

College of Education for Humanities

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## 6. Needs Analysis

The defining feature of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is not simply the existence of a need, but rather a clear awareness of the need. While all language courses are technically based on some kind of need, in General English, the tradition often assumes that these needs cannot be specified. However, if the learners, teachers, and sponsors understand exactly why English is needed, that awareness directly influences the content of the course and allows the teacher to exploit the learning potential of the situation. Because of this, needs analysis is considered the "minimum" of the ESP approach to course design.

A major milestone in the field of needs analysis was John Munby's Communication Needs Processor (CNP), a highly detailed set of procedures used to identify the target language needs of any group of learners by asking questions about key communication variables, such as topic, participants, and medium. While the CNP provided the machinery for identifying these needs, it also highlighted the limitations of a purely language-centred approach to needs analysis. In a language-centred approach, "needs" are defined simply as the ability to produce or understand the linguistic features of a target situation. However, this "scientific" analysis often fails because it misses the human element of education. To address this issue, a fundamental distinction between the two types of needs is needed:

**Target Needs:** What the learner is required to do in the final target situation.

**Learning Needs:** What the learner must do specifically to learn the language.

A successful ESP course must go beyond listing linguistic features and also consider the process of how those features will be acquired.

### 1 What are the target needs?

“Target needs” is something of an umbrella term; it is more useful to look at the target situation in terms of *necessities*, *lacks*, and *wants*.

**a) *Necessities*:** Necessities are the type of need determined by demands of the target situation; that is, what the learner has to know to function effectively in the target situation.

**b) *Lacks*:** Identifying necessities is not enough because ESP teachers must also identify what the learner already knows, so they can decide which of the necessities the learner lacks. This involves measuring the learner's existing proficiency against the target proficiency to find the "gap" that the course must fill.

**c) *Wants*:** The most complex category wants, which refers to the learner’s subjective view of their needs. Because awareness is a matter of perception, a learner's view often conflicts with that of the teacher, course designer, or sponsor. For instance, a student like Li Yu Zhen may need social fluency for life in the U.S., but she prioritizes grammar "wants" because she must pass a test to be accepted into her course. Ignoring these wants can damage motivation.

## **2 Gathering information about target needs**

To gather this information, practitioners use several methods, including questionnaires, interviews, data collection (gathering texts), informal consultations, and observation. This data is organized using *a target situation analysis framework*, which asks critical questions:

**a)** Why is the language needed (e.g., for work, study, training, or status, examination, promotion)?

**b)** How will the language be used? *Medium*: speaking, writing, reading, etc.; *Channel*: telephone, face to face, etc.; *Types of texts and discourse*: academic, informal, technical, etc.

**c)** What will the content areas be? *Subjects*: e.g., medicine, biology, commerce, etc; *Level*: e.g., postgraduate, secondary school.

- d) Who will the learner use the language with? *Native speakers or non-native; Level of knowledge of receiver; Relationship*: e.g., colleague, teacher, customer.
- e) Where will the language be used? *Physical setting*: e.g. office, hotel; *Human context*: e.g., alone, meetings, on telephone; *Linguistic context*: e.g. in own country, abroad.

### **3 Learning needs**

While target needs represent the destination of the journey, learning needs represent the route, and analysing what an expert *does* with language tells us very little about how a student *learns* to do it. Therefore, an ESP course should not be based solely on target objectives. For example, even if a target situation requires reading dull technical manuals, using those same texts in a classroom may fail to generate the necessary motivation for learning. Instead, materials should be chosen for being generative and enjoyable.

### **4 Analysing learning needs**

To analyse learning needs, we can use a similar checklist to that used for target situation analysis:

- ❖ Why are learners taking the course? (Is it compulsory or optional? What do learners think they will achieve?)
- ❖ How do they learn? (What is their learning background? What methodology will appeal to them?)
- ❖ What resources are available? (The number and professional competence of teachers; The materials, etc)
- ❖ Who are the learners (their age, gender, nationality, interests, existing subject knowledge, and their attitude to the English-speaking world)?
- ❖ Where will the ESP course take place? (Are the surroundings noisy, cold, etc?)
- ❖ When will the ESP course take place? time of day; every day /once a week, etc.

By combining the analysis of language use (target needs) with language learning (learning needs), ESP practitioners can adopt a truly learning-centred approach. This ensures that students are treated as people rather than "word-crunching machines" and that the "route" of the course is just as carefully planned as the "destination".

## 7. Approaches to course design

Course design is using the data you've gathered from needs analysis to create a syllabus, select or write materials, decide on a methodology for teaching, and set up evaluation procedures to check progress.

Simply having data from a needs analysis is not enough; that data must be interpreted. Because there are often conflicts—such as what a learner *needs* versus what they *want*—and external constraints like limited time or poor facilities, the designer must choose an approach that balances these factors. There are three main types of ESP course design:

### 1 Language-Centred Course Design

This is the simplest and most common approach in ESP. It tries to make a direct link between the target situation analysis and the content of the course. The process follows a logical path: a) identify the target situation, b) select a theory of language, c) identify the linguistic features (like specific grammar or vocabulary) of that situation, and then d) build the syllabus and materials around those features.

