

Developments in English for Specific Purposes

A multi-disciplinary approach

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7 Needs analysis and evaluation

7.1 Aims

The key stages in ESP are needs analysis, course (and syllabus) design, materials selection (and production), teaching and learning, and evaluation. These are not separate, linearly-related activities, rather they represent phases which overlap and are interdependent. The simplicity and clarity of figure 7.1 is in reality more like figure 7.2.

This cyclical representation places evaluation and needs analysis, seemingly at opposite ends of a time span, in adjacent positions – and even allows them to overlap. Needs analysis is the process of establishing the *what* and *how* of a course; evaluation is the process of establishing the effectiveness. Neither of these are one-off activities – they both need to be on-going.

An initial pre-course needs analysis and a final end- or post-course evaluation have different aims and perspectives. On the other hand, on-going needs analysis within a course and formative evaluation have much in common. Robinson (1991: 16) comments that 'repeated needs analysis can be built into the formative evaluation' process. We support Brown's (1989: 223) suggestion that 'the difference between needs

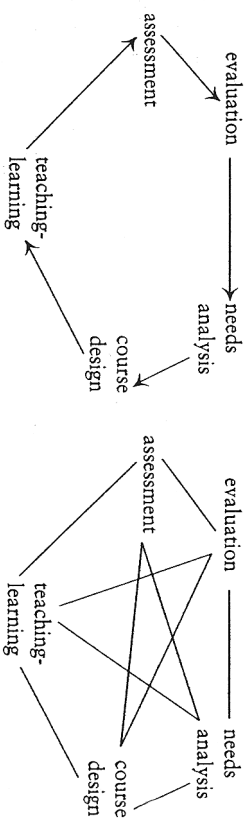


Figure 7.1 Stages in the ESP process: theory

Figure 7.2 Stages in the ESP process: reality

(C)

analysis and program evaluation may be more one of focus than of the actual activities involved'.

In this chapter we will look at both needs analysis and evaluation. We will look at the fundamentals of each, focusing on the similarities and differences between them. We will look at the issues in actually carrying out needs analysis or evaluation and show that the three steps involved in each, mainly collecting data, analysing data and implementing the results, are very similar.

7.2 Needs analysis

Needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching – needs assessment, for example, is the basis of training programmes and aid-development programmes – nor, within language training, is it unique to LSP and thus to ESP. However, needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course.

Within ESP the definitions of needs and needs analysis have broadened with experience and research. For instance, in the 1960s and early 1970s, literature and language trained English teachers, faced with teaching science students English for their subject studies, knew very little of the 'what' or 'how' of those studies and concomitantly little about the language of science and technology.

Data collection therefore began from first principles, and language analysis was influenced by the General English stance and by approaches in linguistics and register analysis which helped to define needs as discrete language items of grammar and vocabulary. When Munby (1978) published his *Communicative Syllabus Design*, the English language teaching world had begun to recognise that function and situation were also fundamental. Munby provided detailed lists of microfunctions in his communicative needs processor; what he did not include was how to prioritise them or any of the affective factors which today, with our broader knowledge and understanding of language and language learning, we recognise as important.

Teachers or trainers setting out nowadays to determine learners' needs begin from a different and broader base. Before they approach clients and students they can trawl the literature for previous needs analyses, available materials, research findings. Not only are they able to do so but we believe that they must. The information obtained from clients and students will only be as good as (a) the questions asked and (b) the analysis of the answers. For example, neither of us have ever worked with police forces or on board ship and we know nothing about how either group operates. If we went straight to them, we would have

to ask a great many questions, we would probably not distinguish the relevant from the trivial, and we would probably have as many questions at the end as we began with.

Instead we would do some groundwork which would include checking the literature for relevant articles, looking for ESP teaching material, contacting colleagues and organisations who might have experience of such groups, reading material about the subject or discipline. We would want to be as knowledgeable as possible beforehand because then we would:

- know what we did not know – that is, we would know what to ask;
- not waste our clients' or students' time;
- appear much more professional;
- know how we should analyse the data.

