

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR ESP INSTRUCTION AND SYLLABUS: A SHORT RESEARCH REVIEW

By

**Flory MANDINA MUANA MUNDELE**

Graduate Student in Applied Linguistics to Teaching at UNIKIN  
Senior Lecturer at ISTM (Medical Technical College) Kinshasa-DRC

### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on relevant general considerations which should be taken into account when deciding to design an English class syllabus for specific purposes. Most ESP class syllabus designers have been challenged by the kind of course content to teach for specific purposes for a long time; especially, in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages context. It is most of the time claimed that courses designed for students requiring English for specific purposes do not coincide with their reasons for learning. This makes the instruction as well as the instructors boring. To that end, this work discusses and gives some clarification on what should be done to come up with an appropriate English class syllabus for specific purposes. The article provides some important information focusing on what has been said by some ESP design practitioners and comments from the personal experience of the author.*

**Keywords:** Needs Assessment, Instruction and Syllabus, English for Specific Purposes

### RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article se concentre sur les considérations générales importantes qui devraient être prises en compte lors de la décision de concevoir un programme de cours d'Anglais de spécialité. Les matières à enseigner au cours d'Anglais de spécialité a longtemps été un très grand défi pour la plupart de concepteurs de programme de cours d'Anglais de spécialité; en particulier, dans l'enseignement d'Anglais aux gens qui parlent d'autres langues. La plupart du temps, les programmes de cours pour les étudiants qui ont besoin d'Anglais de spécialité ne coïncident pas avec leurs raisons d'apprentissage. Cela rend l'instruction ainsi que les enseignants ennuyants. A cet effet, ce travail discute et donne quelques précisions sur ce qui devrait être fait pour parvenir à un programme d'Anglais de spécialité approprié. Cet article fournit quelque importante information en se focalisant sur ce qui a été dit par quelques chercheurs dans le domaine d'Anglais de spécialité, ainsi que sur des commentaires basés sur l'expérience personnelle de l'auteur.*

**Mots-clés:** Etude de Besoins, Enseignement et Programme, Anglais Spécifique

## INTRODUCTION

Materials to be taught for specific purposes have been a challenging issue for a long time for most English teachers to whom English classes for specific purposes are assigned. It is most of the time argued that it is not an easy task to design English class syllabi for students requiring English to accomplish not only academic tasks, but also professional tasks after completing studies. It is very important to mention that the overall objective of an English class for specific purposes is to make learners familiar with more appropriate technical language they need to perform successfully in their professional or academic context. This is what we can call professional language used by a well-defined group of people working in the same field. For instance the hospital language is obviously different from the diplomatic one. So the English syllabus designed for students in the international relations should also be different from the one designed for prospective doctors or nurses. Therefore, ESP course designers should know how to proceed in order to satisfy the expectations of learners.

The article aims at providing some important general principles which anyone deciding to design an English class syllabus for specific purposes should take into account. Failing to comply with ESP design requirements can result in an inappropriate ESP course, which can lead to a complete lack of interest of learners. Thus, this work discusses and gives some clarification on what should be done to come up with a relevant English class syllabus for specific purposes in any major of study. Topics discussed by some ESP researchers and comments based on the personal experience of the author are sources of information in this article.

## I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The selection of appropriate material to teach students requiring English for specific purposes/ESP has been challenging ESP practitioners for a long time. To have a clear view on this particular area of ESP design, it is important to have a look at some relevant information given by ESP researchers who worked on issues raised by the teaching/learning of English for Specific Purposes.

It is important to define the concept ESP before further discussions. A lot of authors defined ESP as viewed from their own experience as ESP teachers. Salas, Mercado, Ouedraogo, and Musetti (2013) defined ESP as:

A kind of instruction in which a list of technical words is enhanced by input in the form of authentic material in which ESP-specific vocabulary is presented in context, or closed communicative activities whereby learners put new words into practice within the context of their professional activities.

In the above definition, the authors suggested ESP practitioners to think both at the micro level, in terms of vocabulary, and at a macro level, in terms of the professional communicative tasks, the genre or formats of those communicative tasks, and the modalities through which those tasks are enacted.

