Exploring ESP Learners' Needs in a Private Language School: The Case of El Nour School in the City of Touggourt

Messaouda LITIEM [1*]
Dr.Nesrine AOUDJIT BESSAI [2]

[1] **Doctorate Student, Algiers 2 University (Algeria),**
messaouda.litiem@univ-alger2.dz

[2] **Senior Lecturer, Algiers 2 University(Algeria),**
nesrine.bessai@univ-alger2.dz

LIRADDI (Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire de Recherche en Analyse du Discours et Didactique de l'Interculturel)

ABSTRACT

This study aims at determining the needs of learners enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in a private language school in Algeria. It was carried out in El Nour school in the city of Touggourt. The sample included ten participants who were selected randomly and data were collected using an interview conducted with learners before taking the course. The qualitative analysis of the obtained results showed that learners' major goal in learning English was to improve their speaking ability and overcome the difficulties they face when speaking English. This study could be of great benefit to many ESP teachers, researchers, and course designers as it presents the main procedures for conducting a needs analysis. Moreover, the findings resulting from the needs analysis will provide an insight into ESP learners' goals, needs, and weaknesses that will pave the way for designing courses that would meet these concerns.

Keywords: ESP; Needs Analysis; Private Language Schools

1. INTRODUCTION

The value that English has received and the development in science and technology in today's world led linguists to think of a new type of English that meets the needs of learners.The known general English has become a language that does not fully address the requirements of individuals who want to communicate internationally within different fields and for various reasons Therefore, linguists called for an English that fits each field and which is called English for Specific Purposes or ESP in short.

What characterizes ESP courses is that they are designed depending on a needs analysis which determines learners' needs before the course begins. It is based on this analysis that the course objectives, the content, the required activities, and the teaching materials can be selected and implemented appropriately. Thus, ESP learners have different needs and a clear understanding of these needs results in designing an appropriate course.

Although there are many studies on ESP learners' needs, little research exists about the context of Algerian private language schools. This study sheds light on this area which has not been investigated thoroughly. The question which is raised in El Nour Private Language School is: 'What are the needs of ESP learners?'. The answer to this question is the core of this paper which discusses the findings of the present study.

2. Literature Review

Dudley-Evans and St-John (1998) define needs analysis as "professional information about the learners: the tasks and activities learners are/ will be using English for" (p. 125) and for Richards (2001), needs analysis refers to the "procedures used to collect information about learners' needs" (p. 51). Thus, needs analysis is a set of procedures that precede course design and which permits the ESP teacher to gather the necessary information about learners' goals and their needs.

According to Robinson (1991), there are multiple ways to conduct needs analysis, in which he mentions: questionnaires, interviews, case studies, tests, and analysis of authentic spoken and written texts (e.g. analyzing written assignments). It can also be done by using surveys, discussions, structured interviews, observation, and assessments (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998, p. 132).

Before conducting the needs analysis, the ESP course designer should be aware of what these needs include. In the same regard, Chambers (1980) says: "The value of needs analysis may go unrealized unless ambiguity and lack of precision in the use of the term are cleared away." (p. 25). As a result, there is no agreed precise definition for the term needs among scholars and which can apply to all learning situations. However, needs may include different types. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) classify needs into two types: target needs and learning needs. Target needs cover three areas: necessities, lacks and wants. For both researchers, *Necessities* are a ''type of need determined by the demands of the target situation; that is, what the student has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation.''(1987, p. 55). *Lacks* refer to the gap between what the student already knows and his/ her necessities (Jordan, 1997, p. 25). While Necessities are considered as objective needs, *wants* refer to the students' motivation behind and the reasons why s/he needs to learn a language; i. e, the subjective side of needs (ibid, p. 26). The needs required to fulfill these lacks, then, and reach necessities are referred to as learning needs.

