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## ESP COURSES AND NEEDS ANALYSIS<sup>2</sup>

The main aim of this paper is to define *needs analysis* in ESP and to present different views of needs and analyses. Once the idea of a new ESP course is developed, the first step that should be conducted is needs analysis, which is of course later followed by curriculum design, materials selection, methodology, assessment and evaluation. Even though all of the afore-mentioned stages are equally important, this paper will primarily focus on needs analysis. According to Hyland (2006), whose definition of needs analysis is usually taken because of the numerous aspects it encompasses, needs analysis “refers to the techniques for collecting and assessing information relevant to course design: it is the means of establishing the *how* and *what* of a course.” As it will be shown in the paper, it is not enough to describe only *needs analysis*. Defining ESP is also a necessary task which proved to be very demanding. However, special attention will be paid to the way Brown (2016) understands needs viewpoints and analysis strategies.

*Key words:* needs analysis, ESP, needs, analyses.

### Introduction

Before even starting to think about teaching an ESP course, let alone designing its curriculum, a language instructor has to know what he or she will encounter in an ESP class and what ESP stands for, i.e. how it is defined, what its main goals are, which students the ESP course is going to welcome, what their level of knowledge will be, etc.

Students usually encounter ESP instruction at the tertiary level of education in Serbia, apart from certain vocational secondary schools. Therefore, the essential detail would be that the knowledge of students who

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come to ESP classes is not *tabula rasa*. The main reason for this situation is that they come from different secondary schools and primary schools, in which EFL professors use different books and pay special attention to different aspects of linguistic competence. For some, for instance, communication was of primary concern, while for others, on the other hand, only grammar rules and their application in isolated sentences represented the peak of a student's knowledge. So, it is obvious that ESP professors do not get to write on the "board" from scratch. There are a lot of different elements on this type of "board", out of which certain parts are missing, and in some cases one can find too many detailed elements there and such a student may find instruction in ESP classes boring, which is usually the case when grammar rules are being dealt with, hardly ever when specialised vocabulary items are being covered.

As far as previous knowledge is concerned, it may seem that we have just described the same situation which takes place during the transition from primary to secondary schools. However, another very important point should be mentioned here and that is *time*. EFL instructors at secondary schools have, I daresay, enough time, or four years to be more precise, at their disposal to make all the necessary adjustments, while the ESP instructor at the tertiary level of education has only one semester, or two at best. Naturally, the question that arises once this and similar ideas have been put forward is whether ESP professors have enough time at hand to make things work in the environment full of the already mentioned "boards" which possess a variety of different elements on them. This problem with *time* was pointed out by Robinson, who even included limited time period in her definition of ESP. She highlights that professors have restricted time in ESP instruction, during which their objectives have to be achieved and are taught to *adults* in *homogenous classes* in terms of the specialist studies that the students are involved in (ROBINSON 1991). The term *homogenous* here refers to the fact that all students in one class belong to the same department and they all aim to graduate from the same field of study, e.g. journalism. The term can never indicate that their level of knowledge is the same.

The story would not be complete if age and delays in commencing one's studies as important factors are not brought up. Students in Serbia normally start their studies (i.e. encounter ESP instruction) at the age of 19 at the earliest. However, it is not unusual for a student to begin his/her studies later in life due to many a reason. It would take too much time to make a list of all the reasons, let alone elucidate them. But one thing is definite, an ESP class can be composed of not only students with different levels of knowledge, but also students of different age who do not share the same generational interests.

As it can be seen, a couple of very significant problems can be encountered the moment one even thinks of setting foot in an ESP classroom,

and we have not even mentioned whether the curriculum has already been prepared or not. It should be argued that the properly prepared curriculum could offer solutions to the above mentioned situations. Therefore, before we start elaborating on what should be taken into consideration during the first phase of creating an ESP course (needs analysis), a brief glance at definitions of English for Special Purposes will be offered so that we could have a clearer picture of its complexity.

