

EXPLORING THE NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP COURSE DESIGN

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Abstract

It is a learner-centered approach to learning, like any other language teaching method; ESP is solely concerned with learning. It is the teaching and learning of English in a second language and foreign language situation where the student's goal is to use English in a specific and specifiable communicative (or linguistic) domain. The drive to learn English was generated as a result of "wild" need to communicate along the crisscross of language in the areas of commerce and technology (Starfield 2012). "It has provided some very important insights into the nature of specific language needs" (Hutchinson and Water 1987: 2). Its goal-directedness enables the learner to crystallize his needs in English: for academic or work purposes. This informs the course designer to structure appropriately the required communicative activities and topics in the course. Moreover, not all the learners have specified their study areas or work; ESP course designer has to introduce general topics or activities, along with those that have specified their academic areas and professions (Babalola 2003). The main thrust of ESP is analyzing the needs of the learner to discovering his communicative needs which should be incorporated in the syllabus/course design

Keywords: ESP, Needs Analysis, Course Design, Target Situation, Learner-centred

Introduction

The basic insight that language can be thought of as a tool for communication rather than as sets of phonological, grammatical and lexical items to be memorized led to the notion of learners. No longer was it necessary to teach an item simply because it is 'there' in the language. A potential tourist to England should not have to take the same course as an air traffic controller in Singapore or a Columbian engineer preparing for graduate study in the United States. This insight led to the emergence of English for specific purposes (ESP) as an important subcomponent of language teaching, with its own approaches to curriculum development, materials, design, pedagogy, testing and research (Nunan 2004:7)

ESP is an offshoot of General English (GE) which was developed to solve specific communication problems. The learner of English is not interested in the theoretical nuances of the

language rather its instrumental purpose; that is, not running the whole gamut of the language structures. The learner requires certain language skills to proceed in his professional calling. So, he needs special communication skills for immediate integration into the working structure of his professionalism. Conversely, Hutchinson and Waters aver that, ESP is not solely concerned with the science of words or grammar, but it equally goes deeper into the underlying structures of the language; therefore, communication is not just the extrinsic features of language, it is what we read or hear, “There is need to distinguish between performance and competence as Chomsky did. That is, between what people do with the language and the range of knowledge and abilities which enables them to do it” (1987: 18).

Because the knowledge of English, he will have the enabling skills to extract relevant information from English textbooks or journals as fast as possible. These skills in addition help the learner to analyse, synthesise and evaluate every English reading material.

It is a learning-centred approach learning like any other language teaching method, ESP is solely unconcerned with learning. “It has provided some very important insight into the nature of specific language needs” (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 2). It is equally similar to the teaching and learning of English in a second language and foreign language situation where the learner’s goal is to use English in a particular domain. It is the drive to learn English as a result of the “wild” need to communicate along the crisscross of language in the areas of commerce and technology (Starfield 2011). Thus, ESP is usually goal-directed which implies that the learner is interested in English instrumentally; for study or work purposes. This informs the course designer to structure appropriately the required communication activities and topics on the course. Moreover, not all the learners have chosen their study area or work, therefore, ESP course designer should introduce general topics or activities, along with those that have specified their work and profession (Babalola 2003).

The ESP course designer must be guided by the needs of the learner, as such he has to analyse the communicative needs of the learner, and incorporate them in the communicative syllabus. Functional needs analysis must be holistic, that is, it must be all-encompassing by taking into account the initial and target needs of the learner. “More and more individuals have highly specific academic and professional reasons for seeking to improve their language skills; for those students usually adults coursed the that fall under the ‘English’ for special purpose (ESP) hold particular appeal” (Hortas 1999:3). So, the ESP learners are usually adults and have limited time for the language learning, so the ESP course designer should also be cognizance of this (Babalola 2003).

ESP classes usually have ‘mixed’ learners, that is, learners from different academic backgrounds, say medical practitioners –doctors, pharmacists, etc. The groups of professionals may not acknowledge that they have something in common. Differently, a company may engage its employees in an ESP class, this group may consist of different professionals, though (Babalola 2003: 139) “they will have shared knowledge of company and shared overall objectives, but they will have very different work schedules within the company”.

