., a day. Shadowing a learner at work helps to understand the business situations in which English is used, however, for many it may be a sensitive issue of confidentiality and for others it results in a feeling of threat at having their movements watched and words recorded. The task of the observer is to reassure the learner, explain the purpose and even show the results of previous observations or shadowing in order to gain their confidence. Most observation is for the purposes of Target Situation Analysis (TSA), but it may also be useful for the Present Situation Analysis (PSA) of a particular individual or a group of individuals, if English is a medium of communication (Frendo 2005: 27).

An analysis of authentic texts is a very important stage of needs analysis. The texts may include written documents or recordings of different events such as meetings, telephone conversations or classroom activities. Authentic texts are crucial for learning about real and carrier content. They may be useful for TSA and PSA purposes, and they may be adapted to comprise some classroom materials (McDonough 1984).

While all of the methods mentioned above require advance preparation, discussion may be more spontaneous and informal. They may be treated as an introduction to other methods of needs analysis or be an end in themselves. Discussions may be useful as a tool for on-going analysis and evaluation of activities and the course as well as expressing needs that generated during the course. However, it is important to check whether the opinions are representative of the whole group or only reflect the view of more confident minority (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: 137).

Assessment includes formal and informal judgments of students' performance. Testing or assignments may be used as a pre-course PSA



(Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 55–56). The results obtained from a needs analysis are not absolute but relative. The findings depend on the person asking, questions asked and interpretation carried out. What is more, what we ask and how we interpret depends on the particular view of the world, on attitudes and values as well as on a specific situation. A very important factor to be taken into consideration when planning a Business English course, or any ESP course, is that it is rarely long enough to cover all learners' needs. That is why, a crucial ability of a teacher is to prioritise and select the essentials.

## 6. A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP

Having discussed all the relevant theoretical underpinnings, it would seem natural now to propose a comprehensive framework for needs analysis to be used in various types of ESP courses. It is the author's intention to clarify which aspects of needs assessment require a thorough examination. Therefore, a model consisting of questions to be used while analyzing a particular teaching context has been created. It involves four subtypes of needs analysis as discussed earlier, namely: target situation analysis, learning situation analysis, present situation analysis and means analysis. The suggested framework can further be expanded depending on the specificity of taught courses, course organizers, students and instructors.

Within TSA, we can find questions concerning numerous issues related to the attitudes towards the target situation of the participants involved in the learning process. The course designer is inclined to gather the answers to the questions indicated below.

### Target situation analysis (TSA)

1. Why is the language needed?
  - a) for study
  - b) for work
  - c) for training
  - d) for a combination of these
  - e) for other purposes, e.g., during an examination, for career advancement
2. How will the language be used?
  - a) as a medium: speaking, writing, reading, etc.
  - b) as a channel: e.g., on the telephone, face to face
  - c) in a text or discourse: e.g., an academic text, lectures, catalogues, etc.

3. What will the content area be?
  - a) in terms of subject/field of study: e.g., medicine, biology, commerce, law, etc.
  - b) in terms of participants' level: in-service technicians, postgraduate students, etc.
4. Where will the language be used?
  - a) in a physical setting: e.g., office, lecture theater, hotel, workshop, library
  - b) in a human context: during meetings, experiments, on the telephone
  - c) in a linguistic context: e.g., in one's own country, abroad
5. When will the language be used?
  - a) concurrently with the ESP course or subsequently
  - b) frequently, seldom, in small amounts, in large chunks

The instructor's aim is to collect the information on their learners' needs. Therefore, the potentials and constraints of the learning situation must be considered. In order to identify them, another set of issues may be useful.

#### Learning situation analysis (LSA)

1. Why are the learners taking the course?
  - a) is it compulsory or optional
  - b) for an apparent need or not
  - c) are status, money, promotion involved
2. What do the learners think they will achieve?
  - a) they will get a job offer
  - b) they will upgrade on a career ladder
  - c) they will change their social status, etc.
3. What is the learners' attitude towards the ESP course? Do they want to improve their English or do they resent the time they have to spend on it?
4. How do the learners learn?
  - a) What is their learning background?
  - b) What is their concept of teaching and learning?
  - c) What methodology will appeal to them?
  - d) What sort of techniques bore/alienate them?
5. What will be available/offered throughout the course?
  - a) a teacher's competence and professional attitude
  - b) a teacher's attitude to ESP
  - c) a teacher's knowledge of and attitude to subject content
  - d) good quality teaching materials
  - e) good quality teaching aids
  - f) opportunities for out-of-class activities

6. Who are the learners?
  - a) age
  - b) sex
  - c) nationality
7. What do they already know about English?
8. What subject knowledge do they have?
9. What are their interests?
10. What is their socio-cultural background?
11. What teaching styles are they used to?
12. What is their attitude to English or to the cultures of the English-speaking world?

For a successful diagnosis of PSA, we should be concerned with the information regarding language items, skills, strategies and subject knowledge - all referring to our future course participants.

#### Present situation analysis (PSA)

1. How long have they been learning English?
2. What is their language level?
3. What is their level of education?
4. Which skills in English have been well-developed?
5. Which skills have to be worked on?
6. What is their knowledge of structures and lexis?
7. What are their preferences regarding the time of studying?
8. What strategies do they use? Do they require strategy training?

The technical side of any course is undeniably of great importance. To recognize the prospective environment where the process of teaching will take place, any teacher will be ready to collect the information with the use of the questions listed below.

#### Means analysis (MA)

1. What facilities are available, e.g., rooms, seating, location?
2. What equipment is available, e.g., boards, flipcharts, cameras, projectors?
3. How much time is available to design the course and prepare materials?
4. How much time is available for training?
5. What is the availability of suitable materials?
6. What time of the day will learners be available?

Needs analysis should be seen as an indispensable aspect of ESP syllabus design in order to link the present students' academic needs with the needs resulting from their prospective employment. It involves not only the students but also all the parties in the educational system and relevant employers.

## 7. CONCLUSION

As indicated earlier various researchers and practitioners, such as Munby (1978), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Berwick (1989), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Sobkowiak (2008), Belcher et al. (2011) thoroughly investigated the abundance of approaches to needs analysis in order to meet the needs of learners in the process of learning an ESP. It is hard to say if a single approach to needs analysis can be a reliable indicator of what is needed to enhance learning. The proposed comprehensive concept of needs analysis encompasses all the features necessary to complete the jigsaw of needs analysis felt and demanded by learners. It should be stated that the numerous models discussed in this paper are not exclusive, but they need to be viewed as complementary.

Most of all, it should be stressed that both target situation needs and learning needs should be taken into account. To better understand the process, each ESP instructor must know how people learn to do what they do with the language, which leads us to a learning-centred approach to needs analysis. Besides, as our syllabus will be based on the learners' needs, it is likely to be motivating for them. As a result, they will be able to notice the obvious relevance of what they are studying and will hopefully combine it with their professional career.

Last but not least, as needs analysis is directly related to the design of ESP courses, it becomes obvious that the success of needs analysis lies in the potential of its findings to inform the development of the syllabus of the ESP course in question (Basturkmen 2010). Interestingly, it seems that on the basis of the suggested framework teachers will be able to better design a syllabus for their own course. Course designers need to look beyond the self-perceived needs of the students by including the valid requirements and observations of other stakeholders – the institution's requirements and the instructor's teaching experience. Hence, the aim is to create a learning environment that is dynamic, stimulating and responsive to the future target situations in which learners will function with the knowledge, skills and competences gained in a particular ESP course.

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