### English for Special Purposes

Since Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) give a brief account of what other researchers proposed when it comes to defining ESP, we will follow their line of work. At the outset of their discussion, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) are mentioned. It is interesting that these two researchers perceive ESP as an approach more than as a product. What Hutchinson and Waters actually want to say here is that ESP does not involve a specific methodology, instructional materials, or instruction. It is their belief that the need of learners stand for the foundation of ESP. The imperative question to which ESP should provide the answer is: *Why does a particular learner need to learn a foreign language?* The purpose of learning English became the essence. What logically comes as a result of this way of thinking is the fact the instruction and materials should be provided according to the learners' needs.

The definition of ESP which Strevens (1988) put forward combines a number of characteristics. He claims that ESP is

- designed to satisfy specific learners' needs,
- related to specific activities,
- on the basis of the language of doing those activities,
- in opposition of General English,
- not according to pre-prepared methodology,
- and that it can be limited to specific skills.

It can be recognised that, so far, the common element of definitions is the needs of students. Robinson (1991) does not abandon this practise of emphasising needs. Moreover, she advocates that it is needs that is of the vital importance in ESP. In her practitioner's guide, she postulates that ESP courses should be based on two criteria (1991: 3): firstly, ESP is normally 'goal-directed', and, more importantly ESP courses develop from a needs analysis whose aim is to specify what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English, and a number of characteristics that would explain that ESP courses, as it has already been pointed out, are generally hindered by a *limited time period*.

Having looked closely at all these definitions, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) come to the conclusion that each of the proposed definitions has some validity but also certain weak points. Considering, for example, Hutchinson and Waters' definition, Anthony (1997) noticed that it is very vague where ESP courses end and General English courses commence. He actually had in mind that numerous non-specialist ESP instructors use ESP approach in such a way that their syllabi are centred on the analysis of learner needs and their own specialist personal knowledge of English for real communication.

What Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) proposed as the most comprehensive definition would be the one offered by Strevens (1988), but also modified. The two authors claim that there are three absolute characteristics, according to which:

- meeting specific needs of the learner is what ESP is designed for;
- ESP employs the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
- language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities represent points that ESP is centred on.

But there are also five variable characteristics which assert that:

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- in characteristic teaching situations, ESP could make use of a different methodology from that of General English;
- it is likely that adult learners represent the target group that should be paid attention to when ESP courses are to be designed, either at a tertiary level institution, as in our case, or in a professional work situation; it could be used for learners at secondary school level as well;
- ESP is normally designed for intermediate or advanced learners;
- it is assumed that in ESP courses learners have already mastered basic knowledge of the language system, but ESP can be used with beginners as well.

What is more, there are a couple of more definitions that should not be left out. Rosemary Varghese (2012) finds it kosher to include students' needs in her definition as well, and she sums up pretty well that ESP is "*an approach to course design which is based on learner's needs*" (2012: 107). Contrariwise, Laborda (2011) believes that "*student's needs can be understood as the language knowledge that the learner requires for professional development, the language and content knowledge that needs to be added or reincorporated to the learner's knowledge and the learner's desires of language or content*" (2011: 103). Furthermore, Triki (2002) offers the definition in which the following is stated "*the term English for Specific Purposes belongs to a system of oppositions where it*

*is contrasted with other Englishes such as English for Academic Purposes, English as a Second Language, and English as a Foreign Language”.*

In order to design a suitable and useful course for such a demanding English, such as ESP, the first step that should be taken is called *needs analysis*. Needs analysis is later followed by curriculum design, materials selection, methodology, assessment and evaluation. Although all of the afore-mentioned stages are equally important, they cannot be seen as autonomous. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) postulated well enough that these stages overlap in a repeated process. In this paper we will primarily focus on needs analysis.

### Needs Analysis

As far as Brown (2016) is concerned, the phrase *needs analysis* can be interchangeably used with the phrase *needs assessment* (2016: 3). But what is needs analysis? To start with, the definition provided by Hyland will be taken into account because of the numerous aspects it encompasses (HYLAND 2006: 73):

*Needs analysis* refers to the techniques for collecting and assessing information relevant to course design: it is the means of establishing the *how* and *what* of a course. It is a continuous process, since we modify our teaching as we come to learn more about our students, and in this way it actually shades into *evaluation* – the means of establishing the effectiveness of a course. Needs is actually an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners' goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations they will need to communicate in. Needs can involve what learners know, don't know or want to know, and can be collected and analyzed in a variety of ways.

