

DESIGNING AN ESP COURSE ACCORDING TO WHAT STUDENTS WANT AND NEED. AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT. *Designing and ESP course according to what students want and need. An analysis of students' needs and expectations.* Starting from the premise that, in designing a course of English for Specific Purposes, the language instructor should also check and take into account what students want, the purpose of this article is to present information about the proficiency and diagnostic test and the needs analysis questionnaire applied to some first-year students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies within Babeş-Bolyai University. The findings of our study showed the needs and the problems of our students, and revealed that they want to improve their communication, grammar, and writing skills, but they also want the English course to be enjoyable and to focus on various specialised topics, not only on their specific field of study.

Keywords: *initial test, needs analysis, questionnaire, ESP, course design, European Studies, skills.*

REZUMAT. *Elaborarea unui curs de limba engleză pentru scopuri specifice în funcție de ceea ce studenții doresc și le este util. O analiză a nevoilor și așteptărilor studenților.* Pornind de la premisa că, în elaborarea unui curs de limba engleză pentru scopuri specifice, profesorul de limbă trebuie să verifice și să ia în considerare și ceea ce își doresc studenții, prezentul articolul își propune să prezinte informații referitoare la testul inițial și la chestionarul privind analiza de nevoi aplicate studenților din anul întâi înscriși la Facultatea de Studii Europene din cadrul Universității Babeş-Bolyai. Rezultatul studiului nostru evidențiază problemele cu care se confruntă studenții, nevoile acestora, precum și faptul că aceștia vor să își îmbunătățească abilitățile de comunicare, gramaticale și

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de scriere în limba engleză și că își doresc să participe la un curs de limbă care să fie plăcut și care să se concentreze pe diferite teme de specialitate, nu doar pe cele specifice domeniului lor de studiu.

Cuvinte-cheie: *test inițial, analiză de nevoi, chestionar, engleză pentru scopuri specifice, designul cursului, studii europene, abilități.*

Introduction

The methods of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) generally and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) particularly have greatly changed over the past two-three decades in Romania. If, at the beginning of the 1990s, ESL courses focused mostly on written tasks (grammar and vocabulary exercises), in the past years the emphasis has moved to the communicative language teaching method.

The emergence of ESP as a subdomain of ESL has brought more importance to the usage of English in various specialised fields and is meant to help English language learners “play” easily with words and phrases according to their field of interest.

Whether we speak about a General English course or about an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, the first step in the design of the learner-centred English syllabus and course materials is a *needs analysis*. This is of utmost importance to find out not only what students want, but most importantly what students need in terms of grammar and vocabulary. *Needs analysis* provides even better answers if a needs analysis questionnaire is corroborated with a (proficiency and diagnostic) test.

Literature review

ESP and *needs analysis* go hand in hand, and it is important to analyse them together. In terms of definitions, the Online Cambridge Dictionary defines *ESP* as “the teaching of English for use in a particular area of activity, for example, business or science.”² A more comprehensive definition would be the one provided by Richards & Schmidt: “the role of English in a language course or programme of instruction in which the content and aims of the course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners.” (Richards & Schmidt 2010, 198). In what *needs analysis* is concerned, several definitions have been

² The Online Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/esp>.

put forward (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Altschuld and Witkin, 1995; Brown, 1995; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Richards, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Boshier & Smalkoski, 2002; Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman, 2004; Richards & Schmidt, 2010, just to mention a few). Part of curriculum development, *needs analysis* (also known as *needs assessment*) represents “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities” (Richards & Schmidt 2010, 389). Another comprehensive definition is the one provided by Brown:

The systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation. (Brown 1995, 36 *apud* Brown 2016, 4)

The importance of *needs analysis* is undeniable as it is meant to answer questions referring to “*who* it will be used *with*”, what types of communication should be included, as well as the learners’ proficiency levels. *Needs analysis* uses both objective and subjective data, which is collected through various instruments: questionnaires and diagnostic tests to collect objective information; interviews and learners’ observation to collect subjective information (Richards & Schmidt 2010, 389).

Building on the information presented, our own general definition of *needs analysis* would be: *needs analysis* represents the process involving various *methods* (e.g.: questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation, etc.) and *stakeholders* (e.g. language learners, language instructors, universities, companies, etc.), from whom information is gathered in order to identify the *stakeholders’* needs and wants for the development of a comprehensive *syllabus* meant to improve the learners’ language level in terms of listening, reading, writing, spoken production and spoken interaction.

