Coming to Grips with the ESP Enterprise: Some Basic Tenets and Fundamental Issues

Abdelmalek EL MORABIT
Moulay Ismail University, Morocco
lmrabet125@gmail.com

Abstract
The present paper is an attempt to demystify the basic tenets related to the ESP enterprise. Its main goal is to familiarize the reader with the nature of ESP, the role of NA as the cornerstone of any ESP program, and some of the implication of NA and the agents they essentially bear on. These agents, nevertheless, may at times come to mismatch in regard to the perceived needs of the ESP learners; we will endeavor to tackle some suggested ways in this mismatch can be handled.
1. The nature and origin of ESP

One might wonder how English has got to have all the power and repute it currently has, being the number-one language of economy, politics, business, among other things. Reasons behind this may vary, but what remains of importance to us is, so long as this is the case, what does it entail as far as education and language teaching, being a means of preparing students for an English-dominated job market, are concerned? Principally, English has always been present in different educational curricula as a school subject, aiming at equipping students with different linguistic and communicative skills required for various unspecified purposes. Such courses would, at best, enable students to master the language system and use it effectively to communicate with others and perform certain tasks. Nevertheless, the recent bloom of the English language and its invasion of many different sectors has required students equipped not only with a ‘general capacity’, to borrow Widdowson (1983)’s term, of the language, but also with linguistic tools and skills related to specific fields of expertise. This gave birth to a remarkable trend in English language teaching (ELT) that focused mainly on particular fields of interest, such as internet English, English for business, English for agriculture, English for tourism, etc.; all of which lie under the general rubric of what came to be known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Nickerson, 2013; Crystal, 2003).

ESP is a subfield of English language teaching (ELT) that can be further divided into English for vocational purposes (EVP), which is intended to prepare learners for a particular vocation, and English for Academic purposes (EAP), which aims to equip learners with the language skills required in academic contexts (Huchinson & Waters 1987; Robinson 1991; Hyland 2006). These two subdivisions of ESP, in turn, are divided into a number of other areas and courses. Varied as they might seem, all of these areas share the same fundamental features of ESP, constituting the trunk to the branching tree; the most significant of which is that they all design courses based on the learners’ needs, discussed below in detail. This, being so, leads us to come to the conclusion that ESP is an approach to foreign language teaching that is based on the learner-centered approach, and therefore the ESP course is more often than not based on a negotiated curriculum between the teacher and the students, and other agencies at times.
2. Needs analysis as the cornerstone of ESP

As alluded to above, the major principle of ESP has been “tell me what you need English for, and I will tell you the English that you need” (Huchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 8). This amounts to saying that the analysis of the needs of students is a sine qua non of the specification of any ESP course content and, by entailment, of the methodology of teaching adopted. Needs analysis (NA) has been referred to in the literature by a diversity of terms, the most prominent among which are ‘needs assessment’, ‘skills audit’, ‘compulsions’, ‘essentials’, etc. These types of assessment, on the whole, center around and attempt to address the lacuna that exists between two conditions: the current condition (aka. the present situation), that is the immediate lacks that the learners exhibit, and the target condition (or the target situation) that they are aimed to manifest by the end of the course. For the sake of illustration, we will borrow Sleezer and Russ-Eft (2007, p. 15)’s figure:

![Figure 1: The gap between the target and the present situations](image)

Based on this, we come to the conclusion that needs analysis is drawn immediately from the learner, and is helpful in designing courses that are intended to remedy his current lacks as well as to meet his desired outcomes.

Needs analysis, then, is a set of procedures for collecting data on why the learner is taking the course, what they are expecting to study in the course, and how they prefer to be taught. This being the case, the term ‘needs’ is obviously an umbrella term that encompasses the learners’ wants, preferences, aspirations, etc. It generally involves, as Hyland (2006) puts it, “what learners know, don’t know or want to know” (p. 74). Accordingly, NA can legitimately be said to be the most predominant feature in the field of ESP. There are quite a few arguments in favor of this claim. To mention but a few, NA helps in deciding on the implementation of a given program through
weighing it with respect to the learners’ perceived needs and objectives behind taking the course. It also helps in making the necessary amendments in the different elements of the program (both the content and the methodology of teaching) with a view to linking them to the learners’ needs. Last but not least, it guides the teacher to use the appropriate content and method that would cater for the various needs and preferences expressed by the learners.