The definition provided by Smoak (2003) is more accurate and specific since it summarizes almost all aspects discussed in the previous one. The author defines ESP as «English instruction based on actual and immediate needs of learners who have to successfully perform real-life tasks unrelated to merely passing an English class or exam». Through this definition, the author described ESP as a needs based and task oriented kind of course. This is what can be more acceptable nowadays.

Our attention can be drawn to the fact that ESP deals with learners expecting the teacher to meet their needs for learning the language. For that reason, any English language instruction for specific purposes which does not satisfy the actual needs of learners, will be of no interest for the learners.

Teaching English to students requiring a kind of language instruction related to their field of study has raised a lot of difficulties. We may describe the most relevant ones as follows: lack of appropriate materials and teaching equipment, poorly motivated students, lack of a significant number of teachers trained as ESP teachers, use of inappropriate methodology for class instruction and assessment, and no regular effective in-service teacher training in the field (Alimi, Kassal, and Azeez, 1998).

As a result, English for specific purposes design has become an interesting field of investigation for many researchers around the world. Many studies have been oriented to the most common issues when dealing with ESP design. The most important question we often ask is to know the kind of course content to provide the learners with for a successful learning process in this particular context of the English language teaching. Most researchers in this field claim that in general, the syllabus designed for students expecting an English class for specific purposes does not coincide with the real learners' expectations. Referring to ESP course as being based on actual learners' needs, a needs analysis should be an underpinning of the English course design (Smoak, 2003).

As mentioned by Ndoma (1996:3), "Ideally, the purpose of an ESP course is to familiarize students with the terminology of their field of study and to help them improve their overall use of the English language used in their profession". From this statement, it is revealed that ESP is not only the teaching of vocabulary related to the field of the concerned students, but it is also the development of competencies for a given specific communication with a

specific kind of language we may even call here professional language. Only needs analysis can help ESP practitioners have accuracy on that specific language to include in the course content.

## II. NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP

Smoak (2003) has mentioned five important lessons he learned from his experience as an ESP teacher. For him:

- ESP is not simply teaching technical or sub-technical vocabulary related to the profession of learners;
- Technical texts from the intuition of the teacher designer or ESP textbooks writers, are not usually focused on the specific tasks in real-life professional contexts of particular learners a teacher is dealing with;
- Needs analysis is good, but it should never be unilateral, so observations and analyses are essential to find out what the real language needs are;
- ESP practitioners and teachers should not assume that what they learned some years ago is still relevant to students they are asked to teach today.

The summary of the lessons from Smoak reveals that having to do with ESP design is not an easy task. We can see that every lesson from the author's experience includes something to do with suitable class content. To this end, he highly recommended ESP designers to conduct a reliable needs analysis study, in order to gather necessary information as important data defining what learners really need to study, and then design a syllabus that can respond to the real-life situation requirements. The author also thinks that needs are dynamic, so reviewing them from time to time is crucial.

Needs analysis studies in language planning emerged in the 1970s and they were widely spread in the domain through the adoption of needs analysis by the Council of Europe's modern language project (Atefi and Moradian, 2013: 35). A needs analysis is a systematic process allowing a researcher to get an accurate picture of students' actual needs for learning, based on both learning and target situation, or on how they will be using the language in their real-life situations (Smoak, 2003). Needs analysis is considered as a basic principle of ESP design, and most information on needs analysis in language teaching, initially came from ESP practitioners.

In addition, needs analysis can help researchers have a clear view on the target situation needs, the learning situation needs, and the expectations of the stakeholders involved in the process. Needs analysis can also be used for many purposes including helping in determining whether a program should be implemented or not and helping ESP practitioners and stakeholders check whether a syllabus matches the goals of the learners for learning a language or not. It cannot only help evaluate an existing program, but also improve it

through finding out the kind of change that may appropriately match the actual needs of learners.

According to Munby (1978: 40), "syllabus specification in ESP can only take place after the prior and necessary work has been done on needs, or it will not be known whether or to what extent the specification is appropriate". So, strictly speaking we cannot talk about an ESP class without starting first with the process of identifying the real needs of students to whom the English class is assigned.