In the case of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, *needs analysis* is even more necessary, the two notions being intertwined. ESP cannot exist and be developed “without knowing what the learners’ *specific needs* are” (Brown 2016, 5). When an English for Specific Purposes course comes into question, our own definition can be made more specific: *needs analysis* represents the process involving various *methods* (e.g.: questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation, etc.) and *stakeholders* (e.g. language learners, language instructors, universities, companies, etc.), from whom information is gathered in order to identify the *stakeholders’ needs, wants* and *expectations* for the development of a comprehensive *syllabus* meant to improve the learners’ language level in terms of listening, reading, writing, spoken production and spoken interaction *in a specific field of activity* (e.g. European Studies, business, medicine, law, etc.).

Background

This article analyses the proficiency and diagnostic test, as well as the needs analysis questionnaire applied to some of the first-year students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies within Babeş-Bolyai University, with the purpose of identifying our students' needs, expectations and language problems.

Founded in 1993, the Faculty of European Studies offers students courses in European studies and international relations, management, European administration, European funds, cultural studies, and even American studies (see the website of the Faculty of European Studies³). The languages of instruction the students can choose from are Romanian, English and German. Initially first-year students had the possibility to opt for two foreign languages to study as mandatory subjects for three academic years. As of 2012, students only have one mandatory language course to study during their first academic year. This is an important piece of information as time is an essential element in designing a syllabus and preparing the course materials.

When filling in their study contracts, students have to choose a foreign language to study for one academic year. Because the minimum required level in the language they opt for is B1, students mostly choose the language they (think they) are most familiar with. However an initial test is of utmost importance because oftentimes this initial test proves that students overestimate their language skills.

Designing the initial test and the needs analysis questionnaire

At the beginning of the first semester, students always have to take a test that is meant to evaluate their language skills as thoroughly as possible. There are four possible types of testing: proficiency, placement, diagnosis, and achievement (Alderson, Krahnke & Stansfield, 1987, *apud* Brown 1995, 108). We drafted and applied a proficiency and diagnostic test to check students' initial level and, accordingly, to be able to set an appropriate course level for those students who opted for English. Ideally, this test could have also been a placement test; however, due to time and setting constraints (lack of available time intervals in the students' timetable, lack of available rooms), this option was not possible.

Based on our previous experience, we drafted the proficiency and diagnostic test meant to cover the most important grammar and vocabulary aspects in English. The test was designed under the form of a longer multiple-choice exercise, which included 100 items, where the first twenty items were easier and were meant to cover basic vocabulary and grammar aspects, such as

³ Faculty of European Studies, BBU: www.euro.ubbcluj.ro.

present tenses, interrogative forms, irregular plurals, articles, genitive forms, possessive adjectives and pronouns, adjectives and some prepositions. The following twenty were designed to cover past tenses, modal verbs, conditional sentences (types zero and one), the passive voice, -ing forms, adjectives that end in -ing and -ed, basic phrasal verbs. Items forty to sixty covered other vocabulary and grammar aspects, for example future forms, more difficult phrasal verbs, fixed expressions, prepositions, comparisons, conditional sentences (types two and three), modal verbs followed by the perfect infinitive. The next twenty items were designed to be a bit more difficult than the previous ones; we therefore included items meant to check the students' knowledge of more advanced quantifiers, expressions, sequence of tenses, mixed conditionals, whereas the last twenty items focused more on vocabulary than on grammar (idiomatic language, exceptions from grammar rules, academic English). If the students' score ranged between 0 and 20 points, they were given an A1 language level; if they scored between 21 and 40 points, they received an A2 level; if they obtained a score between 41 and 60 points, they were given a B1 level; if they scored between 61 and 80 points, they received an B2 level; if they obtained a score between 81 and 99 points, they were given a C1 level; and finally, if they made a perfect test, they received a C2 level.

Additionally, students were also asked to fill in a needs analysis questionnaire, which was designed to elicit more information about what students say they need, but also about what they want, so that the course design would also take into consideration their needs and wants. In drafting the questionnaire, we started from the assumption that students are able to self-assess their language skills, as well as their language needs. The structure of the questionnaire was designed to obtain information regarding students' motivation, expectations, abilities, problems, needs and wants⁴. We, therefore, divided our questionnaire into two larger sections.

Section 1 included five questions meant to collect general information about the students (why they opted for English (Q1), if the English language course would help them in the future and how (Q2), if they had any expectations from the English language course and if they saw any advantages in a language course meant to suit their needs (Q3), the amount of time spent outside the English classes to work on their language skills (Q4), and the elements of an enjoyable language course (Q5)). Through these questions we also wanted to check how the students wrote in English, which helped us confirm/disconfirm the score they obtained on the proficiency and diagnostic test.