The ESP course designer should also be aware of the different approaches to needs analysis. According to Jordan (1997), there are five approaches namely: Target Situation Analysis (TSA), Present Situation Analysis (PSA), Deficiency Analysis (DA), Strategy Analysis (SA) or Learning Needs Analysis, and Means Analysis (MA).Robinson(1991) defines Target Situation Analysis as "a needs analysis, which focuses on students' needs at the end of a language course" (p. 8). It is a type of needs analysis, which aims at determining the language needs of learners that are supposed to be fulfilled by the end of the course.

In contrast to TSA which focuses on what learners need to achieve at the end of a course, Present Situation Analysis, according to Jordan (1997), determines these needs at the beginning of a course (p. 24). In the same regard, Robinson (1991) states: "PSA seeks to establish what the students are like at the start of their language course, investigating their strengths and weaknesses." (p. 9). PSA is an approach to needs analysis through which the ESP course designer collects learners' background information and their current language abilities. Not only that Present Situation Analysis precedes Target Situation Analysis, but the first completes the second (Robinson, 1991; Jordan, 1997). One can not replace the other and the course designer should not rely on only one of them. Both of these should be conducted so as to make a good needs analysis for a better ESP course that meets learners' needs and goals (Songhori, 2008).

When the analyst conducts PSA and TSA, s/he ends up having a clear idea of learners' needs at the starting point and destination of the learning process, but how to measure what is in between to move from the first to the second to fulfill these needs requires an other type of analysis which is called Deficiency Analysis. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Jordan (1997) refer to Deficiency Analysis as the analysis of learners' lacks. It is concerned with the gap between the present situation and the target; i. e, what knowledge and skills language learners need to move from present to target situation (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Deficiency Analysis allows the analyst to discover what areas of language have to be worked on.

Since ESP is a learner-centered teaching approach, identifying the strategies which learners follow to learn new structures is of high importance. Strategy Analysis focuses on the learning strategies that learners employ in their learning to keep them motivated and engaged. For Allwright (1982, p. 27), SA tackles issues like "preferences in group size, correction procedures and methods assessments". According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), learners do not follow the same learning methods, thus the analyst should know what strategies a certain group of ESP learners follow for a good needs analysis.

Needs analysis is not confined to learners, their goals, lacks, and strategies only; however, the setting in which the course will be conducted is also important. It is referred to as Means Analysis. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) state that Means Analysis "looks at the environment in which a course will be run." (p. 124). Location, time, duration, the socio-cultural background, circumstances, constraints faced, and other factors should be taken into consideration in Means Analysis. These variables can influence learners, the learning process, and the objectives of the course.

Although there are different types of approaches to needs analysis, each one focuses on an important aspect in the analysis of ESP learners' needs. In other words, depending on a certain approach to needs analysis may not yield reliable results on learners' needs. Therefore, the analyst or the course designer should not rely on one approach and neglects the other unless his/ her objectives call for a certain type of analysis.

3. Method and Procedures

As in any scientific research, it is mandatory to make clear how the data were collected, what procedures were followed, and how the results were

analyzed. Therefore, this section describes the sample selected, the used research tool, and the type of method and procedures followed in carrying out this study.

The study was carried out inTouggourtcity in March 2019.The population was the ESP learners in El Nour School. Random sampling procedures were followed to choose 10 adults. To ensure homogeneity in language learning level, it was made sure that these participants tend to share the same level of English for better working conditions and results. That is to say, those who showed different levels were not included in this study, but they were enrolled in other learning groups.

To collect data, a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions and close-ended questionswas used to gather information about learners, their goals behind taking the course and their needs. Since learners who participated in this study were mature adults who were aware of their wants and needs, an interview was chosen to collect the necessary data. For many researchers like Hutchinson and Waters(1987), Robinson (1991), West (1994), Jordan(1997), Dudley-Evans and St John(1998),Graves(2000), and Basturkmen(2010), interviews are considered as a needs analysis tool.According to LepetitandCichocki(2002), interviews help to obtain deep information about learners' needs.

