

THE ROLE OF NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP CURRICULUM DESIGN

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Subiectul prezentei lucrări se axează pe analiza de nevoi ca punct de plecare la elaborea unui curs ESP. Fiind un instrument de cercetare, ea determină aspectele care cer o îmbunătățire a performanței, iar realizarea unei analize de nevoi riguroase și concludente, conduce la facilitarea dezvoltării unor competențe generale și specifice în funcție de nevoile individuale de formare ale viitorilor specialiști. Etapele cheie ale analizei de nevoi se manifestă în primul rând, prin identificarea necesităților lingvistice reale ale studenților, determinarea instrumentelor de colectare a datelor și desigur evaluarea prin sintetizarea informațiilor obținute, dezvăluind astfel aspectele care necesită îmbunătățire și oferind un cadru, mai mult sau mai puțin deplin, al capacităților și competențelor necesare pentru viitor.

Cuvinte - cheie: *analiză de nevoi, chestionar, curs specializat, dezvoltare curriculară, ESP, evaluare*

Needs analysis or needs assessment (NA), as it is also called, has attracted the attention of many scholars and TEFL practitioners since its appearance in the 1970s. Munby (1978), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Robinson (1991), West (1994), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Iwai (1999), Westerfield (2010) and many others focused their efforts on determining the role and the importance of NA in both English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

According to West, the term 'analysis of needs' appeared for the first time in India, in the 1920s when Michael West introduced the concept to include two important factors to be taken into consideration while designing a foreign language program: what learners will be required to do with the foreign language in the target situation, and how learners might best master the target language during the period of training [7, p.1].

However, despite being used for the first time in the 1920s, the concept of needs analysis was nearly forgotten for half a century and only in the 1970s it was brought back to life by the ESP movement. Richards and Rodgers are of the opinion that this ignorance can be explained by the fact that during that period, English language teaching was greatly influenced by the traditional structural view of the language and it resulted in the belief that the goal of foreign language learning was the mastery of these structurally related elements of language i.e. phonological units, grammatical units, grammatical operations and lexical items [5, p.17].

It should be noted that, most ESP researchers agree that John Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1978) was the driving force behind NA and it is, probably, the most thorough and widely known work on needs analysis. Munby presented a highly detailed set of procedures for discovering target situation needs and called it *Communication Needs Processor (CNP)*. This set consists of a range of questions about key communication variables (*topic, participants, medium etc.*) which can be used to identify the target language needs of any group of learners. In this train of thought, Hutchinson and Waters claim that 'With the development of the CNP it seemed as if ESP had come of age. The machinery for identifying the needs of any group of learners had been provided: all the course designer had to do was to operate it' [2, p.54]. This marked the beginning of a hot debate on needs analysis as a process and what it refers to. Based

on Munby's approach, ESP researchers introduced various terms to refer to needs analysis over the time: *Target Situation Analysis*, *Present Situation Analysis*, *Pedagogic Needs Analysis*, *Deficiency Analysis*, *Strategy or Learning Needs Analysis*, *Means Analysis*, *Register Analysis*, *Discourse Analysis*, and the most recent *Genre Analysis*.

Later, Dudley-Evans and St. John proposed a modern and comprehensive concept of needs analysis which according to them, encompasses all the above – mentioned approaches. Thus, their concept of needs analysis includes the following:

A. Professional information about the learners: the tasks and activities learners are / will be using English for – *target situation analysis* and *objective needs*.

B. Personal information about the learners: factors which may affect the way they 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*.

C. English language information about the learners: what their current skills and language use are – *present situation analysis* – which allows us to assess (D).

D. The learners' lacks: the gap between (C) and (A) – *lacks*.

E. Language learning information: effective ways of learning the skills and language in (D) – *learning needs*.

F. Professional communication information about (A): knowledge of how language and skills are used in the target situation – *linguistic analysis*, *discourse analysis*, *genre analysis*.