Due to the fact that the term *needs analysis* covers many issues, a number of definitions by other authors could be listed and compared here, but one point has to be borne in mind - definitions can go in many different directions by trying to encompass as much detail as possible and listing them would be laborious. Instead, one more definition will be provided. After combining various definitions from the literature, Brown came up with the following (BROWN 1995: 36):

[*Needs analysis is*] 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.

Having defined needs analysis, the next two issues we have to address include what *needs* is in needs analysis, and in what ways the word *analysis* can be interpreted in needs analysis. Brown (2016: 13) states that a lot of words can be used as synonyms for needs: wants, desires, necessities, expectations, motivations, requests, prerequisites, essentials, the next step, and even  $x + 1$  (where  $x$  is seen as something that students already know, plus the next step, or 1). According to the same author, there are at least four different categories, according to which needs can be elucidated. These points of view on needs, or as the author calls them *needs viewpoints*, include the following: (a) the democratic view: whatever the most people want, (b) the discrepancy view: whatever is missing, (c) the analytic view: whatever logically comes next, and (d) the diagnostic view: whatever will do most harm if missing (BROWN 2016: 13-17).

As far as the first point of view on needs is concerned, it can be concluded that those elements of the ESP that the majority of students recognise as necessary represent students' needs. By following this kind of logic, we should focus on the students' expectations, wants, desires, requests, and maybe their motivations. If we pay attention to this definition, we could find it to be too limiting. There will always be discrepancy between what the students want and what other individuals, such as teachers or administrators, think the students will need. All this poses a problem which can easily be solved by extending the definition of needs to include people other than students. In other words, needs would stand for those components that the ESP majorities of all groups (language teachers, and so forth) want, expect, etc. This wider explanation enables us to perceive what students need, but from a number of different viewpoints. Only then will we be able to mold the needs as something more than merely something that students want (BROWN 2016: 13).

Three primary advantages of the democratic view of needs can be detected. Firstly, the process of determining needs that will be covered in the ESP program includes all the groups. It is a well-known fact that people like to have a say in any process; therefore, they are eager to accept everything that the needs analysis discloses if they have been asked about it. Secondly, it is not unusual to harvest as many practical ideas as possible since a great number of them already exist in any curriculum. Thirdly, it is of the utmost importance to be aware of what the participants in a given needs analysis are thinking about English, ESP, language teaching, and language learning, if we are willing to create a valid curriculum (BROWN 2016: 13-14). Brown (2016) claims that this last point is valid whether the participants in the process admit it or not (BROWN 2016: 14).

When it comes to the discrepancy view of needs, we should perceive students' needs as the discrepancy between what the students are supposed to be

able to do within the ESP course and what they are able to do presently. Viewed from this standpoint, students' deficiencies, lacks, gaps, and requirements are most often of primary concern. Namely, needs analysts would be interested in explaining where, according to the curriculum, the finishing line for students is regarding their ESP knowledge and skills and where students are at the moment regarding their ESP learning (BROWN 2016: 14).

Again, three advantages can be identified. Firstly, people doing the needs analysis are inspired to put together the programs goals and student-learning outcomes which are also known as instructional objectives. Secondly, what follows is the formation of targets for the instruction and determination of the length of the path which the students need to walk along in order to reach those targets. And thirdly, this way of perceiving needs gives needs analysts additional motivation to dwell on the ESP course as a whole, as well as on the entire journey, from the beginning to the end (BROWN 2016: 14-15).