The type of the interview is related to the interviewer's knowledge of what s/he is investigating. "the structured interview is useful when researchers are aware of what they do not know and therefore are in a position to frame questions that will supply the knowledge required, whereas the unstructured interview is useful when researchers are not aware of what they do not know, and therefore, rely on the respondents to tell them" (Lincoln *et al,* 1985, p. 269).In this study, the choice of the interview type to be semi-structured is related to the lack of knowledge of what theselearners' needs may include.

For the interview to yield valid and reliable results, the following considerations were taken into account:

- Participants were informed about the study and its purpose.
- They were informed that their personal information, answers, and opinions will be kept confidential and anonymous.
- They sat the interview individually taking 25 to 30 minutes long.
- The researcher asked for their permission to record the interviews.

The interview consisted of seven sections. The first one was devoted to general information about participants, the next five sections were Present Situation, Target Situation, Deficiency, Strategies, and Means Analysis respectively, whereas the last one was devoted to further suggestions. So as to ensure a good needs analysis, the focus was not on one approach or another, but a combination of the whole was preferred.

The section on General Information dealt with learners' gender, age, mother tongue and academic level.

The section on Present Situation Analysis included seven questions intended to elicit information about learners' attitudes towards learning English, whether English was an important language for them, what they knew about English and which skills they had developed so far, their current language level, if they had already taken ESP courses in English, their evaluation of the learning experience if any, and how they perceived learning a language.

Target Situation Analysis section contained four questions related to learning goals, whether they preferred a general English course or a needs-based one, the content they liked to have, and where and when they needed to use English.

The fourth section dealt with Deficiency Analysis. It included four questions concerning the difficulties that learners encountered when using English, what they lacked, in which language skill (s) they faced difficulties most, and if they used to practise English in their daily life.

Section five was devoted to Strategy Analysis. It included four questions concerning learners' preferred learning style, class work, whether they liked using ICT (Information Communication Technology) in learning, and the type of assignment they preferred.

The sixth section of the interview was about Means Analysis. It contained four questions about the setting, time and duration of the sessions. In the last section, the interviewees were invited to add any further suggestion they thought was important concerning their needs and their expectations regarding the desired English course.

4. Results and Discussion

This study was meant to answer the question 'What are the needs of ESP learners in private language schools in Algeria?' and to have an insight into these learners' needs and pave the way to designing an appropriate course that will meet learners' needs and expectations. What is important to say is that not all ESP courses are the same as they are designed to teach English to a specific group of learners. Courses that meet the needs of learners must be based on a needs analysis. By doing so, a teacher can have a clear understanding of the weaknesses and interests of learners. The interview results and discussion are presented below.

4.1 Section I: General Information

The sample interviewed included four males and six females, in El Nour language School. They were aged between 25 and 45. Eight of them were workers, whereas two female participants were not.The first question revealed that all participants speak Arabic as their mother tongue, which means that English is a foreign language for them.The question about the academic profile of the respondents shows that two of them held a Master Degree, while the othershad a Bachelor Degree in different fields.

4.2 Section II: Present Situation Analysis

The third question was asked to see if English was important to learners and all of them said that it was very important. One of the respondents added: *'If English was not important to me, I wouldn't come to take a course to improve my level in it'*. Most of the respondents were aware that English is an international language.

The fourth question was about the learning of English throughout their life. The results reveal that all of them had been learning English academically for seven years in middle and secondary schools through syllabi designed by the Algerian Ministry of Education, whereas eight participants had a course in English at university and six took additional courses in English to improve their speaking skill. Thus, the majority of participants had similar language learning experiences.

Questions 05 and 06 were asked about their knowledge of language structures and the language skills that they had developed so far. 80% of the informants replied that they knew a little amount of vocabulary and grammar rules, and developed some reading and writing abilities, but their listening and

speaking were less developed. The rest stated that they had a good knowledge of grammar rules and memorized a lot of words; however, they were able to put this knowledge into practice in writing, but not in speaking.