G. What is wanted from the course.

H. Information about the environment in which the course will be run – *means analysis* [1, p.125].

Research into NA shows that the different types of needs analyses are not exclusive but rather complementary, because none of the approaches can be a reliable indicator of what is needed to improve. Only combining several of them can give us a better picture of our learners' needs. In other words, the more detailed the NA is, the better the chances to make the right decisions are. It is widely agreed that NA is and will always be an important and fundamental part of ESP. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John, NA is '*the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a very focused course*' [1, p.122]. This opinion is strongly supported by Graves (2000), Gatehouse (2001), Richards (2001) and Westerfield (2010). They also emphasize that NA makes the course more oriented to the real needs of the learners.

According to Iwai et al, '*needs analysis refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students*' [4, p.6].

A broader definition of NA is given by Hyland. '*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*' [3, p.73-74].

Smoak is of the opinion that NA should include observations of the language use in context. '*An ESP professional must be prepared to find out how language is used in real world situations and teach that language*', because she believes that '*ESP is English instruction based on actual and immediate needs of learners who have to successfully perform real-life tasks. It is needs-based and task oriented*' [6, p.27].

Hutchinson and Waters underline the necessity to distinguish between '*target needs* (i.e. what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and *learning needs* (i.e. what the learner

needs to do in order to learn)' [2, p.54]. They advise to look at target needs as *necessities*, *lacks* and *wants*. Necessities in their opinion are:

1. demands of the target situation, that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation;
2. knowledge of the linguistic features – discoursal, functional, structural, lexical – which are commonly used in the situations identified.

Focusing just on necessities is not enough since we do not know what the learners already know and we can not identify which of the necessities they lack. Thus, we first need to find out what they know and only then to focus on the necessities they lack. Target needs can be subjective as well and these are learners' *wants*, which as Hutchinson and Water state can conflict with the perceptions of other interested parties: course designers, sponsors, teachers. They even notice that there is no necessary relationship between necessities as perceived by sponsor or ESP teacher and what the learners want or feel they need, but bearing in mind the importance of learner motivation in the learning process, learner perceived wants cannot be ignored.

Identifying target needs is a complex and laborious process and it involves many ways in which information can be gathered, but the most frequently used are: questionnaires, interviews, observation, data collection e.g. gathering texts and informal consultations with sponsors, learners and others. The case with *learning needs* is a little more complicated as the analysis cannot show how the student learnt the language items, skills and strategies that he or she uses. Therefore, learning needs focus on how to learn to do something and it relates mostly to methodology. The awareness of *what to teach* encourages us to consider *how to teach* this and we must choose the methods depending on the conditions of the learning situation, the learners' knowledge, skills and strategies and of course their motivation to do it.

Language acquisition is the goal every foreign language teacher sets and it can be more effectively achieved if it is properly embedded within the learners' field of study. Thus, the selection of materials, methodology, assessment and evaluation can be derived from the NA which is the first stage in course design. Due to NA we determine *what* and *how* of our course and can then proceed to design it. We should also keep into mind that as Dudley-Evans and St. John note, these stages are not linear, but rather interdependent, overlapping activities in a cyclical process and NA is often ongoing, feeding back into various stages [1, p.121].

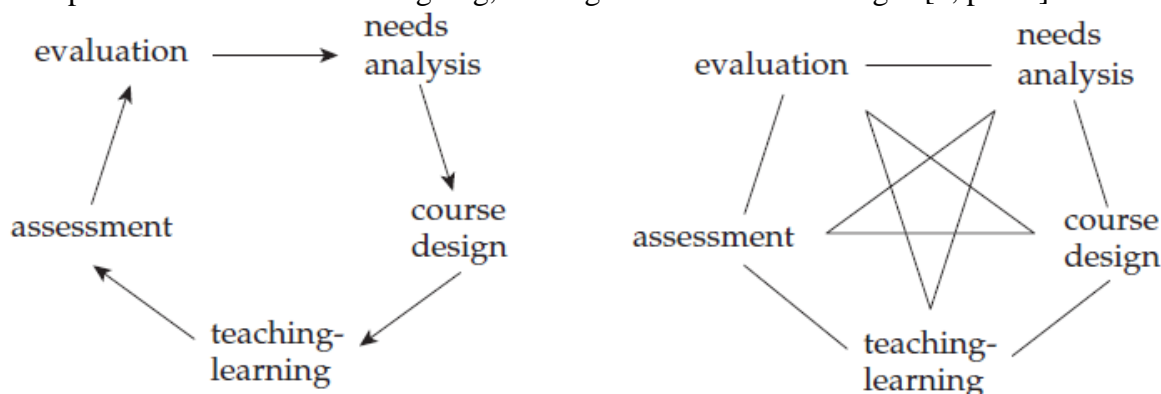


Figure 1: Linear vs. cyclical processes of needs analysis (Dudley - Evans and St John p. 121)