Besides, the form of language teaching in ESP is not different from other forms, but the contents vary. ESP “language teaching (SP-LT) occurs whenever the content and aims of the teaching are determined by the requirements of the learner rather than by external criteria” (Stevens 1977: 189). As such the process involved in learning ESP and other forms of language teaching are meant to facilitate effective and efficient language learning situations. So, there is no peculiar methodology or approach for ESP learning. It “is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 19-20). Thus, ESP is not a product but an approach, this implies that, it has no specialized methodology and reading material. It is truly an approach because its main thrust is the need of the learner in language teaching and learning, that is, the instrumental need of the learner to the target language. The necessary questions will relate to the learners themselves, the nature of language the learners will need to operate and the learning context” (Umera-Okeke 2005:7)

Needs Analysis

ESP course is to prepare the learner to develop or learn specific and specifiable communicative needs within the target situation: academic, professional or workplace environments. One important feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is structured to meet the varying needs of the learner (s); got from analyzing his needs. In fact, we have seen so far that language learning in ESP is not merely learnt for its own sake, but to help facilitate the path to entry into greater communicative competence for the learner, in the target situation. To make the course more interesting and motivating, the syllabus has to be functional, that is, by accounting for the needs of the learners, “who see the obvious relevance of what they are studying” (Basturkmen 2006:18).

It is a time conscious programme, so time has to be used effectively to accommodate the needs, because ESP learner has quite limited time to learn English as a result, it becomes very necessary to teach the learner the most important areas he needs: for communicative skills. It behoves therefore the course developer to identify those specific communicative needs of the learner which will be reflected in the course design/syllabus. Having identified the target situation, the

course developer will thus, carry out intensive linguistic features of the target situation (Babalola 2003). All this will determine and refine the syllabus of ESP course designer which can equally help “to assess learners and learning at the end of the course” (Basturkmen 2016: 17).

“Needs analysis is an important requirement in language learning for fact-finding and data collection (Dordan 1977) for specifiable communicative needs, communicative skills, communicative situation/setting and specifiable learner. It is the pre-course activities employed by ESP course developer “to the specification of language Learning objectives” (Brundley 1989:63), because it is most vital feature in ESP course/syllabus design (Hutchinson and Waters: 1987). It is therefore “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities’ (Umera-Okeke 2005: 34).

CATEGORIES OF INTERPRETATION OF NEEDS

Narrow or Product-Oriented Interpretation

This accounts for the communicative demands of the learner’s academic area or job/ professional requirements. The learner’s needs are interpreted on the basis of the language he will use in a specifiable communicative situation. It is target language behaviour which implies what the learner will be able to do with the language, at the end of the course. It is goal-oriented interpretation of needs (Widdowson 1978). Such needs can be described as objectives (Berwick 1989). They are objective because they are gleaned from several aspects of the actual information concerning the learner, his use of English in functional communicative situation and hyper-current communicative proficiency and linguistic difficulties (Bindley 1984). Objective needs act as the first step towards designing ESP course programme.

Broad of Process Oriented Interpretation

Bindley (1989) interprets needs on the premise of the individual learner in the learning situation: that is, taking into cognizance what the learner has to do in order to truly learn the language. It “relates to transitional behaviour, the means of learning” (Babolola 144). This implies identifying and incorporating the cognitive and affective variables of the learner in the learning situation. These needs were generated from the cognitive variables and affective factors which affect learning such as awareness, attitudes, personality, confidence, wants, expectations, in line with the learning of English and the learner’s individual cognitive style and learning strategies (Bindley 1989:65). The biographical data/subjective needs are vital to making necessary decisions in class placement and learning mode or style.

User- Institution or Society Interpretation

According to Babalola (2003), the institution or society in the determining in factor on what is desirable or necessary for the learner, to learn in the ESP learning situation. Thus, the programme will be structured in line with the goal-directed intent of the “sending” institution.