The seventh question asked was meant to determine how participants would assess their current level of English to see their self-reflection and how they looked at their abilities. The results show that the majority of them claimed that they had not yet reached the level they wanted. They saw that their level was below their ambition, whereas only two of them stated that they were good at English.

Question 08 was if they took any specific course in English. Six of them took courses in private schools to improve their level at speaking; however, they developed other skills but not speaking. In the second part of this question, the respondents mentioned the reasons behind their dissatisfaction with previous courses. The purpose was to study those reasons to find suitable solutions in the new course. The ones who were not satisfied referred to some reasons like the courses in which they had grammar rules, vocabulary, reading and writing skills, but less focus on speaking, resulting in a low language level. Moreover, they claimed that courses cost was very high. They stated that they were very interested and motivated to take courses to speak, yet previous learning experiences lowered their motivation. One of them stated: '*I used to enter the course very motivated, then I do not feel eager to continue.*'

Question 09 was asked about their perceptions of language learning. All of them believed that the major goal of learning and speaking English was to sound like native speakers. For them, the native speaker was the model and any practising of English that is not native-like was not successful learning.

4.3 Section III: Target Situation Analysis

Question 10 was intended to know participants' goals behind taking a course in English. All of them replied that they wanted to improve their speaking skill in English.

In the next question, they were asked if they preferred a general English course or a specific one. The majority insisted on a specific course as previous general courses were not very effective. Only two respondents were not sure about the type of course needed.

Question 12 was asked to know what content these participants preferred. All respondents stated that they needed daily life topics and tasks more than field-specific ones.

The last question within this section concerned the time and place that learners were supposed to use English in. 80% of participants stated that there was no specific time or place, but they wanted to use English in their daily life and work. The rest said that they would use English daily as they planned to travel abroad.

4.4 Section IV: Deficiency Analysis

Question 14 was to know whether learners had difficulties in using English and all of them said yes.Their answers to the previous question led to ask question 15 which was intended to know in which language skills they faced the most difficulties. More than the half of participants reported speaking, while the rest stated listening and speaking.

Question 16 was about learners' weaknesses in these skills. In relation to the speaking skill, they mentioned the ability to pronounce correctly, to ask and answer questions, to hold conversations and express their opinions, to avoid Arabic, to be able to use grammar and vocabulary successfully when speaking, to speak quickly, to speak in English accurately, fluently, confidently, without being shy or having fear of making mistakes. As far as listening is concerned, they mentioned the ability to differentiate between spoken British and American English, to understand native speakers as they speak fast and to develop their ability of comprehension.

Question 17 was asked to know if they practise speaking in English in their daily life. eight respondents said they did not, while only two said that they did.

4.5 Section V: Strategy Analysis

In the first question of this section, participants were asked if they preferred teacher-centered instruction and they said no. In the second part of the same question, they were asked which teaching approach they preferred. All of them preferred a type of instruction that was not about pouring information by the teacher into the heads of learners. One participant stated: '*I don't like teachers who keep speaking and doing everything.*', while another said: '*I like teachers who make me move, do the work, practise by myself.*'

Question 19 was to know if they preferred learning individually, in pairs, or in groups. The majority preferred to learn in pairs or in groups because they feel shy to perform individual tasks.

Question 20 was asked if they liked using ICT (Information Communication Technology) in learning and all of them admitted yes.

The next question was asked to see whether they liked to have class work or home assignments and they preferred to have class work, but not tests as they were busy and they wanted to be trained in using and practicing the languagerather than tested.

4.6 Section VI: Means Analysis

The questions within this section were about the place, setting, time, and duration of the sessions. The majority of participants saw that the classroom was a suitable place to learn, and a few others suggested changing the place from time to time to change the mood, or trying electronic learning. Concerning the suitable time, all of them preferred to have the sessions during the weekends (Fridays and Saturdays) as they were busy during the weekdays. Besides, when asked about the time allocated to the sessions, 60% of them stated that they preferred the session to be no more than 2hours long, while the others did not precise, but they preferred the session to be neither short nor long.

