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# A needs analysis approach to ESP syllabus design in Greek tertiary education: a descriptive account of students' needs

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## Abstract

This paper describes the initial phase of a needs analysis project which was developed in the context of Greek tertiary education with the aim to identify the needs of a target group of learners and introduce needs-based course design. The findings of the study revealed the need for the development of a highly specific ESP language course with a clear focus on the target discipline, accountancy. There was also a call for the provision of ESP training which addresses the learners' immediate needs as students and their long-term needs as professionals in the accountancy business.

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*Keywords:* Needs analysis project; teaching to perceived needs; learner needs; syllabus design; ESAP; subject-specificity.

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## 1. Introduction

The status of English as an International language (EIL) and the growing demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in the Technological Educational Institutions (T.E.I.) in Greece have highlighted the need for investigating into various aspects of teaching and learning in the particular context with the aim to optimize learning opportunities regarding the ESP courses provided. The absence of formal needs analysis procedures in ESP course design at the Department of Accountancy in the A.T.E.I. of Thessaloniki, Greece has provided the stimulus for the design of the study which has been conducted in order to deal with the issue of ESP courses which have not been tailored to the needs of a target group of learners.

It is considered that since the present curricular framework has not yielded the desired results and has proved inadequate in addressing the learners' needs both professional and academic, the revision of the existing ESP curriculum seems extremely timely. In fact, opting for curricular renewal periodically can be invaluable (Jackson, 2005) in our attempt to ensure that the course remains aligned with the learners' needs. In quest of this issue, the role of needs analysis in any ESP curriculum should not be underestimated (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson & Waters,

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1987; Robinson, 1991; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2001). On the contrary, it is acknowledged that “needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP” and its proper application can result into a “focused course” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.121) which is actually sought for in this case. For this reason, an attempt is made to adopt a framework for ESP course design which employs needs analysis as its starting point aiming to highlight the views of all stakeholders in the process of curriculum development, course and syllabus design, and evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of the needs-based course.

## **2. The study**

### *2.1. The aim and objectives of the study*

The present study has set itself the objective of focusing on the presentation of the wealth of data which emanated from the students’ questionnaires and interviews and provide rich insights into their perceived needs as learners and as language users. Nevertheless, it should be put forward that the needs analysis project developed, has not been limited to the procedures employed prior to the beginning of the course, which is referred to as “initial needs analysis” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Graves, 2000), and the learner is not the sole stakeholder involved.

In particular, the basic objectives of this part of the research project were:

- to identify the students’ prospective professional needs;
- to identify the students’ needs in terms of language skills and tasks;
- to record the students’ deficiencies concerning language skills;
- to elicit the students’ preferences with respect to learning styles, methodology, and teacher roles;
- to record the students’ suggestions for better ESP training.

### *2.2 The participants*

The participants involved in the study were 395 students of Accountancy in the A. T.E.I. of Thessaloniki; of them 38% were male and 62% female. Their age range varied; however, the majority of them (74.5%) were 20-22 years old. Also, their level of English language proficiency ranged from beginner (31%) to upper intermediate (59%) and advanced (9%).

### *2.3. Research methods and tools*

A multi-method approach which involved both quantitative and qualitative research methods was adopted in the needs analysis project. Triangulation of sources and methods (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Long, 2005) was also attempted in order to secure the validity and reliability of the research. Data were collected through the students’ questionnaire, which included closed- and open-questions and was administered to 395 students. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 students in an attempt to gain more meaningful insights into the situation.

### *2.4. Data analysis*

The data derived from the questionnaires were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items of the questionnaires were obtained.

The verbal data of the semi-structured interviews, which was analyzed qualitatively, underwent the procedures of data reduction, first and second level coding as well as pattern coding. Codes resulted in groups of categories, ‘labeled’ by a specific name (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, similar concepts with common characteristics were clustered into themes, so as to reduce the number of categories as shown in table 2.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. *The students' questionnaire*

##### 2.1.1. *The learners' needs and purposes for using the English language*

First of all, with respect to the usefulness of the target language for professional or study purposes a considerable number of the participants (39.5%) stated the importance of English knowledge for “transactions in the workplace” while an equally significant percentage (34.4%) expressed their intention to “continue their studies abroad”. Also, attending “seminars for educational purposes” received 11% and “communication with English speaking colleagues” followed with 9.6%.