Salas, Mercado, Ouedraogo, and Musetti, four of them working as ESP teachers for many years, stated that «needs analysis is a defining element of ESP and critical to the overall success of any ESP course» (2013). From the preceding statement, it can be inferred that needs analysis is the starting point in ESP design, and the success of an ESP class highly depends on the quality of the needs analysis conducted.

It is very important to mention that the focus of needs analysis should also be put on collecting important information about necessary linguistic and contextual elements from the real life contexts in which the language will be used. A student in medicine, for instance, will need to learn things related to what he or she really does on daily basis. So a careful observation of daily tasks of a profession can help the designer decide on what to include in the course content.

Needs analysis can also help determine not only the content of the course, but also the way the course is going to be conducted. As Lynne Flowerdew (2013:325) confirms it, the first step in ESP design process is needs analysis and then materials selection, methodology, assessment, and evaluation come afterwards. These stages should be viewed in a cyclical process, rather than in a linear fashion.

To conclude the discussion, it is very important to mention that being aware of the kind of context the text we are planning for students is focused on, is essential since it helps in the choice of the language to include (Ngwaba, 2019).

### **III. TYPES OF NEEDS IN ESP**

There are a lot of types of needs depending on researchers who worked on this particular area of ESP design. To describe needs, Richterich and Chancerel (1977) put a particular emphasis on present situation analysis (PSA). The present situation analysis draws attention to the "lacks" and the "wants" of the learners. The "lacks" refers to the gap between what students are able to do with language at the beginning of the course and what they need to do at the end of the course. The "wants" refers to the view of learners to what their needs are or simply what they desire to learn from their course content.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) addressed three important aspects in classifying needs: the target situation analysis, which is concerned with “necessities”, and the present situation analysis, which addresses learners’ “lacks” and “wants”. ‘Necessities’ refers to the type of need determined by the demands of the target real-life context of learners. It is just what the learner is supposed to know to function effectively in the target situation. To know about the necessities of learners, it is very important to observe the situations in which they are expected to function.

Sometimes, there is no necessary relationship between necessities as perceived by sponsors or ESP teachers and what the learners want or feel they need. Since learners’ motivation in the learning process is not to be neglected, their perceived “wants” cannot be ignored, even if some needs analysis pointed to a mismatch between the intended target needs and students’ wants (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

As Widdowson (1981) points out, while target needs are seen as goal-oriented, learner needs are more process-oriented when they refer to what the learner has to do to acquire the language. A greater focus on the learner in needs analyses gave rise to the “negotiated” syllabus, which, as Brindley (1989) states, can involve accommodation and compromise regarding not only what is to be learnt, but also taking into account students’ preferred ways of learning and cognitive style.

According to Siribaddana (2010), as quoted in Tshitenge (2019: 34-35), the types of needs can be described as follows:

- (1) Normative needs, i.e., the expected standards in relation to a trained individual in a particular discipline how knowledgeable s/he is;
- (2) prescribed needs, i.e., curriculum revisions can be thought of as being based on prescribed needs;
- (3) perceived needs, i.e., students’ perception of what they want to learn;
- (4) expressed needs, i.e., what the students’ say that they want to learn and
- (5) unperceived needs, i.e., needs which are not usually recognized by the students as being necessary.

As for Robinson (1991) cited in Tshitenge (2019: 34-35) again, the categories of needs are the followings: “the ‘objective’ versus the ‘subjective’ needs, the needs ‘perceived’ by the ‘language teachers’ opposed to the needs ‘felt’ by the ‘students’, and ‘target’ needs/‘goal-oriented’ needs as opposed to ‘learning needs’/‘process-oriented’ needs”.

Briefly speaking, referring to needs in terms of present situation/PS and target situation/TS, would be better since it summarizes types most researchers provided. Thus, needs analysis can be seen as a combination of TSA and PSA.

Syllabus designers should not postpone dealing with the constraints associated with the needs of learners. They should find information relating to both, the target situation analysis and the present situation analysis simultaneously.