The Gains Afterwards for the Learner

This interpretation of needs is concerned with what the learner ought to or would like to gain or achieve at the end of the ESP course programme. Because, learner has his personal aims in addition to (or even in opposition to) the requirements (demands) of his academic and occupational goals or needs (see. Umera-Okeke, 2005, Babalola, 2003).

The Learner’s lack

Needs can be interpreted as what the learner lacks in the target language which is English. In fact, this means the communicative or linguistic skills that are lacking in the communicative competence of the learner, in English. So those skills have to accounted for in analysing the needs of the learner.

Two Broad Approaches to Needs Analysis

Target Situation Analysis (TSA)

It is an approach to needs analysis that highlights on learner’s needs at the end of the ESP course programme. The information gathered is used for subsequent training in the academic programmes: English for Academic purposes, or occupational programmes: English for Occupational Purposes. This approach to needs analysis is concerned with discovering the target use of English by the learner at the end of the language course; that is, the learner’s target needs which include his lacks, necessities and wants. It can also be called deficiency analysis (Umera-Okeke 2005) However, it usually helps to offer solutions on how to improve the learner’s language/communicative skills relating to his education, occupation and any other linguistic or communication situation. Lacks are the gaps that are found in-between the target. Proficiency and the existing learner’s competence; necessities or the objective needs are what are expected of the learner to know, at the end of the programme, to function efficiently in the target situation while wants or the subjective needs address the perceived wants of the learner. This is possible because motivation is the “arouser” of learning, so a learner learns quick and well, whenever he encounters his interest or needs. In addition, this often adopts communicative syllabus design.

Munby (1978) developed a popular framework for needs analysis which is called communicative needs processor. This consists of a set of parameter that has information on how the learner's target situation can be arranged. This framework has been severally discussed, analysed and studied by different scholars. It has its strengths and weaknesses. One of its strengths is its comprehensive data bank (micro-skills and attitudes), use as for the designated jobs which require low level of linguistic accuracy of native-speaks-like ability and so on for the learner. "The TSA may thus pinpoint the stage at which good enough competence for the job as reached" (Babalola 2005: 145). Its critics are of the view that it is too complex and inflexible, and equally it is inherently time consuming.

The information collected about the learner may involve two different stages in the life of the learner, which includes getting the learner ready for more training programmes in English and preparing him for new occupational challenges. So ESP programmes are meant to prepare the learner for further training courses which English is the medium of expression, afterwards the learner will secure the job (Babalola 2003). In truth, the requirements for ESP course training and the target job usually differ, but differences have to be considered in the analysis the needs of the learner. For example, during the ESP course programme the learner maybe required to make/ take notes from textbooks or answer examination questions, but his profession or occupational calling may demand much of discussion and negotiation in the target language (English), with little need of reading and writing. Thus, it behooves the learner to drill himself frequently on how to answer examination questions in ESP courses and also doing substantial drill/practice on oral or spoken activities in preparation for his profession or prospective profession (Babalola 2003).

Present Situation Analysis (PSA)

This presents the competence level of the learner at the beginning of the ESP programme, by discovering or investigating the learner's areas of strengths and weakness. It somewhat serves as a complement to Target Situation Analysis (TSA) by appraising what the learner possesses, lacks and needs to acquire in relation to language for the target situation needs. There are three basic sources of information which are extensively outlined by Richterich and Chancerel (1980), that form the premise of PSA establishment. They include the students/learners themselves, the language-teaching establishment and the user-institution (the learners' sponsors or place of work). This information can be collected though surveys, tests, interviews or questionnaires. The learner is the centripetal and centrifugal variables in all the processes or activities in this analysis.

To establish any of these information given, the course designer has to assess the levels of ability of the learner, that is, his resources: for instance, his level of financial and technical assistance;

his views on language teaching and learning. Besides, the surrounding culture and society, that is, the sociolinguistic milieu, to investigate the attitudinal position held towards the use and learning of English, and also a foreign language.