Section 2 included four subsections, where students simply had to tick the option that best corresponded to their needs/wants. The first subsection

⁴ Our questionnaire was adapted from <http://www.chem.kyushu-u.ac.jp/gcoe/eng/symposium/pdf/English%20needs%20survey.pdf>, accessed on 15/09/2018.

asked them to evaluate their own language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking), as well as their knowledge of specialised terminology in their field of studies. The second subsection wanted to see if they were motivated to attend an ESP language course focused on European studies and international relations or management (according to the specialisation the students were enrolled in). The third subsection asked students about the elements that they would like to focus on during the English language course, while the fourth section included items referring to specific skills that they would want to focus on during the first semester language course.

We were able to differentiate between the students' *situation needs* and *language needs*, as well as between their *objective needs* and their *subjective needs*.

Findings

The initial test and the needs analysis questionnaire were applied to first-year students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies, specialising in European Administration (19 respondents) and in International Relations and European Studies (the English line of study, where the students study everything in English – 14 respondents, as well as the German line of study, where students have German as medium of instruction – 19 respondents). We decided to choose these three different specialisations because of the students' different perspectives on language but also because, from our past experience, students studying European Administration are known to have lower English levels, whereas those studying International Relations and European Studies in English and German are known to have better English levels.

The first question in Section 1 was designed as a very simple open-ended question (*Why did you opt for English?*) because we wanted to see, first of all, what motivated the students to (continue to) study English, and, secondly, to also check how well they could write in English. Motivation "refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language" (Gardner 1985, 10). Whether intrinsic or instrumental, "motivation is responsible for determining human behaviour by energising it and giving it direction" (Dörnyei 1998, 117). In the case of our respondents, irrespective of their specialisation, they all answered this question by emphasizing the importance of English not only for their personal lives, but also for their professional lives, which showed us they are both intrinsically and instrumentally motivated to improve their English language skills.

The purpose of the second question introduced in our questionnaire was to see their expectations regarding the way in which the English language course could help them in the future. Here, students' answers varied. Some of them (19.5%) thought about the more immediate future, mentioning that they

expected that the English language course would help them improve their speaking skills or any other weaker areas of language. Others (75.23%) thought about their long-term development, writing that their expectations were to improve their language skills to be able to make friends internationally or to work in a foreign country. The remaining 5.27% of the respondents were very unsure about their future; therefore, they did not give an exact answer to this question. Mention should be made that, generally, it was those students who had obtained lower scores on their initial test who provided more exact answers, proving this way they knew exactly what they wanted and how important English is in their personal and professional lives.

Their expectations were verified through question number three as well, because students were asked to mention what they expected from the English language course they opted for. Not surprisingly, most students (approximately 90%) answered they wanted it to be fun and enjoyable, to focus on group activities where they would have the possibility to communicate as much as possible. Modern research on language teaching and language learning focuses on *learner-centred methods*, rather than on *language-centred methods*, and the students' answers prove they prefer a *communicative approach* to language learning.

The fourth question included in section 1 of the questionnaire was again meant to indicate how motivated students are to work on their English language skills. When asked about how much time they are willing to work on their English language skills outside the regular English classes (two hours per week), 6.98% of the respondents said they spent more than one hour per day working on English outside English classes, 25.46% mentioned they spent between two hours per week and one hour per day, while 67.56% of them answered they spent two hours per week or less. The results were surprising at first, because they showed that students were willing to work extra to improve their language level; however, the percentages did not materialise after the beginning of the semester—when they received homework, very few of them did it, proving that they were not very willing to actually make an effort and work outside the English classes.

The purpose of the final question in Section 1 was to see what students like and enjoy in the learning process, and this way to respond to their wants by including in the course development materials and activities they enjoy. That is why, for question five they were asked to think about a (language) course they really enjoyed and to enumerate the elements that made that course an excellent one. Unfortunately, for this question, we did not receive as many clear answers as expected. Instead of writing clearly about the elements that made that course enjoyable, most students were quite vague and wrote they liked that particular course because “the topic was interesting”. There were, however, other students who provided clear examples. Again, most of them remembered courses that were interactive and fun, that made them work in groups, where they also learnt new information.

