

Needs Analysis: The Cornerstone of Effective ESP Program Development

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Abstract:

In the intricate realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy, the effective development of programs hinges largely on understanding the specific needs of diverse learners. This paper delves into the conceptual framework of needs analysis (NA), elucidating its pivotal role in tailoring ESP courses for maximum efficacy. Drawing from a comprehensive review of academic literature, pedagogical theories, and documented best practices, the discussion underscores the multifaceted components of NA, ranging from learners' linguistic competencies to their professional objectives and cultural contexts. Case studies of successful ESP programs are examined to highlight the nuances of implementing NA in real-world contexts. The paper also navigates potential challenges and considerations, offering insights for educators and curriculum designers. Conclusively, it posits that a thorough NA not only forms the cornerstone of effective ESP program development but also ensures that instruction remains responsive, relevant, and learner-centered in a dynamic educational landscape.

Keywords: Needs Analysis; ESP Pedagogy; Curriculum Design; Learner-centered; Professional Objectives..

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- INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, English has firmly established itself as a lingua franca, often bridging communication gaps across diverse fields, from science and technology to business and diplomacy. Amidst this backdrop, the field of ESP has emerged, not just as a subset of English language education, but as a specialized discipline that adapts linguistic teaching to precisely fulfil the demands of specific professional and academic requirements¹.

Different from general English courses, ESP emphasizes the language's practical application in specific sectors or professions. Whether it is the precise terminologies used in medical discourse, the nuanced language of legal documents, or the structured format of business correspondence, ESP courses are designed to enhance and sharpen these specialized skills, ensuring learners become proficient in both the jargon and conventions of their respective fields².

The dynamism and specificity inherent to ESP make the design and development of its curriculum both a challenge and an art. Here, the tool of NA becomes invaluable. It is not just a preliminary step but the cornerstone upon which effective ESP courses are built³. By systematically assessing and identifying the linguistic needs and lacks of its target audience, NA ensures that ESP courses are highly precise, relevant, and, most importantly, actionable in real-world contexts⁴.

This paper endeavours to undertake a comprehensive examination of NA, elucidating its pivotal role in directing the trajectory ESP programs. Through a systematic dissection of its methodologies, a meticulous exposition of its significance, and an identification of its attendant challenges, our objective is to underscore the assertion posited by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) that devoid of a rigorous NA framework, ESP initiatives risk devolving into generic undertakings, thereby diluting their inherent specificity.

In delving into the intricacies of NA, we aim to provide a thorough understanding of its theoretical underpinnings and practical applications within the realm of ESP. By elucidating the various

approaches and techniques employed in conducting NA, including needs assessment surveys, target situation analysis, and discourse analysis, we endeavour to illuminate the multifaceted nature of this fundamental process.

Moreover, our analysis seeks to underscore the profound significance of NA in aligning ESP curricula with the specific linguistic demands of learners' respective fields of study or professional endeavours. Through a nuanced exploration of NA's role in identifying learners' communicative needs, language proficiency levels, and discourse conventions, we aim to highlight its instrumental role in ensuring the efficacy and relevance of ESP programs.

However, notwithstanding its inherent merits, we also acknowledge the challenges inherent in conducting NA within the context of ESP. These challenges may include issues related to data collection, interpretation, and stakeholder engagement, all of which necessitate careful consideration and mitigation strategies to ensure the integrity and validity of the NA process.

In sum, this paper endeavours to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on NA within the field of ESP by providing a comprehensive analysis of its methodologies, significance, and challenges. By shedding light on the pivotal role of NA in shaping the direction of ESP programs, we aspire to underscore its indispensability in preserving the specificity and efficacy of language instruction tailored to learners' professional or academic objectives.

1. Historical Background

The 1960s heralded a transformation in the landscape of English language education. As the world underwent rapid industrialization, technological advances, and globalization, the demand for English proficiency in specialized fields began to surge rise. It was against this backdrop that ESP was born, distinguishing itself from general English courses with its sharp focus on meeting the unique linguistic needs of professionals and academics across a myriad of disciplines⁵.