If the analytic view of needs is taken into account, students' needs represent those components of ESP that are to be learned next on the basis of the best available second language acquisition (SLA) theory and experience. Here, needs analysts are keen on discovering the next step that the students should cover in the hierarchy or process of language learning. As it has already been mentioned, this novel next step is sometimes designated as  $x + 1$ . It goes without saying that the analyst should first find out everything the SLA field knows about the process of learning English. Only then will the needs analyst be able to clarify what that means for learning the specific ESP, and for students in the sense that it has to be explained where students presently are in the process of learning ESP. According to Brown (2016), this view of needs can be rather problematic because we do not still fully understand how English is learned. Nevertheless, there are some language teachers who embrace the analytic view because they believe in their understanding of the process of learning ESP (BROWN 2016: 15).

Within the diagnostic view of needs, students' needs are perceived as any element that would damage ESP most significantly if it is missing. Viewed from this perspective, the analyst will seek what is necessary and essential for students, as well as any preconditions that they have to master before moving on. In this type of needs analysis, the ESP situations in which the students are most likely to find themselves are investigated. Needs analysts also have to learn about students, so that they could pinpoint potential students' needs. Having done this, the analyst continues his/her work by selecting those needs which could yield the most negative consequences if they are not covered (BROWN 2016: 15-16). Brown (2016) concludes that the diagnostic view of needs is beneficial when there is an ESP program in which needs have to be given primacy (BROWN 2016: 16).



What Brown emphasises is the fact that needs analysts cannot be in favour of one of the views of needs and consider it to be the truth. In that situation, analysts would be supporting only certain aspects of needs. Namely, needs can stand for wants, desires, expectations, requests, motivations, deficiencies, lacks, gaps, requirements, the next step, necessities, essentials, prerequisites, to name but a few. All of these represent facets of needs, i.e. facets which demand attention in an ESP curriculum. In order to include as many facets of needs as possible, we have to consider two, three or even all four viewpoints and conjoin them before conducting the needs analysis (BROWN 2016: 16-17).

Having elucidated the needs in the needs analysis, the reasonable step forward would be to make the word *analysis* in the needs analysis clearer. Brown (2016) asserts that there are at least eleven analysis strategies which ESP needs analysts could make use of. We should understand these analysis strategies as means to examine, investigate, explore, and analyse data which will enable us to uncover the needs necessary for a “*defensible curriculum in a particular ESP learning-teaching context*” (BROWN 2016: 18). It would be beneficial to mention here that we will not dwell on whether there could be more than eleven analysis strategies. We will focus on Brown’s list: individual-differences analyses, rights analyses, classroom-learning analyses, classroom-teaching analyses, means analyses, language audits, target-situation use analyses, target-situation linguistic analyses, target-situation learning analyses, present-situation analyses, and gap analyses (BROWN 2016: 18-27).

Individual-differences analyses investigate what students’ preferences are in connection to the learning process. The analyses of this kind usually investigate students’ preferences in error correction, the size of classes, learning strategies and styles, the amount of homework, etc. A good example would be, according to Brown, to collect information on culturally conditioned beliefs (to accept unthinkingly all ideas penned by the authorities or to approach every written document in a critical manner) by using questionnaires about expectations and differences (BROWN 2016: 23). Rights analyses seek to unravel what the vital relationships are in the situation and how they are opposed. Benesch (1999: 313) elucidates it pretty well, “*Rights analysis examines how power is exercised and resisted in various aspects of an academic situation, including the pedagogy and the curriculum.*” The instance provided by Brown describes analysing the power relationships (and how they are resisted) within the ESP teaching institution, which could include “*investigating how administrators create policy that the students resist, and how teachers can mediate between the two groups*” (BROWN 2016: 23-24).

Target-situation use analyses explore what course-participants ought to be able to do in the ESP when the instruction finishes. We should start the analyses of this kind by exploring the way(s) the language is used in the



particular ESP. This can be done by establishing or discovering existing corpora (nowadays, most often there are computer databases) of the language which is used in particular ESP and then scrutinising them. By exploring the use of language, we could draw together the information about the distinctive ways language is used and understood in the discourse community of the particular ESP, which Brown likes to refer to as “*an ESP community*” (BROWN 2016: 18-21). For example, for a future English for Journalism course, the needs analysis could search for the language used in common language events – talking to the editor, writing an effective lead, interviewing a politician, etc. This analysis could then gather the illustrations of certain language uses in the form of recordings (e.g. an interview) and photocopied texts (e.g. newspaper articles).