Section 2 of the questionnaire was divided into four smaller subsections designed using Likert-type scales. As previously mentioned, the first subsection asked the students to evaluate their own language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking). Here, we were able to compare their self-assessment (subjective evaluation) with the scores they obtained on the initial test (objective evaluation). Irrespective of their specialisation, the students with high scores on the proficiency and diagnostic test (levels B2 to C1) were able to correctly self-assess their general English language levels (i.e. B2 students ticked an “intermediate” or “upper-intermediate” level, C1-level students ticked “advanced”). The findings were more interesting for some of the students who had obtained lower scores on the initial test, as some ticked “upper-intermediate” even though they had only obtained an A2 or a B1 level on the test. This result led us to believe that they are either unfamiliar with the existing language levels (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) or they overestimate their language skills (which was quite interesting since in section 1, for question 2, those students who had obtained lower scores on their initial test were the ones who provided more exact answers, proving this way they knew exactly what they wanted to improve).

The second subsection was introduced to check the students’ interest in attending an ESP course. Therefore, the students were first asked if they were interested in attending an English course that focused on topics related to “European Studies”. They had four answers to choose from: *very interested*; *interested*; *not very interested*; and *not interested at all*. In the case of the students studying in German, 69.23% of the respondents said they were very interested in such a course, while the remaining 30.77% said they were interested. 57.14% of students from the English line of study said they were very interested, 28.57% declared they were interested, while 14.28% said they were not very interested in an ESP course on European studies. European Administration students declared they were very interested (26.31%) or interested in such a course (57.89%); only 10.52% said they were not very interested in one, while one student did not tick any option. We can therefore conclude that the majority of interviewed students would like to attend an ESP course focusing on European studies.

The purpose of the third subsection was to see the exact needs of the students according to what they consider important. Using a Likert-type scale, they had to mark the given items as being *not important*, *important* or *very important*. The items the students had to prioritise included fluency, accuracy, general English vocabulary, specialised terminology in English, as well as reading, listening and writing skills. Most of the interviewed students considered fluency, accuracy, general vocabulary and specialised vocabulary to be very important. What was interesting was the fact that among those students who did not mark ‘specialised vocabulary’ as being important are the intermediate ones, who considered all the other items more important than this one. Also, those who had

obtained high scores on the initial test did not mark reading and writing as being important priorities for them to develop further during the English class.

The fourth subsection included items related to the four major language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking, where the students had to tick the items that they would like to improve during the one-year ESP course. Using again a Likert-type scale, they had to mark each of the listed items as *not important*, *important* or *very important*. Following the analysis of this subsection, we were able to notice that, in what their listening skills are concerned, they are mostly interested in being able to listen to presentations and lectures in English. As to their reading skills, they ticked items related to the business field, such as marketing, management, project management, but also European studies. This is not surprising at all, since the website of the Faculty of European Studies informs its future students about their career opportunities, which include working for EU institutions, for central or local administrative institutions, multinational companies, business centres, etc.; therefore, business knowledge represents a must. Next, referring to their writing skills, students marked reports, translations, and business e-mails as “important” or “very important”, whereas for the last section, concerning their speaking skills, most students ticked items related to giving presentations, taking part in conferences, speaking to foreign colleagues or visitors, which shows their wish to be able to communicate on various topics related (or not) to their field of specialisation.

To sum up, through the answers the students provided in this needs analysis questionnaire and through the proficiency and diagnostic test applied to students, we were able to differentiate between their situation needs and language needs, as well as between their objective needs and their subjective needs.

Although sometimes used interchangeably (Brown 1995, 40), *situation needs* and *language needs* are different. If *situation needs* are meant to analyse the setting in which the language will be used (“administrative, financial, logistical, manpower, pedagogic, religious, cultural, personal” (Brown 1995, 40)), the term *language needs* refers to those language skills that students still have to acquire. As such, students’ *situation needs* are represented by the place where students have to use English—in our case, in the academic setting and, in the future, in a professional environment—, while their *language needs* were identified based on the proficiency and diagnostic test they took. Consequently, following the analysis of the test, we can say that the students’ language needs include improvement in terms of grammar (irrespective of their level), specialised vocabulary, as well as writing (this part was analysed in Section 1 of the needs analysis questionnaire where the students had to answer some open-ended questions).