PSA stands in for the shortfalls or constraints on TSA. However, linguists have deferring views on the relation of TSA and PSA; some are of the view that TSA has to be the first, while some assert that PSA should precede TSA. “But in practice, one is likely to seek and find information relating to both TSA and PSA simultaneously” (Babalola 2003: 146). In fact, a viable needs analysis has to combine the two for functionality on the part of the learner and course/syllabus designer. Thus, the learner has to be tested in all the language skills speaking and listening, reading and writing. Pre-selection test” (Yates 1977: 48) would come in form of battery test to measure the present level of attainment of the learner before the beginning of the course. He outlines pre-selection conditions which include:

- i. To provide a rapid means of assessing an employee’s approximate stage of attainment in English for the purpose of forming homogenous classes.
- ii. To provide a rapid means of assessing whether an employee can participate in a single “one-off” activity such as international seminar.
- iii. To provide a rapid means of deciding which stage test to administer employee for whom a detailed language profile is required (1977:48).

The Expanding of Needs Analysis in ESP

Needs analysis investigates to establish the communicative needs of the learner and their realisations, as a result of the analysis of the communication in the target situation. That is what can also be called target situation analysis (Chambers 1980). Dudley-Evans and St John outline eight principles in analysing the needs of the learner.

- i. Professional information about the learners: The tasks and activities learners are/will be using English for-target situation and objective needs
- ii. Personal information about the learners: Factors which may affect the way the learn such as previous learning experiences, cultural information, reasons for attending the course and expectations of it, attitude to English: wants, means and subjective needs
- iii. English language information about the learner: What their current skills and language use are (*present situation analysis*) which allows us to assess (iv).
- iv. The learners’ lacks: The gap between (iii) and (i)- lacks.
- v. Language learning information: Effective ways of learning the skills and language in (iv)- *learning needs*.

- vi. Professional communication information about (i): Knowledge of how language and skills are used in the target situation - *linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, genre analysis*.
- vii. What is wanted from the course.
- viii. Information about how the course will be run – *means analysis* (125).