A crucial point, whenever data is being collected, is to know beforehand what will happen to the raw data and to the information derived from it. Much time and effort can be wasted in gathering responses that cannot be interpreted or lead to more questions rather than answers. As ESP practitioners we need to know exactly what we are trying to find out and what we will do with the answers before we start (Berwick, 1989: 62).

7.2.1 What is meant by needs?

One difference between now and the 1960s is what we understand by the concept of needs and needs analysis. A confusing plethora of terms exists: needs are described as *objective* and *subjective* (Brindley, 1989: 65), *perceived* and *felt* (Berwick, 1989: 55), *target situation* (Brindley, 1989: 63); in addition, there are *necessities*, *wants and lacks* (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 55). These terms have been introduced to describe the different factors and perspectives which have helped the concept of needs to grow. Each of these terms represents a different philosophy or educational value, and merits careful thought.

Briefly, objective and perceived needs are seen as derived by outsiders from facts, from what is known and can be verified, while subjective and felt needs are derived from insiders and correspond to cognitive and affective factors. Thus, 'to be able to follow instructions accurately' is an objective/perceived need. 'To feel confident' is a subjective/felt need. Similarly, product-oriented needs derive from the goal or target situation and process-oriented needs derive from the learning situation.

These pairs can be seen as corresponding to a *target situation analysis* (TSA) and a *learning situation analysis* (LSA); a third piece of the jigsaw

is what learners already know, a *present situation analysis (PSA)*, from which we can deduce their lacks. Thus, a TSA includes objective, perceived and product-oriented needs; an ISA includes subjective, felt and process-oriented needs; a PSA estimates strengths and weaknesses in language, skills, learning experiences.

Task 7a ⇔

Group the following statements under the headings target situation analysis (TSA), learning situation analysis (LSA) and present situation analysis (PSA).

1. I need to see vocabulary written down.
2. I have occasional meetings with British colleagues.
3. I find it difficult to write persuasively.
4. I pick things up by listening.
5. Student X needs to read more widely.
6. I like problem solving.
7. I get my tenses mixed up.
8. I hate group work.
9. I have to write reports.
10. My problem is finding the right word.

To establish a workable course design, means analysis is suggested (Holliday and Cooke, 1982: 133) as an adjunct to needs analysis. Means analysis looks at the environment in which a course will be run or, as in the original metaphor that generated the term, the environment in which a project will take root, grow healthily and survive. The two key factors considered are the classroom culture and the management infrastructure and culture. An important perspective is that these are viewed not as negative constraints but as relevant features. The negative-constraints view corresponds to: 'ideally we would do . . . but it is not possible so we will compromise and do . . .'. The relevant-features perspective is a positive approach which says: 'what will be best in this particular and given situation?'

Means analysis is an acknowledgement that what works well in one situation may not work in another. While hotel staff around the world may share some similar language needs, how they learn the language, the conditions in which they are learning and where and how they apply the language are not the same. So the needs, and how they are prioritised, ordered and then met will be different.

7.2.2 A current concept of needs analysis

We see today's concept of needs analysis including aspects of all these approaches. Needs analysis in ESP, figure 7.3 below, now encompasses determining:

- 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 which may affect the way they learn such as 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 skills and language use are – *present situation analysis* – which allows us to assess (D)
- D. the 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
- H. information about the environment in which the course will be run – *means analysis*