Long (2005) proposed task-based needs analyses as the unit of analysis, because tasks required by the target and present situation, provide a more reliable source of data than those produced by language teachers and applied linguists.

Any English course designed for specific purposes should be more directed towards satisfying the current and future needs of learners, and this allows them to be well equipped for the future professional challenges where the role of English is vital.

#### **IV. NEEDS ANALYSIS METHODS**

As proposed by Long (2005), to conduct a needs analysis study in ESP, researchers are encouraged to use either inductive or deductive procedures. The inductive method refers to intuitions of ESP experts, observations, and unstructured interviews. The deductive method involves surveys using questionnaires and structured interviews. Because in ESP design researchers would like to have much information from the interviewees, the unstructured interviews are more appropriate. Then follow-up survey questionnaires or structured interviews can be planned.

Hyland (2006:68) suggests the use of triangulated sources of information in conducting a needs analysis in ESP. According to him, triangulation ensures validity (an accurate reflection of the features being studied) and reliability (a consistent interpretation of the features) in the findings of needs analysis. The range of data sources encouraged here can be composed of: ESP practitioners and teachers, content specialists, stakeholders, learners, and administrators.

The above discussion reveals that in needs analysis learners act as co-researchers to determine their own needs and learning goals. So they cannot be left behind in a needs analysis process.

Findings of needs analysis cannot often be generalized, but curriculum developers can rely on the similarities of contexts to decide on a probable transferability of the results to another context rather than the one under investigation Schmidt (1981: 200).

As smoak (2003) said, because needs of learners are dynamic, the findings of a needs analysis study should be revisited regularly for the course content improvement.

## V. NEEDS ANALYSIS AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Wilkins (1976: 55) observes that:

The first step in the construction of any language syllabus or course is to define objectives. Wherever possible these will be based on an analysis of the needs of the learners and these needs, in turn, will be expressed in terms of the particular types of communication in which the learner will need to engage.

This suggests that needs analysis is closely linked to curriculum design particularly that of an ESP course.

Any ESP course that is not based on a careful needs analysis will fail to relate the language taught to the real life language used in students envisaged academic or occupational setting. It is very important to state that needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP courses as Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 122) also mentioned. Never mind the type of syllabus to work with, needs have to be taken into account.

Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) list the following types of syllabus: lexicogrammatical (organized around structures and vocabulary), functional-notional (organized around functions and notions), discourse-based (organized around aspects of text cohesion and coherence), learning-centered (organized on what learners have to do in order to learn language items and skills, not the items and skills themselves), skills-based (organized around particular skills), genre-based (organized around conventions and procedures in genres as units of analysis), and content-based (organized around themes) which informs a range of topical areas of use and can be realized in pedagogic terms by variety of different topics.

Course designers will need to select the kind of syllabus he/she would like to work with, and then exploit all needs of learners from a formal needs analysis study within the content to develop.

Identifying needs of learners, developing materials, and implementing effective teaching practices are still serious challenges in the field of the teaching of English for specific purposes. Traditionally, a teacher interested in the ESP approach would be expected to locate or develop materials for the course, teach the course, and finally evaluate how well learners' have achieved the goals of the course. However, few ESP practitioners have the time or experience to realize these multiple roles successfully. Practitioners are increasingly being burdened with heavy teaching loads and they also face having to teach students from many different specialist fields. Evaluation then becomes a matter of testing learners understanding of the textbook material. In spite of that, curriculum developers are expected to conduct very reliable needs analysis studies before designing ESP courses for any major.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed in this work, we have to recognize that designing ESP classes is too demanding and requires some creativity, but can be extremely rewarding because of the real-life, immediate application of learning that typically accompanies an ESP program. In working with students requiring specific English or with adult professionals, it is necessary to be responsive to their needs and flexible in adapting class programs. Making clear links between the tasks performed in English class and students real-life professional performance, is one of the most important elements which make an ESP class more effective. So complying with all requirements provided in this paper, can somehow help ESP practitioners and course designers provide effective English classes for specific purposes to their learners.

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