The purpose of the needs analysis questionnaire and of the proficiency and diagnostic test applied to our students was not only to gather data about the existing *situation needs* and *language needs*, but also about the students’ *objective* and *subjective needs*. *Subjective needs* “are generally more difficult to determine

because they have to do with *wants, desires, and expectations*" (Brindley 1984, 31, *apud* Brown 1995, 40); however, we were able to identify their wants and expectations through the first section of our questionnaire (Questions 1 and 3). Students generally want to improve their current language level and their knowledge of specialised vocabulary. Their expectations are more diverse: they expect the English language course to be fun, enjoyable, interesting, to include group activities and communication activities on interesting topics, which shows us that students are mostly interested in speaking activities. *Objective needs* are "those needs determined on [...] observable data gathered about the situation, the learners, the language that students must eventually acquire, their present proficiency and skills level" (Brindley 1984, 31, *apud* Brown 1995, 40). Based on the proficiency and diagnostic test applied to our students, we were able to collect accurate information regarding their *objective needs*, which, following the analysis of the test, include: improvement of tenses (for all levels), irregular plurals (for all levels), articles (beginners and intermediate), genitive forms (beginners and intermediate), prepositions (all levels), modal verbs (all levels), conditional sentences (all types for beginners and intermediate students, type 3 and mixed conditionals for advanced students), the passive voice (all levels), -ing forms (all levels), adjectives that end in -ing and -ed (beginners and intermediate), phrasal verbs (all levels), fixed expressions (all levels), idiomatic language (all levels).

One can see that the students' needs are extremely varied and it is impossible to cover all topics thoroughly in multi-level classes. However, taking into account the findings of our questionnaire and of our proficiency and diagnostic test, we designed an ESP syllabus in which we tried to cover as many of the aforementioned topics as possible, taking into account the students' situation needs, language needs, objective and subjective needs. The result is as follows:

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Weeks 1-2 | Placement Test |
| Weeks 3-4 | Communication Language Focus: Nouns and Articles Idiom of the Week |
| Weeks 5-6 | Human Rights. Discrimination. War and Peace Language Focus: Adjectives and Adverbs Idiom of the Week |
| Weeks 7-8 | Languages in the E.U. Language Focus: Tenses Idiom of the Week |
| Weeks 9-10 | History Language Focus: If Clauses Idiom of the Week |
| Weeks 11-12 | Presentations: Students deliver a brief presentation about an influential politician, statesman, diplomat or revolutionary of the past or present |
| Weeks 13-14 | End of Semester Test |

Figure 1. 1st semester syllabus

DESIGNING AN ESP COURSE ACCORDING TO WHAT STUDENTS WANT AND NEED

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Weeks 1-2 | Management and Cultural Diversity Language Focus: <i>Passive Voice</i> Active reading |
| Week 3-4 | Political Systems Language Focus: <i>Reported Speech</i> Active reading |
| Week 5-6 | Power Language Focus: <i>-Ing and the Infinitive</i> Active reading |
| Week 7-8 | Diplomacy Language Focus: <i>-Ing and the Infinitive</i> Active reading |
| Week 9-10 | Security Language Focus: <i>Relative Clauses</i> Active reading |
| Weeks 11-12 | Speaking exam |
| Weeks 13-14 | End of Semester Test |

Figure 2. 2nd semester syllabus

Through these two syllabi we managed to cover most of the specialised topics that students will further study, as well as the most important grammar topics that the proficiency and diagnostic test results showed are necessary. Furthermore, to cover some of the students' expectations and to make the ESP course more interactive, interesting and fun, in the first semester we included an activity meant to activate the students' *intuitive heuristics* as well as their autonomy in the language learning process, giving them the possibility to work on their speaking skills, as well as on their idiomatic language (for more details, see Nistor & Cotoc 2018). Also, in order to respond to the students' wants to work on their fluency and grammar, in the second semester we introduced a new activity where students are involved in active reading, as they read topical texts related to their field of activity and are asked to discuss the text with the whole class, working this way on ways of expressing opinions, giving arguments and using diplomatic language in case they disagree with a point of view expressed by other students, etc.

Conclusions

Designing a syllabus for an ESP course is never an easy task, as several variables have to be taken into account. Apart from the fact that learners differ from one academic year to another, their language needs are also different and, consequently, their objective and subjective needs differ, too. In order to be able to adapt each year not only to what students need, but also to what they want and expect from an ESP course, the implementation of a proficiency and diagnostic test and of a needs analysis questionnaire is a must.

The findings of our study showed the needs and the problems of our students, and revealed that they want to improve their communication, grammar and writing skills, but they also want the English course to be enjoyable and to focus on various specialised topics, not only on their specific field of study. Consequently, we designed an ESP syllabus attempting to cover most of their needs (to improve their English language level, to improve their specialised vocabulary, to be able to use English fluently in their future career, to further develop their language skills) and wants (to have group projects or activities on interesting topics, to be involved in communication activities, to participate in a fun, interactive, enjoyable and interesting English language course).

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