Critiques on Needs Analysis

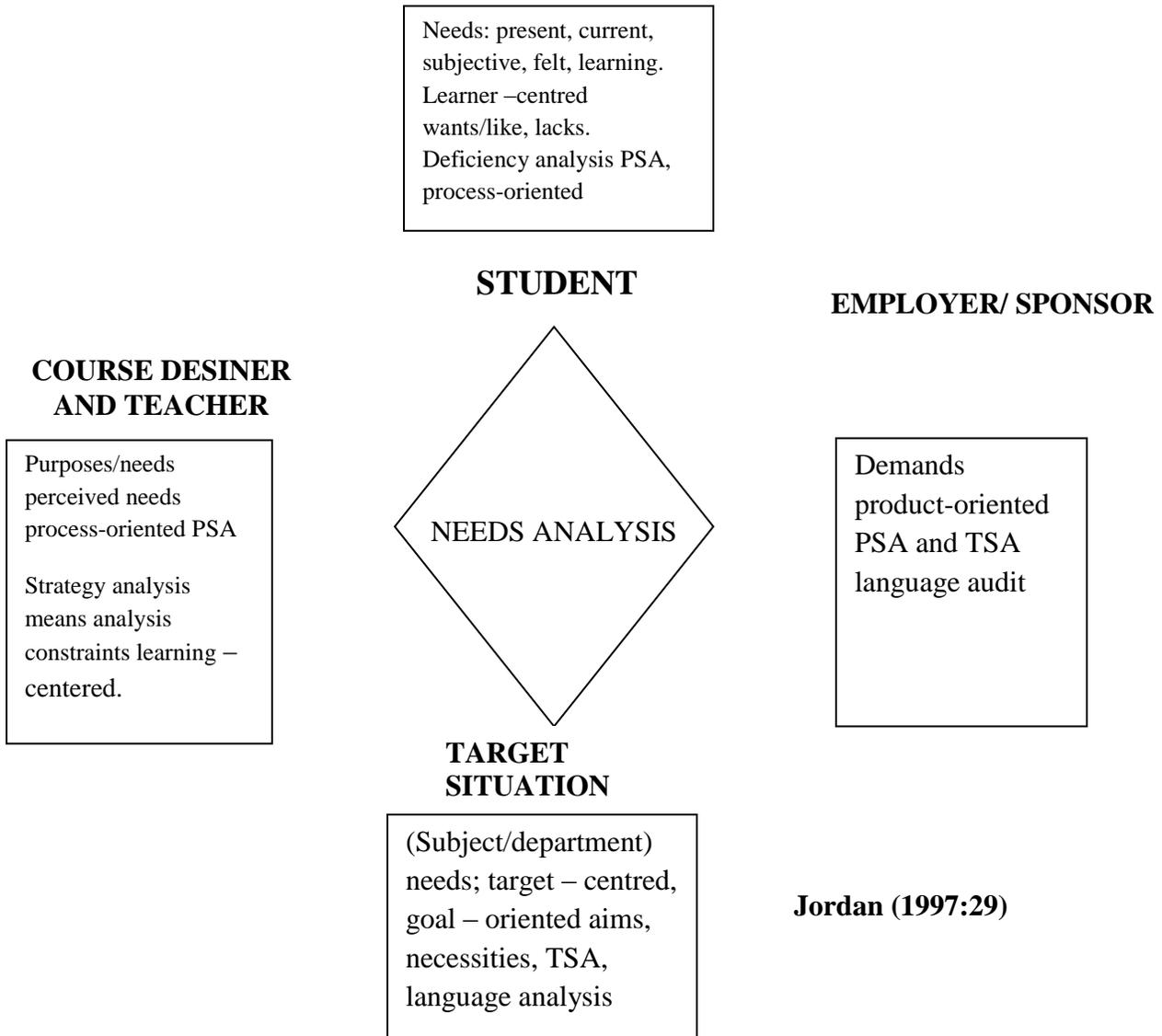
Course designer optimizes language to the needs and interests of the learners to an energizing functional framework for their target communicative environments. This helps to erase the perceived “language learning anxiety” which may engender what I called *linguistic divergence* on the learners, which simply means negative attitude. As a result the course designer must be learner-focused or centered in the descriptions of the language use in specific academic, workplace and professional domain of the learners. This will obviously illuminate the learners’ target language needs by maximizing their instrumental interests in learning of the language.

- Often the information the course developer comes from the learners’ institution; and these institutions have already had specific expectations about what the learners can do eventually. Therefore, needs analysis only takes care of the interests of the “sending” institutions at the expense of the learners (Auerbach 1995). Perspectives of needs vary and the needs analyst has to decide whose perspectives to take into account in designing ESP courses or synthesise divergent perspectives (Jasso-Aguilar 1990). Besides, needs analysis is a means of fitting outsiders into the communicative practices of linguistically privilege in-groups. It purports to be a neutral enterprise but in fact is often used by institutions to get others to conform to established communicative practices (Benesch 2001).
- Hutchinson & Waters (1987) posit that language needs are different from learning needs, despite the fact that the learner has to make use of some language structures/features in his target situations. It has not thus implied that the learner is willing to learn/acquire them. Therefore, Language training for specific purposes can be a covert means to channel immigrants into marginal occupations, ensuring that they only have good enough English to be able to move out of these jobs (Tollefson 1991).
- The learners are often asked for their perceptions of needs but they may not be reliable sources of information about their own needs, especially if they are relatively unfamiliar with the job they are to perform or subject they are to study (Long 1996). Asking learners about their language needs can be problematic because they may lack awareness or metalanguage to describe these needs in any meaningful way. It is improbable that students with unsophisticated knowledge about language would make sound decisions about their needs (Chambers 1980).