4.7 Section VI: Further Suggestions

The last section of the interview was to know if participants had further notes or suggestions to add concerning their needs and the desired English course. Their suggestions were summarized in the following points:

- Focus on real English use more than teaching formal grammatical rules in isolation
- The use of a lot of oral tasks to practise listening and speaking
- Avoiding the use of Arabic (their mother tongue)

The participants' responses to the interview show that these learners were motivated to improve their speaking ability in English, but they had a lot of difficulties. They believed that the major goal of learning a language is to sound like a native speaker. Moreover, they wanted to overcome the fear of making mistakes and other speaking difficulties. Most of them had previous failing experiences in other private schools where ESP teachers are sometimes

restrained by school authorities to use some of the existing materials which are designed by different writers in the field. Meanwhile, other schools give the freedom to teachers to design their own courses based on their learners' needs. However, not all designed courses meet learners' needs as they are not based on needs analysis which is the most important step in any ESP course design. Another important note from the interview analysis is that most designed courses are grammar-based and deal with formal rules more than communicative functions less taking into account learners' psychological obstacles; resulting in a failing learning experience which is another made obstacle for the learner.Shutz and Derwing (1981,p.30) argue that any language program that is based on the course designer's imagination of learners' needs and not on an objective assessment of theirreal needs is inaccurate and inappropriate.

ESP teachers; therefore, need to be aware of the importance of conducting needs analysis before getting into the classroom. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that teachers' awareness of learners' needs results in designing an acceptable and reasonable course in terms of language content (p. 53).In addition toHutchinson and Waters, other researchers like Richterich and Chancerel (1987), Munby (1978), Brindley (1989), Robinson (1991), Jordan (1997), Dudley-Evans and St. and John (1998) have stressed the importance of such a step in designing ESP courses and syllabi.In the same line of thought, Brindley (1989) states: "If instruction is to be centered on the learners and relevant to their purposes, then information about their current and desired interaction patterns and their perceived difficulties is clearly helpful in establishing program goals." (p.64).

Based on the needs analysis results, the ESP course which would be designed should meet these learners' goals, answer their needs, and help them overcome the obstacles they encounter when speaking English. By the end of the course, learners are expected to develop the necessary skills to speak English accurately, comprehensibly, appropriately, and confidently; including the ability to ask and answer questions, discuss topics, express ideas and opinions, and perform different oral tasks and presentations. The ability to successfully communicate in the target language determines the success of the ESP learner in school and later in his/ her life. Therefore, ESP teachers must pay great attention to the way speaking is taught to ESP learners.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a study on ESP learners' needs in an Algerian private language school by describing both the theoretical background and the method followed in carrying out this research in addition to the results obtained. The needs analysis results show that these learners'first main goal is to improve their speaking skill as it is the skill through which they can show their success in expressing themselves in English to get a job or for any other personal, academic, or professional purpose.

As ESP is a learner-centered approach that depends on needs analysis, the course designer is like the dressmaker who has to respect some pre-determined measures to make a piece of clothes suits a client and which may not applyto other clients. The samething happens in ESP courses which suit a group of learners but not others. This specificity makes studies on ESP limited and less generalizable; which is the case in this research. However, a humble work as such is certainly significant for further studies in this field hoping that the findings presented would contribute to enhance teachers' practices and improve students' learning in ESP classrooms.

6. Acknowledgments

7. Bibliography List

[1] Allwright, R.L. (1982). Perceiving and Pursuing Learners' Needs. In M. Geddes, & G. Sturtridge (Eds.), Individualization. Modern English Publications, Oxford.

[2] Basturkmen, H. (2010). Developing Course in English for Specific Purposes. Houndmills Basingstoke. Palgrave Mcmillan,Hampshire.