One of the earliest manifestations of ESP was seen in disciplines such as aviation and medicine. Pilots, air traffic controllers, and medical practitioners found themselves in situations where English, as a universal medium of communication, became critical. As industries diversified, the scope of ESP expanded, enveloping areas from business communication and diplomacy to the technical lexicons of science and engineering⁶.

Initially, ESP was often misconstrued as merely a subset of general English courses, with a sprinkling of jargon and terminologies from specialized fields. However, pioneers like Robinson (1991) championed the idea that ESP was not just about vocabulary adaptation but involved a deep understanding of both linguistic structures and the communicative tasks associated with fields as diverse as business, technology, and science. Whether it was the precise language needed for drafting a business contract or the complex terms used in a scientific research paper, ESP courses began to shape themselves around these real-world needs.

As the decades progressed, educators and curriculum designers realized that to make ESP truly effective, a superficial understanding of these fields was not sufficient. It became imperative to dig deeper into the linguistic challenges and necessities of professionals and students. This is where the role of systematic Needs Analysis came to the forefront⁷. No longer was it enough to make educated guesses about what learners might require. Instead, through Needs Analysis, stakeholders could gather data on what learners truly lacked, what they desired, and how they would utilize English in their specific roles.

By the late 20th century, the ESP landscape had transformed considerably. From its modest beginnings in the 1960s, it had matured into a robust field with well-defined methodologies and approaches. Courses were now designed not merely by language experts but often in collaboration with industry professionals, ensuring a perfect marriage of linguistic theory and real-world application. This

evolution not only fortified the efficacy of ESP programs but also solidified the role of Needs Analysis as an indispensable tool in shaping them.

2. Definition and Scope of Needs Analysis

The world of education, particularly in specialized sectors like ESP, is as dynamic as it is diverse. Responding aptly to the evolving needs of learners requires a nuanced understanding of their specific requirements, challenges, and aspirations. It is within this context that Needs Analysis (NA) emerges as an invaluable tool, providing educators and curriculum developers with a structured methodology to grasp and cater to these nuances⁸.

At its foundational level, NA can be understood as a deliberate and organized process of gathering, interpreting, and applying information about learners' needs to inform curriculum development⁹. Rather than operating on assumptions or broad generalizations, NA empowers educators to make informed decisions based on empirical evidence.

In fact, the ambit of NA extends far beyond mere data collection. Its multifaceted nature can be delineated into three primary dimensions:

2.1. Wants, Needs, and Lacks

In the realm of Needs Analysis (NA) within the context of language learning and education, the distinction between wants, needs, and lacks carries significant implications. Although these terms may initially appear synonymous, they possess distinct connotations crucial for designing effective language curricula tailored to learners' requirements. As highlighted by Richards (2006), wants represent the aspirations and preferences of learners. For example, a student might 'want' to acquire proficiency in business English to secure a position in an international corporation. Needs, on the other hand, signify the essential requirements for attaining specific objectives. Expanding on the previous example, the student 'needs' to develop proficiency in business communication, negotiation terminology, and an

understanding of cultural nuances in international business settings. Lacks refer to the disparities between learners' current competencies and their desired outcomes. For instance, if a student struggles with formal email communication, addressing this 'lack' becomes imperative within the curriculum. This framework offers a structured approach to identifying and addressing the multifaceted dimensions of learners' language learning needs, thereby enhancing the efficacy of language education initiatives.

2.2. Data Sources

Effective NA is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. It thrives on diversity, drawing insights from a broad spectrum of sources. Learners themselves contribute invaluable perspectives through direct feedback, providing insights into their motivations, challenges, and goals. Educators, with their on-ground experience, illuminate pedagogical strategies that resonate with learners and identify common areas of difficulty. Additionally, industry professionals, particularly in ESP, offer real-world perspectives, ensuring the curriculum remains relevant and actionable by providing insights into industry applications and expectations. This comprehensive approach, incorporating input from learners, educators, and industry professionals, enhances the depth and relevance of the NA process, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective and tailored language education initiatives.