Although the above mentioned assumptions may seem to apply to any general context in which the language is taught, it is of special pertinence to the field of ESP. As a matter of fact, ESP, as contrasted with EGP (English for general purposes), naturally makes use of the learning-centered approach of language teaching, and thus lays more emphasis on the learner and typically assigns him the role of an initiator, processor, and proactive participant. ESP, also, is particularly subject-matter focused, and it employs functionally-oriented courses. This being the case, it calls on teachers to take into account the needs of the learners as the starting point for course designing, as well as a means of “refining and evaluating ongoing ESP courses” (Basturkmen, 2010, p. 25). More practically, these skills audit will help the teacher to create (and update as the course progresses) an ILP (Individual Learning Profile) for each learner (Day & Krzanowski 2011). With this stated, it decidedly becomes evident that NA is of an uppermost importance to the field of ESP.

3. Implications of NA

Needs analysis has a number of implications for both pedagogy and research. First, NA, providing an articulate account of the ‘felt’ needs and preferences of the learners, allows educators to generate programs that meet the diverse needs of learners in terms of both the content and the methodology adopted. The point is that, when this is the case, learners are more motivated towards fulfilling greater achievement, and they also develop more positive attitudes towards the language they are taught and the education they receive. Additionally, NA is a field of interests of many researchers. The assessment of learners’ needs allows the researcher to develop deeper insights into the effectiveness of and the satisfaction of learners with the existing methods and approaches LT. This, again, will serve as a basis for the development of new approaches and syllabus designs that will meet the requirements of the learners, and, hence, help achieve better outcomes.

With these few implications stated, we argue that NA has many more implications that appeal to different agents involved in the ESP enterprise. It generally has implications for students, teachers, administrators, employers, and researchers. Indubitably, students are the pivot of any teaching-learning process, and it is from them that needs are derived in the first place. This makes

\footnote{Brindley (1994) draws a significant distinction between students’ \textit{felt needs}, as they are felt and stated by learners, and students’ \textit{perceived needs}, as they are perceived by their teachers.}
NA of direct association with the students. In most cases, it the job of teachers to elicit their students’ needs. These needs are of direct importance to them in that they guide their decision on the what and how of the program. In many EAP, however, such decisions are typically taken by the institution’s administrators, mostly in isolation from the learners. These decisions, still, should not be in conflict with the learners’ needs. This fact makes implications of NA apply by far to administrators. Similarly, in EVP, a major question is often mooted; namely, “are [students] paying for the course themselves or are they being sponsored by their employer?” (Coxhead, 2018, p. 9). Provided that the second possibility is the case, employers often have a say in what concerns different aspects of the program being taught. These decisions should still be in consonance with the needs of the learners, and thus implications of NA apply to employers as well. As maintained in the previous paragraph, NA proffers insights into the wants of learners, and therefore constantly trigger further research in the field of LT and teaching approaches. Therefore, NA are the main concern of many researchers dealing with the aforementioned issues.

4. The mismatch between different needs

Having introduced the concept of needs analysis and some of its implication for a number of different stakeholders in the milieu of ESP, some questions prove problematic, viz, what if there turn out to be a mismatch between the needs expressed by different parties involved in the program? and How should a teacher react in this case? In this situation, as stated by Zadhoosh, Amirian, and Hesabi (2014), “the definition of the term ‘need’ itself would vary depending on who was making the judgment; teachers, learners or administrators” (p. 78). For instance, if the needs are basically decisions made by administrators, the definition of ‘need’ would be entirely different from the case in which they express the tendencies and aspirations of the learners. The aforementioned authors conducted a study on the stakeholders’ perceptions of the ESP needs of undergraduate students of linguistics in Iran. The context therefore was of EAP; which fact entails the involvement of policy makers in the specification of the needs. Their findings were as follows:

The students regarded listening as one of the first priorities while the teachers had completely different idea. Also, leaning the vocabulary is necessary in teachers’ view but not in the students’. However, the idea of the policy makers is very different from the students and the teachers. In their idea reading and writing precede other components of language. (p. 79)

As far as these findings are concerned, they reflect a mismatch of needs among students, teachers, and policy makers in terms of the four language skills and vocabulary. On a more general footing, however, discrepancy in the needs can be at the level of the content and/or at the level of the methodology.
4.1. On the level of the content

This type of mismatch occurs at the level of the content of the program, more technically, in terms of the specification of the experiential content (Nunan 1988, p. 80). The teacher, for instance, may want to teach certain elements, say a set of notions or functions, that are not in accord with the wants of the learners and the goals of the institution. This being so, the onus is always on the teacher to find a way to come to a compromise. When it comes to the institution, as curriculum designers, Atai (2000) adherently maintains that students’ needs and future language uses of the learners should not be intuited by ESP curriculum designers. There seem to be a lot of truth in this statement, especially that the milieu concerned is ESP. In fact, curriculum designers often make decisions in vacuum, turning a blind eye to the variety of preferences and needs of individual learners. As for the clash between the needs of teachers and the those of learners, on the other hand, the teacher may well be urged to make use of Nation and Macalister (2010)’s adaptation technique. Using this techniques, the teacher will be flexible about his or her decisions on the content to be taught and the materials to be used. Practically, the teacher will need to take into account his own perceived needs, the needs of his students, and the current existing syllabus in order to find a middle way and come up with a final teachable and comprehensive product. In this way, the needs of all parties will be satisfied in a way that aims at achieving better outcomes in the target situation.

4.2. On the methodology:

There might also be a discrepancy between the learners’ and the teachers’ perceptions of the suitable methodology to adopt in an ESP course. As elucidated above, regarding the methodology, ESP courses are learner-centered by nature. With this, among other things, in mind, it may well be argued that the most suitable approach to use in an ESP milieu would be the Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) in that it focuses on the output rather than the input, and that it seeks to teach students the basic skills they need in order to prepare them for situations they will commonly encounter in their everyday lives (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Despite this, many learners prefer to be taught by means of a traditional method. On the face of it, the teacher in this case is caught between two undesirable alternatives: submitting to his students’

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2 Hutchinson and Waters, however, (1987) argue that “[t]here is nothing specific about ESP methodology. The principles that underlie good ESP methodology are the same as those that underlie sound ELT methodology in general” (p. 142).
desire, even if their option is inappropriate for the immediate situation, or imposing his decisions and dispersing thus with the learners’ wants. The optimal suggested solution to this dilemma, however, will be the adoption of a negotiated syllabus. The latter involves “the teacher and the learners working together to make decisions at many of the parts of the curriculum design process” (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 149)³. One important part of the curriculum design process is the methodology adopted. Teachers and learners will need to indulge in a discussion of the techniques they prefer to use in class. After the negotiation, they will end up with finding common ground and with parties making concessions at the expense of more pertinent and suitable techniques. This resolution will satisfy all parties involved and will ultimately achieve better results.

Conclusion

To sum up, ESP is by and large a domain of ELT that is based on a learner centered approach to language teaching, and which aims to equip students with the specific linguistic skills required by their particular field of interest. To design courses that meet these specific needs, a number of procedures by which the needs of learners are assessed, processed, and analyzed are carried out. These needs are of essential importance to any ESP course in that they help teachers, or any agent involved in course designing for that matter, in designing a course that caters for the diverse lacks, preferences, and learning styles of the learners. Other agencies, however, might be involved in the specifying of the needs to be considered in the course designing process. A clash between the wants of these different parties is mostly handled by means of a negotiation of the needs and an adaptation of the content. In a word, ESP is a new state-of-the-art domain of ELT, of which NA constitute a part and parcel.

References


³ See also Parkinson and O'Sullivan (1991).