- Objective needs are not necessarily the same as subjective needs or wants. For example, engineering students may objectively need to deal with written texts concerned with technical matter but may want to read topics in English on other general interest subject. Using technical texts, topics, or tasks may turn out to be demotivating (Basturkmen 2008).
- Language use in specific situations is simply too unpredictable to be identified in any certain terms. ESP has sometimes produced a rigid view of language needs and failed to take account of the variation of language use that exists in any target situation. A striking example of a rigid approach to analysis of language needs is seen in Munby's Communicative Needs Processor, conducted in 1978. This approach involved the attempt to identify not only the English language functions that would be needed (for example, by a waiter working in a Spanish tourist resort) but also the actual linguistic formula for realising these functions (Basturkmen 2006:20).
- Basing course designs on needs analysis may lead to language training rather than language education. Learners are trained to perform a restricted repertoire of the language rather than to develop underlying linguistic competence of the language because they are deprived of the generative basis of language (Widdowson 1983).

However, the courses developer should be in contact with the local situations towards developing the courses in ESP. That is, the courses should be patterned within the confines of the thinking and learning of the local culture. In addition, the anticipatory constraints should be equally captured. Jordan therefore asserts that, "it allows sensitivity to situations in any country and discourages the imposition of alien models (of teaching, methodology, and learning)" (Jordan 1977:28). He exemplifies this below, from the data generated from the learner, course developer and teacher, employer or sponsor and target situation:

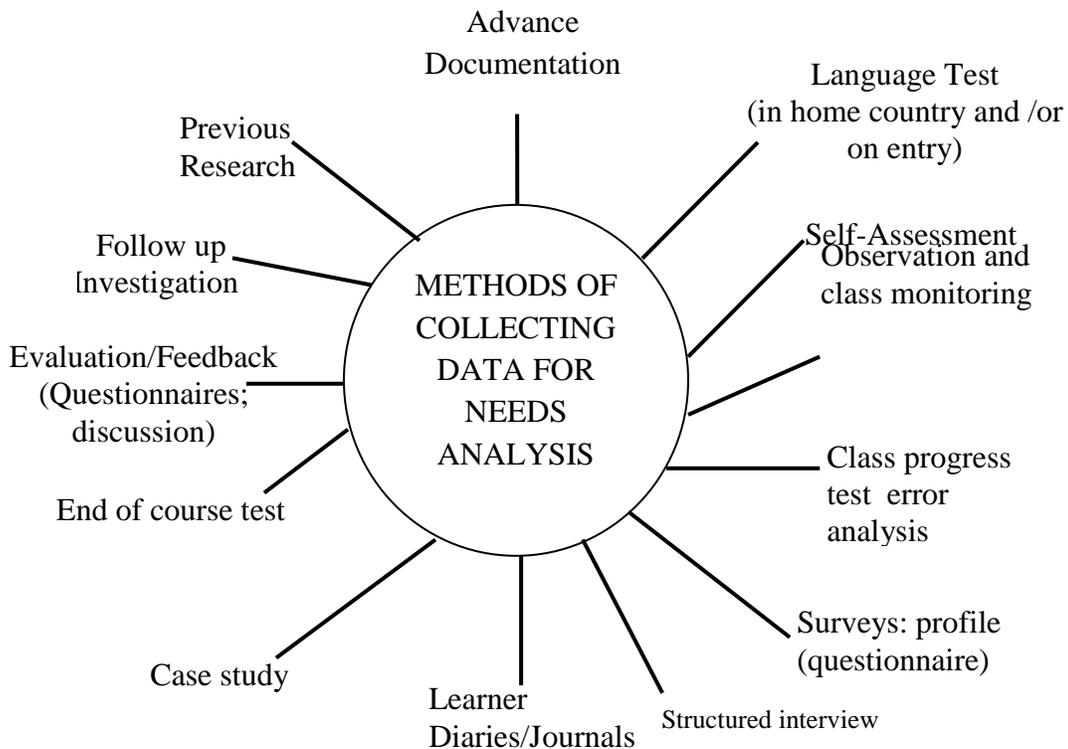
JORDAN SUMMARY OF NEEDS ANALYSIS



Method of collection for Needs Analysis

ESP course designer employs different methods/techniques in the collection of information (data) about the learner’s needs. These may include, interview, observation, data collection (that is gathering texts; informal consultations with sponsors, learner’s and others), and questionnaires (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). Eclecticism of these methods are advocated for effective result, but this is dependent on the time and resource available. Moreover, “the methods used employ various techniques: documentation, texts, questionnaires, forms/checklists, interviews, record-keeping and observation” (Jordan 1997:30), from where the course developer/designer obtains his information simultaneously. Jordan diagrammatises these below:

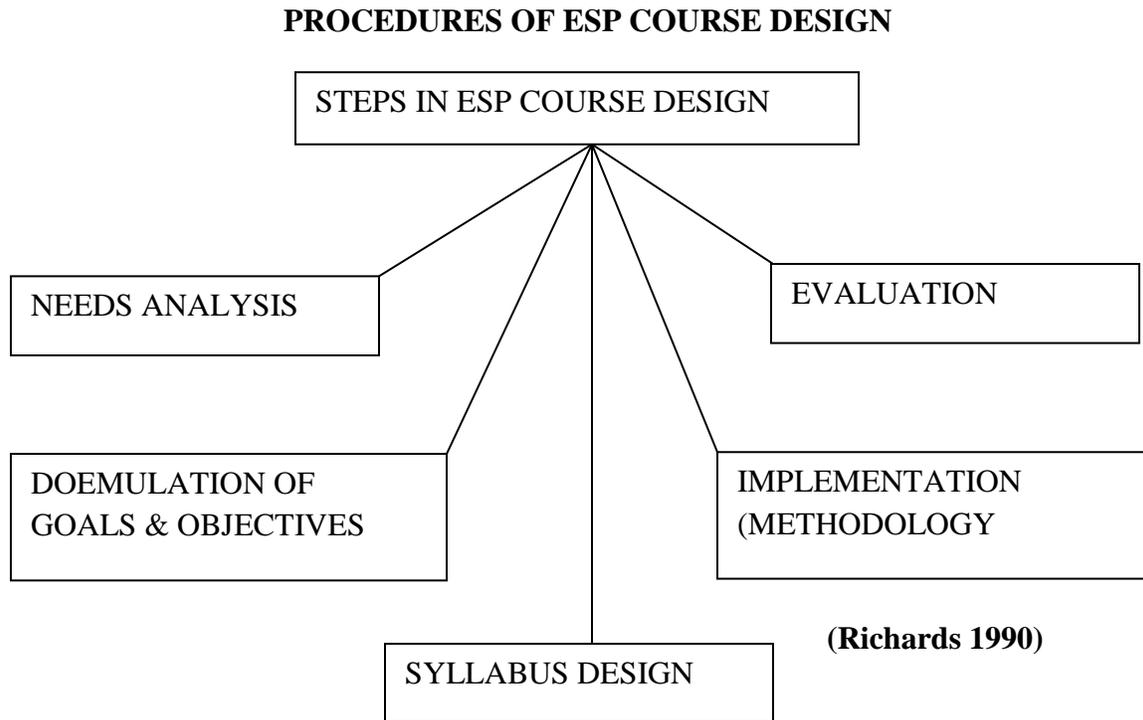
JORDAN METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION



Course Design in ESP

It is the development of curriculum in language teaching which consists of needs analysis, syllabus design, goal setting, methodology and testing and valuation. It is the same procedure in all aspects of language leaning: EFL, ESP, ESL, etc. But the course designer is saddled with the

consciousness of knowing the particular needs of every unit of the language learning. Richards, thus, diagrammatises the procedure:



a) Needs Analysis

We have dwelled heavily previously that ESP accounts for the deferent and specifiable communicative needs of the learner, which influence the course development in ESP, to account for these varying needs. Needs analysis is the heart and soul of any course design. Thus, in English language teaching, according to Brinley, there two approaches to needs analysis: “narrow or product-oriented interpretation of needs whereby the learner’s needs are seen solely in terms of the language they will have to use in a particular communication situation” and “broad or process-oriented interpretation” which analyses needs in relation to the learning situation (1984: 65)

ESP course design is learner-centred, because the course designer or teacher involves the learner or accounts for the needs of the learner before designing a course for him. So, language teaching will be solely dependent on the readiness of the participants (the course designer or teacher and the learner) to interact and agree between them their goals of interaction, for effectiveness. However, this relationship will not be imposed on them rather, it has to be negotiated (Corder 1973:13).