2.3. Application

Upon completion of the collation and analysis of data, the task of applying these findings presents itself as a substantial challenge. This pivotal phase necessitates the synthesis of insights derived from the data, the discernment of overarching themes, and the subsequent translation of these discernments into a curriculum characterized by both breadth and flexibility. This process demands meticulous attention to detail and a nuanced understanding of educational dynamics, ensuring that the resultant curriculum is not only

comprehensive but also capable of accommodating diverse learner needs and evolving educational contexts.

In essence, a well-executed Needs Analysis acts as a compass, directing the course of curriculum development towards genuine learner needs, ensuring not just academic excellence but also real-world applicability.

3. Importance of Needs Analysis in ESP

The distinctive nature of ESP lies in its commitment to aligning linguistic education with specific professional or academic aspirations. Unlike general English courses, ESP aims to empower learners with the specialized language tools they need for particular fields of work or study. Central to achieving this alignment is the process of NA. Its importance in the ESP domain can be explored through several dimensions.

3.1. Relevance and Authenticity

The primary objective of ESP is not just to teach English but to teach it in a way that is directly applicable to specialized contexts, be it law, medicine, business, or engineering. Through NA, educators can glean insights into the authentic language tasks and challenges that learners are likely to face in their respective fields¹⁰. By aligning the curriculum with these insights, ESP courses can offer content that mirrors real-life scenarios, thereby enhancing its authenticity.

3.2. Learner Engagement and Motivation

When students perceive their lessons as directly relevant to their career or academic goals, their motivation to learn naturally intensifies¹¹. By addressing the genuine 'needs' and 'wants' of learners, a Needs Analysis-driven curriculum can foster heightened engagement. Learners are more likely to invest effort and time when they see a direct correlation between their studies and their professional aspirations.

3.3. Optimized Resource Allocation

In any educational setting, aligning academic coursework with industry requisites stands as a paramount endeavour. This alignment ensures that educational programs not only impart theoretical knowledge, but also equip learners with the practical skills necessary for success in professional settings. NA, particularly when it incorporates perspectives from industry professionals, emerges as a pivotal mechanism in bridging the gap between academia and industry. By leveraging insights gleaned from professionals actively engaged in the field, NA facilitates the integration of industry-relevant content and practices into academic curricula. Consequently, students benefit from a curriculum that not only meets academic standards but also resonates with the evolving demands of the professional landscape. This symbiotic relationship between academia and industry, fostered by NA, enhances the relevance and applicability of educational programs, ultimately preparing learners for seamless transitions into the workforce¹².

3.4. Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Needs Analysis is not a one-time process. Repeatedly conducting NA at regular intervals provides educators with continuous feedback on the effectiveness of the curriculum¹³. This iterative approach allows for constant refinement, ensuring that the ESP program remains updated with the changing needs of its learners and the evolving dynamics of specialized fields.

3.5. Bridging the Gap between Academia and Industry

Particularly in ESP, there is a need for academic courses to resonate with industry standards and expectations. NA, especially when it draws insights from industry professionals, acts as a bridge, harmonizing academic instruction with real-world demands¹⁴.

In summation, NA stands as a cornerstone in the development of effective ESP programs. By ensuring a deep alignment between learner requirements and curriculum content, NA fortifies the very

essence of ESP – specialized English education that is both meaningful and actionable.

4. Components of an Effective Needs Analysis

An effective NA is not just a cursory evaluation of what learners require. It is a multi-faceted exploration that offers educators a 360 degree view of both learner requirements and the broader educational context. Additionally, further examination of its components sheds light on the intricate aspects of NA and its pivotal role in shaping effective ESP programs.

4.1. Target Situation Analysis

Target Situation Analysis (TSA) delves into the eventual situations or contexts where learners are anticipated to use English. It is a forward-looking analysis aiming to envision the specific linguistic tasks and challenges learners might encounter in their professional or academic pursuits¹⁵.