Concluding this article, we can state that ESP has much evolved during the last three decades and now researchers are of the opinion that while designing an ESP course, the focus should be not only on learners' immediate needs, but on future needs, wants and expectations as well. Therefore, needs analysis has achieved much more importance thanks to the fact that needs assessment process involves students' participation. They are invited to take decisions regarding the proposed ESP course.

Over the years, NA has broadened its scope and has resulted in a wide range of NA frameworks specially designed to identify different types of needs depending on the specificity of the ESP course. Dudley-Evans and St. John (pp. 140-144), Hutchinson and Water (pp. 59-60, 62-63), Richards (Appendix 3), all of them provide framework for NA that can be taken up, adapted to individual needs and used as useful instruments to identify learners' needs and wants.

TARGET SITUATION ANALYSIS	PRESENT SITUATION ANALYSIS
<p>Why is the language needed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - for study; - for work; - for training; - for a combination of these; - for some other purpose, e.g. status, examination, promotion. <p>How will the language be used?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - medium: <i>speaking, writing, reading etc.</i>; - channel: e.g. <i>telephone, face to face</i>; - types of text or discourse: e.g. <i>academic texts, lectures, informal conversations, technical manuals, catalogues</i>. <p>What will the content areas be?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - subjects: e.g. <i>medicine, biology, architecture, shipping, commerce, engineering</i>; - level: e.g. <i>technician, craftsman, postgraduate, secondary school</i>. <p>Who will the learner use the language with?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - native speakers or non-native; - level of knowledge of receiver: e.g. <i>expert, layman, student</i>; - relationship: e.g. <i>colleague, teacher, customer, superior, subordinate</i>. <p>Where will the language be used?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - physical setting: e.g. <i>office, lecture theatre, hotel, workshop, library</i>; - human context: e.g. <i>alone, meetings, demonstrations, on telephone</i>; - linguistic context: e.g. <i>in own country, abroad</i>. <p>When will the language be used?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concurrently with the ESP course or subsequently; - frequently, seldom, in small amounts, in large chunks. 	<p>Why are the learners taking the course?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>compulsory or optional</i>; - <i>apparent need or not</i>; - <i>Are status, money, promotion involved?</i> - <i>What do learners think they will achieve?</i> - <i>What is their attitude towards the ESP course?</i> - <i>Do they want to improve their English or do they resent the time they have to spend on it?</i> <p>How do the learners learn?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is their learning background? - What is their concept of teaching and learning? - What methodology will appeal to them? - What sort of techniques are likely to bore/alienate them? <p>What resources are available?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - number and professional competence of teachers; - attitude of teachers to ESP ; - teachers' knowledge of and attitude to the subject content; - materials; - aids; - opportunities for out-of-class activities. <p>Who are the learners?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - age / sex / nationality; - What do they know already about English? - What subject knowledge do they have? - What are their interests? - What is their socio-cultural background? - What teaching styles are they used to? - What is their attitude to English or to the cultures of the English-speaking world? <p>Where will the ESP course take place?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - are the surroundings pleasant, dull, noisy, cold, etc? <p>When will the ESP course take place?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - time of day; - every day / once a week; - full-time / part-time; - concurrent with need or pre-need.

Table1: A framework for needs analysis, after Hutchinson and Water (pp. 59-60, 62-63). The appropriate identification of learners' needs helps the teacher determine and refine the content of his ESP course. It also helps to see to what extent the course designed meets the learners' real language needs. Therefore, the role of NA in ESP curriculum design is

indisputable. It exactly contains those tools and methodologies that help us to gather information from learners, teachers and language courses with the purpose to identify what language skills the learners need to develop and how they can develop these skills in the best and most effective ways.

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