[3] Brindley, G. (1989). "The Role of Needs Analysis in Adult ESL Programme Design". In R. K. Johnson (Ed.): The Second Language Curriculum, pp. 63-78.CUP, Cambridge.

[4] Chambers, F. (1980). An Evaluation of Needs Analysis. ESP Journal,vol. 1 (1),pp. 25-33.

[5] Dudley-Evans, T. & St John, M.J. (1998). Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach. CUP, Cambridge.

[6] Hutchison, T. & Waters, A. (1987). English for Specific Purposes: a learner-centered approach. CUP, England.

[7] Graves, K. (2000). Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers. Heinle&HeinlePublishers,New York.

[8] Jordan, R. R. (1997). English for Academic Purposes: A guide and resources book for teachers. CUP, London (UK).

[9] Lepetit, D. &Cichocki, W. (2002). Teaching Languages to Future Health Professionals: A Needs Assessment Study.The Modern Language Journal, 86(3): 384-396.

[10] Lincoln, Y. S., &Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications, Inc, CA.

[11] Munby, J. (1978). Communicative Syllabus Design. CUP, Cambridge.

[12] Richards, J. C. (2001). Curriculum Development in Language Teaching. CUP, Cambridge.

[13] Richterich, R. &Chancerel, J. L. (1987). Identifying the Needs of Adults Learning a Foreign Language. Prentice Hall International.

[14] Robinson, P. (1991). ESP Today: A practitioners' guide. Prentice Hall International, New York.

[15] Schutz, N.W. and Derwing, B.L. "The Problem of Needs Assessment in English for Specific Purposes: Some Theoretical and PracticalConsiderations". In Mackay, R. and Palmer, J.D. (Ed.) (1981): Languages for Specific Purposes, pp. 29-49. Program design and evaluation, Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1981.

[16] Songhori, M. H. (2008). Introduction to Needs Analysis. ESP world, vol. 4, pp. 1-25.

[17] Strevens, P. (1988). "ESP after twenty years: A re-appraisal". In M. Tickoo (Ed.), ESP: State of the art, pp. 1 -13. SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

8. Appendices

Needs Analysis Interview

This interview is intended to get data on the needs of ESP learners in El Nourprivate language School for the purpose of identifying these needs and paving the way to design an appropriate course.The results of this study are based on your responses. You are kindly requested to sit this interview to answer the following questions. Be sure that your answers will be kept anonymous and confidential.

Section I: General Information

Gender: Male ☐   Female ☐
Age: ☐

   01- What is your mother tongue?
   02- What is your academic level?

Section II: Present Situation Analysis

   03- Is English important to you?
   04- How long have you been learning English?
   05- What do you know of English?
   06- Which language skills have you developed so far?
   07- How would you assess your current level at English?
   08- Did you take any specific course in English?
   - If "yes", were you satisfied with the experience? Please, explain why.
   09- How do you perceive learning the language?

Section III: Target Situation Analysis

   10- Why do you want to take a course in English?
   11- Do you prefer taking a general English course or a needs-based one? And why?
   12- What content would you prefer?
   13- Where and when do you need to use English?

Section IV: Deficiency Analysis

   14- Do you have difficulties in using English?
   15- In which language skill (s) do you face difficulties most?
   16- What do you lack in this/ these skill (s)?
   17- Do you practise English in your daily life?

Section V: Strategy Analysis

   18- Do you prefer a teacher-centered instruction?
   - If "no", what teaching approach do you prefer?

19- Do you prefer learning individually, in pairs, or in groups?
20- Do you like using ICT (Information Communication Technology) in learning?
21- Do you like to have class work or home assignments?

Section VI: Means Analysis

22- Where do you prefer to take the course?
23- How do you prefer the setting of the class?
24- When do you prefer to have the sessions?
25- How long do you prefer the session will be?

Section VI: Further Suggestions

26- Do you have any further notes or suggestions to add concerning your needs and the desired English course? If any, please state them.