TSA ensures that the curriculum remains anchored in real-world applications. It narrows down the broad spectrum of English language education to specifics, ensuring that learners are equipped with skills directly relevant to their future roles. Typically, TSA can involve studying job descriptions, interviewing professionals in the target field, and examining samples of communication from the target situation.

4.2. Present Situation Analysis

Present Situation Analysis (PSA) offers a snapshot of the learners' current linguistic competencies¹⁶. It identifies where the learners currently stand in terms of their language skills and contrasts this with where they need to be.

By understanding learners' strengths and weaknesses, PSA allows educators to design a curriculum that addresses specific gaps, ensuring that instruction is both targeted and efficient. PSA often employs

diagnostic tests, questionnaires, and interviews to gather data on learners' current proficiency levels.

4.3. Means Analysis

In addition to assessing the 'what', Means Analysis delves into the 'how', aiming to discern not only what content is necessary but also how it should be delivered most effectively¹⁷. This comprehensive approach acknowledges that an effective curriculum extends beyond mere content provision; it must also consider the methods and strategies employed in delivering that content to learners. Means Analysis plays a crucial role in this process, ensuring that teaching methods align with the preferences and learning styles of the target audience. Moreover, it oversees the optimal utilization of resources, ensuring that available materials and tools are utilized to their fullest potential. This multifaceted component of curriculum development often entails a thorough evaluation of existing teaching materials and pedagogical approaches, examining their suitability and effectiveness in meeting learners' needs. Additionally, Means Analysis involves soliciting feedback from both educators and learners, providing valuable insights into the efficacy of instructional methods and areas for improvement. Through this rigorous evaluation process, Means Analysis contributes significantly to the creation of a curriculum that is not only content-rich but also pedagogically sound and responsive to the needs of learners.

4.4. Constraints Analysis

Every educational setting comes with its unique set of challenges, be they logistical, financial, or cultural. Constraints Analysis identifies potential roadblocks that might impede the delivery or reception of the curriculum.

By pre-emptively identifying constraints, educators can strategize solutions, ensuring that the curriculum remains robust even in less-than-ideal conditions. This might involve assessing institutional

budgets, gauging classroom sizes, understanding cultural sensitivities, and factoring in time limitations.

In synthesizing insights from these components, educators are better equipped to craft a curriculum that is not just informed but also adaptive, ensuring that the journey from learner needs to desired outcomes is both efficient and effective.

5. Methods and Tools for Conducting Needs Analysis

An effective NA hinges on the selection of appropriate methods and tools. The aim is to extract as clear and comprehensive a picture as possible of the learners' needs, both expressed and latent. A detailed examination of the selected methods and tools is undertaken as follows:

5.1. Questionnaires and Surveys

Questionnaires and surveys serve as structured instruments that are pivotal in collecting data from a wide array of respondents efficiently. As Bryman (2012) points out, they are typically designed with a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The goal is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of learner needs and preferences, ensuring that a broad perspective is captured.

The advantages of using questionnaires and surveys in educational settings are notable. One significant benefit is scalability; these tools enable educators to gather data from a large number of participants within a relatively short timeframe. Additionally, the responses obtained are quantifiable, which means they can be easily subjected to statistical analysis to draw meaningful conclusions. However, there are inherent limitations to this method. Questionnaires may lack the ability to delve into the intricacies of individual responses, often missing out on nuanced insights that might be gleaned from more in-depth qualitative methods. Furthermore, there is the issue of response bias—learners may give answers they think are expected or desired, rather than expressing their true opinions and experiences. This can

lead to data that does not accurately reflect the authentic views and needs of the respondents.

5.2. Interviews

Interviews are a qualitative research method involving one-on-one interactions, which can take place either in person or through virtual means. According to Lewis (2014), these interactions are crucial for gaining a thorough understanding of learners' individual needs, challenges, and objectives. This method is intimate and personalized, providing a depth of insight that is hard to capture through more impersonal means like surveys or questionnaires.