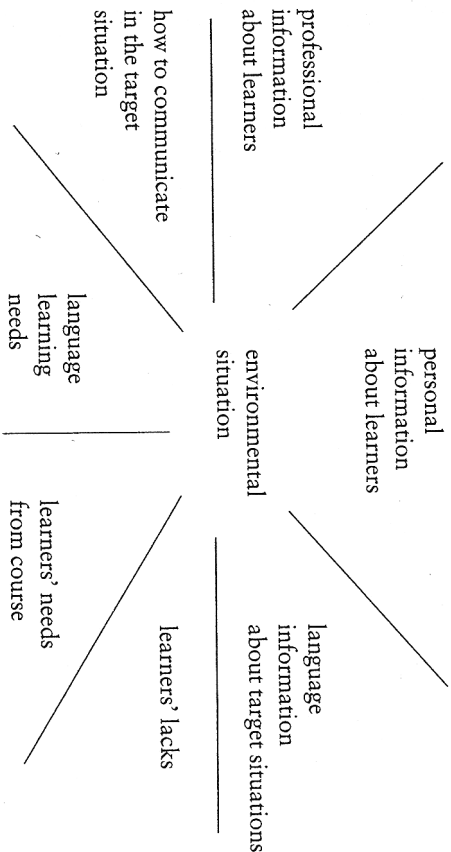


Figure 7.3 What needs analysis establishes

The aim is to know learners as people, as language users and as language learners; to know how language learning and skills learning can be maximised for a given learner group; and finally to know the target situations and learning environment such that we can interpret the data appropriately.

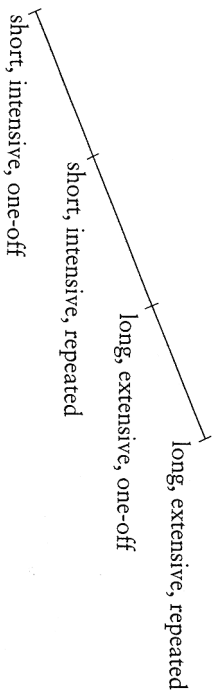
7.2.3 The non-uniqueness of needs analysis

The findings from a needs analysis are not absolute but relative and there is no single, unique set of needs. The findings depend on who asks what questions and how the responses are interpreted. What we ask and how we interpret are dependent on a particular view of the world, on attitudes and values. Berwick makes the point that 'our perceptions of need develop from what we believe is educationally worthwhile, that needs are not simply "out there" waiting to be counted and measured' (p. 56). Users of needs analysis must recognise this and try to ensure that the view of the world which is applied is congruent with the situation rather than in conflict with it. This view will also affect what, at the course design stage, is prioritised within a given set of needs.

7.2.4 Matching needs analysis to situation

In theory, needs analysis is a first step carried out before a course so that a course outline, materials and other resources can be in place before teaching begins. Practice may be rather different.

The way in which needs analysis is actually approached and conducted will differ according to each situation. Needs analysis and courses are not mounted in a vacuum and must be developed around available human and material resources. (The four case studies in chapter 8 illustrate this.) Other variables that are influential can be represented on a course cline of:



The amount of data collected and when it is collected may be very different at opposite ends of the cline. In a situation where the course is

repeated, with large numbers of students, substantial advance needs analysis may be possible and justified. This often happens in EAP situations when a new course is devised or an existing one revised (Hewings and Dudley-Evans, 1996; Rea-Dickins and Iwaitama, 1995). In contrast, many EOP courses are one-off, cater for a handful of people and may be held at quite short notice. Often, participants can provide some pre-course information (see Extract E.7.1, pp. 140-41) that provides a framework for course design. However, sometimes there is no opportunity to obtain information from participants until they arrive. These are situations where trawling for as much background on the Target Situation as possible, asking pertinent questions on arrival, and evaluating and adapting throughout the course is the practical approach. The initial framework may have to change. Certainly the detail will have to be negotiated jointly while the course is running.

A word of warning: we must distinguish between overall needs and course needs. This is our point (G) in the list of what constitutes needs analysis (p. 125). The following cautionary tale indicates why. In the mid-1980s, as part of a joint research project between a British and a Spanish university, an analysis of Spanish science researchers' English needs was carried out. The needs analysis showed that all the researchers needed to read English-medium journal articles, some of them needed writing. On the basis of that, a one-week course (10 hours, 2 hours per day) was devised around skills and language development for reading scientific articles. After the first session, the participants all said it was very interesting but that what they needed from the course was writing; if necessary, they could read a text over and over again with a dictionary and work out the meaning for themselves. The result? On-the-spot planning and an instant writing course - with some long late nights of preparation - and all because one question had not been asked:

What do you need/want from the course?

The questions had all been around:

What do you need English for?

An additional factor is that an ESP course is rarely long enough to cover all that learners need. Thus, both at the needs analysis stage, and when we meet with the learners, we need information that will help us select and prioritise. For example: What could cause communication breakdown? What are the absolute essentials? (see chapter 8).