Classroom-learning analyses are focused on what the classroom learning situation is or ought to be. These analyses explore questions such as the teaching methods and the materials that professors will employ, the selection and ordering of the course content, and the kinds of activities that course-participants will take part in (BROWN 2016: 24). For example, in a class based on the target-situation linguistic analysis, the needs analysis could lead the analyst that the most important need is for students to master the common abbreviations used in newspaper articles. Classroom-learning analyses could then be used to determine which abbreviations ought to be covered (very likely based on the target-situation linguistic analysis), in what order (maybe it would make most sense to teach general academic abbreviations first, then abbreviations used in journalism, and at the very end symbols), what teaching methods to use (delivering lectures could be a good idea for the abbreviations), and what kind of activities course-participants would like to take part in.

Target-situation linguistic analyses investigate what linguistic characteristics course-participants will need to master and use in the ESP in order to achieve the language uses that are discovered in the target-situation use analysis. In these analyses, the specific linguistic features of the ESP that are found with the help of the target-situation use analysis are normally described and analysed. The linguistic features we should focus on here could include grammar, vocabulary items and collocation, to name but a few (BROWN 2016: 21). If we take a look at the course English for Journalism, the analysis of this type could search for the information about the linguistic characteristics of the vocabulary specific for writing effective leads, or prominent abbreviations.

What is explored in target-situation learning analyses is the information that students have to be able to learn and continue learning in the particular ESP community. By following the above-mentioned definition, we arrive at a conclusion that “*knowing how to learn the content of each field is often a very important aspect of succeeding at various stages of assimilating into an ESP community — an aspect that is sometimes quite independent from the specific*

*language use and linguistics involved*" (BROWN 2016: 22). This means that journalists should, for instance, be recertified after some time for writing in English.

The next rational step after target-situation learning analyses could be present-situation analyses. These analyses normally provide information about the students' knowledge at the outset of the course. By employing test results or certain observational techniques, such as corpora of learner-produced writing or speaking samples or interviews, these analyses could help us explore what course-participants can do with the language at the beginning of instruction (BROWN 2016: 22-23). For example, in the English for Journalism course, this analysis would imply using verified tests to gain proficiency information about the students. The information would include their strong and weak points regarding the four language skills, or in Europe, determining their level on the CEFRL (the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – A1-C2).

Gap analyses investigate the discrepancies between what students should be able to do at the end of the course and what they are able to do at the moment in the ESP. Therefore, this type of analysis should be seen as a combination of the three target-situation analyses (use, linguistic, and learning) and the present-situation analysis in order to investigate what students will need to master so that they could move from where they are right now to where they should be at the end of the course. This analysis is undoubtedly connected to the discrepancy view of needs, which has been mentioned above. If analysts decide to use this analysis, they should seek lacks in students' present abilities (BROWN 2016: 23).

In classroom-teaching analyses we explore what the teaching situation is or what it ought to be. This particular type of analysis normally seeks information "*about the selection and ordering of the course content, the teaching methods that will be employed, types of activities students will engage in, and the materials that will be employed — but from the teachers' perspectives*" (BROWN 2016: 24). Collecting information about teachers' preferred teaching styles and strategies and how those preferred teaching styles and strategies could influence students' learning styles and strategies is of the utmost importance for these analyses (BROWN 2016: 24-25). In the English for Journalism course, for instance, needs analysts with this orientation towards analyses could be interested in the ways of teaching that teachers feel most comfortable with (e.g. role-play: interviewer – interviewee, the analysis of example articles, etc.). Teaching strategies would also represent a very important aspect (e.g. establishing a pleasant learning environment, etc.).

Defining the contextual constraints and strengths represents the most important task of means analyses. This particular analyses would explore various issues, including the available equipment, facilities, funding, etc. Cultural attitudes

which could influence instruction, training, teaching ability and the level of teachers' proficiency in English would also be of interest for these analyses as well (BROWN 2016: 25). For the English for Journalism course, analysts would be gathering information about the available audio-visual equipment, but they would also be concerned with the attitudes from the wider cultural environment (e.g. the attitudes of parents, students, and the public towards learning English generally, and towards learning English for writing newspaper articles).