The advantages of interviews are significant. They provide an in-depth look at the individual perspectives of learners, revealing complex motivations and experiences. Interviews also offer flexibility, as the interviewer can follow up with additional questions or prompt further discussion in response to a participant's answers, allowing for a more dynamic and responsive data collection process. On the downside, interviews can be time-consuming, as they require a significant investment of time both to conduct and to analyse compared to methods like questionnaires. Each interview must be scheduled, performed, and then meticulously reviewed to extract meaningful data. Additionally, interviews can be highly subjective. The quality and depth of the insights gained can depend greatly on the interviewer's skills and approach, and the responses can be influenced by the interviewer's demeanour, the questions posed, and the overall interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. This subjectivity means that different interviewers might draw different conclusions from the same set of responses.

5.3. Observations

The method referred to involves direct observation, where educators watch and analyse learners in real-world settings where the target language is being used. Turner et. al. (2015) highlights that this approach offers an unfiltered perspective on learners' actual linguistic

competencies and challenges. This kind of observation is pivotal as it captures the authentic use of language, free from the influence of test settings or structured interviews.

There are clear advantages to this method. It provides authenticity, granting educators access to raw and unedited insights into how learners use language in real-time situations. It also offers contextual clarity, as seeing the language used within its natural context helps educators understand the practical application of linguistic skills and the situational nuances that learners face. However, this approach comes with limitations. The observer's paradox is a significant concern; the very act of observation can affect the behaviour of the participants, as people may alter their natural language use when they know they are being watched. Additionally, the data collected from observations can be highly interpretative. Observers must carefully analyse and interpret what they see, and their conclusions can be influenced by their own biases or perspectives. This requires a level of critical analysis to ensure that the observations are as objective and useful as possible.

5.4. Text Analysis

This method involves a meticulous examination of authentic documents that hold relevance to the specific professional or academic fields targeted by the learners¹⁸. These documents could encompass a wide array of materials such as technical reports, industry publications, legal contracts, scientific papers, or business correspondence, depending on the learners' intended areas of specialization. For instance, if the focus is on preparing ESP students for careers in law, the analysis may involve scrutinizing legal documents such as contracts, court judgments, statutes, and legal briefs. By closely examining these authentic materials, educators can identify and extract linguistic elements that are recurrent and indispensable within the targeted field. This process provides invaluable insights into the language features and communication norms prevalent in real-world professional contexts, thereby enabling

educators to design ESP curricula that are not only linguistically accurate but also highly relevant and practical for the learners' future career endeavours.

There are significant advantages to this method. It ensures direct relevance by aligning the curriculum with the actual linguistic demands encountered in the field. Furthermore, it aids in pinpointing industry-specific jargon and the common linguistic structures that are essential for effective communication within the field. However, there are limitations to consider as well. This method may not fully capture the nuances of spoken language that are characteristic of the target field. The language used in written texts can be quite different from the language used in daily verbal interactions. Additionally, this approach is time-intensive. It necessitates a careful and detailed analysis of the texts to ensure that the most relevant and frequently used language elements are identified and appropriately integrated into the teaching materials.

In deploying these tools, it is crucial for educators to strike a balance. No single tool can capture the complete picture; a combination ensures both breadth and depth in insights, enabling the creation of a well-rounded, effective curriculum.

6. Challenges in Conducting Needs Analysis

Needs Analysis is fundamental to crafting successful ESP programs; however, the process of determining 'needs' is replete with challenges. Exploring this complexity further reveals the intricacies involved in accurately identifying and addressing learners' specific requirements within ESP contexts.

6.1. Subjectivity of 'Needs'

The concept of 'needs' is not universally defined. What one learner perceives as essential might be viewed as ancillary by another. Achieving a balance to serve a diverse group can be complex. This subjectivity can lead to a curriculum that is either excessively

comprehensive, attempting to address everyone's needs, or excessively specialized, attending to the requirements of a select few.