Formulation of Goals and Objectives

The course developer after analysing the needs, he will then specify the aims and objectives (that is, what is expected at the end of the course) of the teaching course (Umera-Okeke. 2005:48). So, at the end of the ESP course, the learner will be able achieve communicative competence; because communication is usually the emphasis, especially in ESP language learning situation. To achieve these goals/objectives, the ESP course designer is required to employ communicative syllabus which would help the ESP learner to “approximate more and more to the language use characteristic of the community whose language he is acquiring (Wilkins 1976:13). Some scholars are of the view that such expectation may be unnecessary, because the learner may not be interested in being a member of the language community, he is interested in merely to communicate with the language. In short, the goals/objectives should be geared towards achieving a competent communicator rather communicative competent speaker (of English).

Syllabus of Course Design

At this point, the course developer interprets the information (or data collected) from the needs of the learner (needs analysis) and develop them into a syllabus or course. It is the conversion of those needs of the learner into syllabus content (Wilkins 1976: iv). Thus, syllabus is a compilation of expected goals which set out a plan on what to be learnt in a given course, and specifies the types of learners or the group of learner, the blow-by-blow learning processes (unit) and the period of time the learning is expected to take. Syllabus can take various forms, in so far as, it captures the intended goals and objectives and represents a particular theory or eclecticism of theories of language learning. With air finality, Robinson asserts that, “course design involves putting the theoretical decision about objectives and syllabus into a context” (1991:41)

Implementation

After all the theoretical foundations and explorations in getting things done for effective ESP learning language situation, the onus now lies on the ESP teacher. This is the actual performance of the syllabus or course designed. The teacher is therefore saddled with the responsibility of implementing maximally syllabus designed for the ESP courses. And the teacher needs proper reinforcement to bring out the best in him, through training and retraining him and increased resources. Authorities or “sending” institutions should encourage “The process or task-based syllabus, the use of authentic texts, collaboration with the content teacher to creating and interpreting the syllabus” (Umera-Okeke 2005:52).

Evaluation

It is the final steps in course design and the assessment of the syllabus. The teacher, at this point, is expected to measure the successes achieved after overall assessment of the syllabus-practicability or impracticability of the syllabus. Both the teacher and learner have relative confidence on syllabus because it is assumed that enough grounds have been covered. Thus, syllabus should be assessed or evaluated to find out the level of success achieved on the set goals and objectives in the implementation.

Conclusion

Though ESP is an off-shoot of general English language Teaching (ELP); but its main thrust is on practical results or outcomes and effects on the learner; on his communicative abilities. It is quite obvious (now) that the interests of ESP have always been, and remain, with needs analysis, text analysis, and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situated” (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:1).

Inherently, language syllabus is selective in nature, but general English syllabus is usually after the language reality which the student has to contend with in the learning of English, this language reality or activity is to be discovered or speculated by the course designer; and it is the first step towards the needs analysis. As such, the main concern of every course designer is to discover the specific needs of the learner: “ESP is simply a narrowing of this (sic) spectrum” (Holmen 1996: 3-4):

The ESP process of specialization should not result in the complete separation of one part of the language from another. One cannot simply hack off pieces of a language or of skills and then expect them to exist independently of anything else. Every discipline refers to others and each draws on the same reservoir of language. A science student who comes to grips (sic) with the past simple passive through the description of laboratory procedures is unlikely to lock that tense into that context for the rest of their English-speaking life.

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