While it seems logical, it has several major weaknesses:

- a) *Learner-restricted, not learner-centred*: The learner is only used to identify the target situation. Once that is done, their actual learning needs are ignored.
- b) *Static and inflexible*: It doesn't allow for changes or feedback if the initial analysis was wrong or if student motivation changes.
- c) *Wrongly assumes learning is systematic*: Just because a teacher presents language in a systematic way doesn't mean the student's mind learns it that way.

- d) It works as an analytic model but not as a predictive one. Analysing what occurs in a target situation does not determine what should occur in a pedagogic context.
- e) *Surface levelled*: it focuses on performance (what people do) rather than the competence (the underlying knowledge) that allows them to do it

## **2 Skills-Centred Course Design**

The skills-centred approach rests on two principles:

### **Theoretical Basis**

This principle suggests that underlying any visible language behaviour (performance) are specific skills and strategies (competence).

*Performance level*: The ability to complete a specific task (e.g., cataloguing a book).

*Competence level*: The specific strategies needed to achieve that task (e.g., skimming for gist and extracting relevant data).

The objective is to look past surface data to the internal processing power of the learner.

### **Pragmatic Basis**

Drawing on Widdowson's (1981) distinction between goal-oriented and process-oriented courses the authors acknowledge a structural problem in ESP: the target aims may be unachievable within the time and experience constraints of most ESP courses. The process-oriented approach resolves this by viewing the ESP course and the target situation as a continuum of developing proficiency, with no fixed cut-off point.

The skills-centred approach takes the learner more seriously than the language-centred model:

- a) It views language in terms of how the learner processes it, b) it builds on positive existing abilities not only on lacks, and c) It frames its objectives in open-ended terms enabling learners to achieve at least something.

Nevertheless, it retains a critical limitation: it treats the learner as a user of language rather than as a learner of language. The processes it investigates are processes of language

use (e.g., reading strategies) not processes of language learning. It does not, therefore, constitute a fully learning-centred approach.

### 3 Learning-Centred Course Design

The term learning-centred is preferred over "learner-centred." While "learner-centred" implies that the student is the only factor, "learning-centred" recognizes that learning is a negotiation between the individual and society.

A learning-centred approach differs from the others by looking beyond just performance or competence to find out how someone actually acquires that competence. We can see the difference between the designs in this diagram:

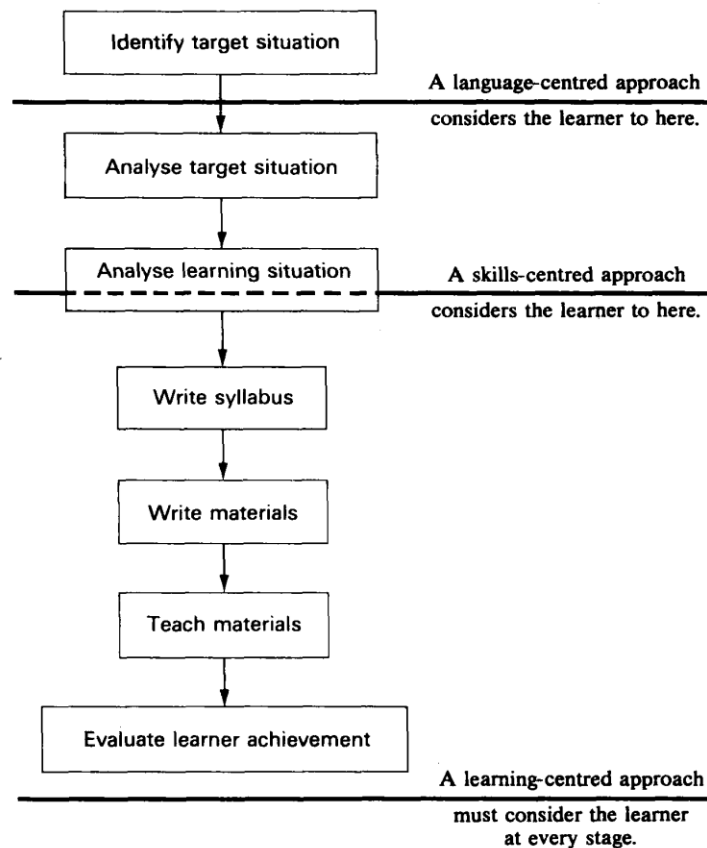


Figure 20: A comparison of approaches to course design

This figure shows that a learning-centred approach to course design take account of the learner at every stage of the design process. This has two implications:

1) **Course design is a negotiated process:** No single factor (like the target situation) has total control. The learning situation and the target situation both influence the syllabus, materials, and teaching methods.

2) **Course design is a dynamic process:** It is not a straight line from analysis to course. It uses feedback channels to change the course as needs and resources evolve over time.

Ultimately, a learning-centred approach is more complex because it recognizes that learning is a complex, human process that must consider the learner at every single stage