6.2. Rapidly Evolving Industry Standards

In the modern era, many fields are undergoing swift transformations due to technological advancements and shifting paradigms. The linguistic requirements of these industries can change commensurately. A curriculum designed based on a Needs Analysis conducted today might become obsolete in a short span, necessitating frequent updates.

6.3. Logistical Constraints

Conducting a comprehensive NA often requires substantial resources, including time, finances, and expertise. Resource constraints can lead to shortcuts in the NA process, potentially resulting in a less-than-optimal curriculum.

6.4. Diverse Stakeholder Perspectives

In NA, data is often sourced from various stakeholders – learners, educators, and industry professionals. These groups might have divergent views on what is 'essential'. Balancing these different perspectives can be a tightrope walk, with the risk of either academic impracticality or industry irrelevance.

6.5. Dynamic Learner Profiles

Especially in adult education, learners come with varied backgrounds, experiences, and competencies. Capturing a snapshot that represents this diversity can be challenging. A curriculum designed for an 'average' learner might not address the unique requirements of those at the extremes of the competency spectrum.

6.6. Over-reliance on One Method

Each tool or method for conducting NA, be it surveys, interviews, or observations, has its inherent limitations. Excessive dependence on a single method to the detriment of others can distort the results. This

can lead to a curriculum that is either too generalized or too specific, missing the mark in addressing genuine needs.

Despite these challenges, the importance of NA in ESP cannot be understated. Regular, cyclic re-evaluations and a multifaceted approach can help in navigating these complexities, ensuring that ESP programs remain both agile and deeply relevant to the learners' aspirations.

7. Case Studies

The study on the ESP course for engineering students at Dhofar University in Oman found it beneficial. Survey results from first- and second-year engineering undergraduates showed improved English vocabulary, grammar, and speaking skills. The ESP course was well-received for its relevance and duration. Open-ended questions indicated that students felt the course enhanced their technical English and could boost their engineering career prospects. Despite some critical views about the necessity of subject-specific English and its impact on Grade Point Average (GPA), the overall sentiment was positive, with many recommending the ESP course to others. The findings align with prior research, suggesting that ESP courses significantly aid non-native English speakers in mastering professional language requirements, thus preparing them for their engineering careers. This underscores the importance and effectiveness of Needs Analysis in ESP; ensuring courses meet specific learner requirements in their professional context¹⁹.

The debate over whether to prioritize English for General Purposes (EGP) or ESP in Mexican university courses has been a point of focus among educators and scholars in recent years. In response to this, a study was conducted with the 2014 cohort at a regional branch of a public Mexican university to gauge English learning needs and understand how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators are responding to these needs with new teaching strategies. A mixed-method sequential approach was employed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data over two years, structured

in three phases. Following the identification of student needs, the educators adopted and implemented Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) within the ESP framework. Feedback from 191 students was solicited via a questionnaire after they had completed four EFL courses. The feedback indicated a generally favourable view of the EFL classes, signifying that the pedagogical approach was effective and the materials were well-suited for their educational needs. This positive outcome highlights the significance and utility of conducting a needs analysis in ESP to tailor language instruction to specific student requirements²⁰.

Conclusion

English for Specific Purposes distinguishes itself from general English education through its unwavering focus on the specific linguistic needs of particular professional or academic groups. At the heart of this specialized approach lies the indispensability of a robust Needs Analysis. By delving deep into the particular linguistic challenges and requirements of learners, a Needs Analysis transcends surface-level instructional design to tailor curricula that resonate with real-world applications. It is through this systematic approach that educators can bridge the gap between generic language skills and specialized communicative competencies required in distinct fields. As global professional landscapes evolve and intercultural communication becomes more crucial than ever, the role of NA in ESP program development solidifies further. It stands as a beacon, ensuring that learners are not just language-proficient, but are adeptly equipped with the precise English skills that their specialized fields demand, thereby ensuring effectiveness, relevance, and genuine applicability in their respective domains.

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