
Lecture III: Needs analysis and ESP curriculum

Introduction

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the starting point of curriculum design is a clear understanding of learners' **needs**. ESP focuses on teaching language that is relevant to specific fields such as business, medicine, engineering, or tourism. Therefore, before designing any ESP course, teachers and syllabus designers must identify **what learners need to learn, why they need it, and how it will be used** in their real academic or professional contexts. This process is known as **needs analysis**.

1. Definition of Needs Analysis

Needs analysis (also called needs assessment) is the process of collecting and interpreting information about learners' language requirements, difficulties, goals, and preferences. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), needs analysis helps determine "what the learners have to learn" and "why they have to learn it." It serves as a bridge between **learners' present knowledge** (what they already know) and **target knowledge** (what they must learn to succeed in their future situations).

2. Types of Needs

Scholars generally distinguish between three main types of needs:

1. Target Needs:

- What learners need to do with English in their target situation (e.g., reading academic articles, writing business reports).
- Includes *necessities, lacks, and wants*.
 - **Necessities:** what is required by the target situation.
 - **Lacks:** the gap between what learners know and what they need to know.
 - **Wants:** learners' personal expectations or interests.

2. Learning Needs:

- How learners prefer to study or acquire the language.
- Focuses on learning styles, motivation, and classroom preferences.

3. Situational Needs:

- Practical factors such as course duration, available resources, institutional goals, and teacher qualifications.

3. Methods and Tools for Needs Analysis

To gather accurate data, ESP teachers and curriculum designers use a combination of tools, including:

- **Questionnaires and surveys** to collect learners' opinions and preferences.
- **Interviews** with students, subject specialists, or employers.
- **Observation** of learners in real or simulated contexts.
- **Diagnostic tests** to assess learners' current language proficiency.
- **Document analysis** of course materials, job descriptions, or academic requirements.

A mixed-method approach ensures that both subjective (learner perceptions) and objective (task-based) needs are addressed.

4. Challenges in Conducting Needs Analysis: While needs analysis is essential, it faces several challenges

- Limited time or resources to conduct thorough investigations.
- Learners' inability to clearly articulate their own needs.
- Institutional constraints or pre-set syllabi.
- The changing nature of workplace or academic language demands.

To overcome these difficulties, ESP practitioners should treat needs analysis as a **continuous process** rather than a one-time activity, revising the curriculum regularly based on feedback.

5. Definition of ESP

ESP can be defined as the teaching and learning of English for a clearly defined purpose that is directly related to learners' needs. According to **Hutchinson and Waters (1987)**, ESP is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning." This means ESP is not a product (a specific kind of language) but a **methodology**—an approach guided by the learners' goals.

6. Characteristics of ESP

ESP has several key characteristics that distinguish it from General English:

- **Needs-based:** It begins with a thorough analysis of learners' linguistic, communicative, and professional needs.
- **Goal-oriented:** The main aim is to help learners use English effectively in a specific domain.
- **Authentic:** ESP uses real-life materials from the learners' field (e.g., research papers, reports, manuals).

- **Specialized vocabulary:** The focus is on terminology and discourse specific to the discipline or job.
- **Flexible methodology:** ESP teachers adapt methods and materials to learners' purposes and contexts

7. Types of ESP

ESP is commonly divided into two broad categories:

A. English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

EAP helps students use English effectively in academic study or research. Examples include:

- English for Science and Technology (EST)
- English for Academic Writing
- English for Research Purposes

B. English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)

EOP focuses on English used in the workplace or professional environments. Examples include:

- English for Business Communication
- English for Medical Professionals
- English for Engineers
- English for Tourism and Hospitality

8. Importance of Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP. It identifies what learners already know, what they need to learn, and why they need it. Through questionnaires, interviews, and observation, teachers determine:

- The **target situation** (where and how English will be used)
- The **learners' lacks** (gaps in knowledge)
- The **learners' wants** (preferences and motivations)

A well-designed needs analysis ensures that the ESP course is **relevant, efficient, and motivating**.

9. The Role of Needs Analysis in ESP Curriculum Design

Needs analysis is the **foundation** of an ESP curriculum. The information gathered helps educators make informed decisions at every stage of course design:

Curriculum Stage	How Needs Analysis Contributes
Goals and Objectives	Defines what learners should achieve by the end of the course.
Content Selection	Determines which topics, skills, and vocabulary are most relevant.
Methodology	Identifies effective teaching approaches that suit learners' preferences.
Assessment	Ensures tests reflect real-world tasks from the target context.
Evaluation	Provides feedback for improving future courses.

In this way, needs analysis ensures that the ESP curriculum is **learner-centered, relevant, and practical**.

10. The Role of the ESP Teacher: The ESP teacher plays multiple roles

- **Researcher:** Studies the language and discourse of the target field.
- **Course designer:** Develops or adapts materials suitable for learners' needs.
- **Facilitator:** Guides learners toward independent and purposeful language use.
- **Evaluator:** Assesses learners' progress in relation to real-world tasks.

ESP teachers must be flexible, innovative, and willing to learn about the learners' professional or academic disciplines.

11. Challenges in ESP: Despite its growing importance, ESP faces several challenges:

- Limited availability of specialized teaching materials.
- Teachers' lack of subject-specific knowledge.
- Diverse student needs within the same class.
- Rapidly changing workplace language demands.
- Institutional constraints and large class sizes.

Addressing these challenges requires collaboration between language teachers, subject specialists, and curriculum designers.

Conclusion

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) represents a learner-centered, functional, and pragmatic approach to language teaching. It aims to provide learners with the skills and language knowledge necessary to function effectively in specific contexts. By integrating **authentic content**, **needs-based design**, and **practical communication**, ESP empowers learners to achieve success in their academic, professional, and global pursuits. Needs analysis is the cornerstone of an effective ESP curriculum. It provides the necessary data for designing courses that are relevant to learners' professional or academic goals. By identifying both target and learning needs, ESP teachers can develop materials, methods, and assessments that truly reflect real-world communication. In essence, needs analysis ensures that the ESP curriculum is not just about teaching English, but about preparing learners to **use English purposefully and effectively** in their specific fields.

References

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