Language audits represent a little bit different analyses from those that we have described so far. They should be used utilised when wide-ranging analyses are necessary to scrutinise language strategies for large regions, such as the European Union and states. For analysing needs of big companies and professional groups, we would also rely on language audits. There is a potential risk that in such analyses, the needs of small groups of students will be neglected. What Brown insists on is that language audits could be misused "*to justify the imposition of top-down and bureaucratic language policies, standards, common frameworks, and the like*" (BROWN 2016: 25-26).

After the itemisation of eleven analysis strategies which could be exploited either separately or as a combination when needs analyses are conducted, it should be pointed out that they have a tendency to give better results when combined.

## Conclusion

As it can be perceived, defining ESP was not an easy task due to a lot of factors that have to be taken into account. However, the three absolute characteristics, along with the five variable ones, which were postulated by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) seem to have satisfied general expectations of what ESP stands for. In order to create an ESP course properly, the needs analysis as a first step cannot be avoided. On the basis of this outline of *needs analysis* in ESP, whose aim is neither to be all-encompassing nor to present a thorough analysis of the literature concerned with different views of needs and analyses, a couple of conclusions can be drawn. Different analysts could have completely different views of what needs and analyses are. Therefore, it is vital to agree on one of the four needs (democratic, discrepancy, analytic and diagnostic) or on a certain combination of the four. It is also essential to choose one analysis (individual-differences analyses, rights analyses, classroom-learning analyses, classroom-teaching analyses, means analyses, language audits, target-situation use analyses, target-situation linguistic analyses, target-situation learning analyses, present-situation analyses, and gap analyses) or a certain combination of the afore-mentioned analyses. The combination of analyses would definitely be more productive.

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## КУРСЕВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА ЗА ПОСЕБНЕ НАМЕНЕ И АНАЛИЗА ПОТРЕБА

### Резиме

Овај рад за свој главни циљ узима дефинисање анализе потреба у оквиру курсева енглеског језика за посебне намене као и описивање различитих погледа како на потребе тако и на анализе. Од самог осмишљавања новог курса енглеског језика за посебне намене, јасно је да је први корак који се мора предузети анализа потреба. За анализом потреба касније следе кораци као што су израда курикулума, одабир материјала, методологија,

оцењивање и евалуација. Иако су сви од овде поменутих корака једнако битни, у овом раду фокусираћемо се на анализу потреба коју схватамо као најбитнији корак, из простог разлога што је то корак од кога све креће. Након што смо понудили неке од најпознатијих дефиниција анализе потреба, увидели смо да је готово једнако важно најпре дефинисати енглески језик за посебне намене. Као што се може закључити из самог рада, дефинисање енглеског језика за посебне намене испоставило се као веома захтеван задатак због могућности да се ова специфична врста енглеског језика разуме на различите начине. Одлике енглеског језика за посебне намене које су навели Дадли-Еванс и Ст. Џон (1998) на прилично добар начин дефинишу овај специфичан облик наставе. Стога, у наредном делу рада дајемо приказ анализе потреба, као и различитих погледа на саме анализе и потребе. Циљ оваквог приказа није да пружи темељан увид и критички осврт на литературу која се бави овом тематиком, већ да олакша да дођемо неколико закључака везаних за анализу потреба у оквиру курса енглеског језика за посебне намене. Тако можемо закључити да више људи може имати различите погледе на то шта су потребе а шта анализе. Складно томе, од суштинске је важности изабрати један од четири погледа на потребе које нуди Браун (2016), или се сложити око тога коју комбинацију истих је најбоље употребити. Такође је јако битно и одлучити се за једну од 11 анализа или за одређену комбинацију анализа које су поменуте у раду. Међутим, оно на чему Браун (2016) инсистира јесте да је спајање више анализа увек продуктивније.

*Кључне речи:* анализа потреба, курсеви енглеског језика за посебне намене, потребе, анализе.