Moreover, regarding the frequency of using English in the workplace the vast majority of the participants declared their need to use English either “very often” (38%) or “sometimes” (34%). In particular, the purposes, for which the students need and expect to use the target language, were ranked as follows: “oral communication”; “reading and comprehending texts”; “listening and comprehension”; “producing written texts”.

##### 2.1.2. *The focus of the needs-based course*

The learners' needs were largely influential in establishing the focus of the needs-based course in terms of skills at the macro- and micro-level. In particular, concerning reading skills, the need for “reading subject-specific magazine or newspaper articles” (50.6%) and “reading textbooks or manuals” (42.8%) was established by a significant percentage of the participants. At the micro-skill level an important percentage of the participants (60.8%) indicated the need for practice in “reading a text for gist”. On a similar line “reading to check information” received a significant percentage (55.7%), and “identification of basic messages” gained 53.2%.

As far as writing skills are concerned, the most popular task to be included in the ESP syllabus was writing “notes, memos, e-mails” which received a significant percentage, 59.7%. “Analyzing graphs” was ranked next with an equally high percentage 54% while “report writing” (33.7%) and “formal and informal letter writing” (31.4%) were also highly regarded. The learners also stated their need for practice in the underlying processes of written discourse such as: “developing arguments” (57.2%), “linking sentences and paragraphs” (55.4%), “producing well-developed paragraphs” (54.9%), “developing introduction and conclusion” (52.7%), and “organizing information” (50.9%). In addition, practice in the use of “appropriate vocabulary” (52.9%) and “grammar” (46.8%) in producing written texts was considered of major importance.

Moreover, regarding listening in the target language the students considered of primary importance to be trained in “comprehending presentations and seminars” (56.7%) and “comprehending recorded materials” (54.2%). The ability to “listen and follow instructions” (36.2%) was also highly valued. Furthermore, the vast majority of the participants highly valued practice in terms of “understanding main points” (62%), “identifying specific information” (62.3%), and “keeping notes” (49.6%). Significant percentages were also assigned to “evaluation of speaker position” (45.8%) and “comprehending speakers with different accents” (30.9%).

In relation to oral production and communication, “job related communicative tasks” accumulated 64.1% and “giving a presentation” 61%, and were indicated as the most important tasks by the learners, along with the need for development of “oral fluency” (58%) and “grammar and vocabulary” (56.5%).

With respect to the learners' deficiencies in grammar and skills, “writing” was stated as the most difficult skill and received 40.3%; “oral communication” followed with 21.5%; “grammar” was ranked third with 18.2% and “listening comprehension” and “reading comprehension” fourth and fifth with 15%, and 3.5% respectively.

##### 2.1.3. *The learners' preferred learning methods*

In dealing with unknown vocabulary, a significant percentage of the participants, 37%, expressed the wish to be provided with “translation by the teacher”, while another 35% to be given the chance to “explain vocabulary in context”; another 16% stated willing to attempt to “make sensible guesses and explain unknown vocabulary”.

Moreover, considering vocabulary acquisition their first preference is to “connect new vocabulary with already known” (25%), the second one being “memorizing vocabulary items” (22%); “organizing vocabulary in thematic

categories” and “using a dictionary” were ranked third and received equal percentages (19%). It is interesting that at this point “translation by the teacher” seems to be the least favored choice (15%).

It should also be emphasized that almost unanimously 90% of the target population acknowledged the nature of the language course, stressed the need for a “subject-specific” accountancy course and highlighted the following as the most efficient sources for ESP materials: “the Internet” (40%); “subject-specific textbooks” (25%); “accountancy related magazines” (21%); and “materials from accountancy firms” (14%).

Finally, with respect to the use of mother tongue, a considerable percentage, 37.5% of the participants wish the Greek language to be “often” used in the ESP classroom while 30.9% “sometimes” and another 19.2% “always”.

#### 2.1.4. Suggestions

The verbal data derived from the open-ended question ‘what are your proposals about improving ESP instruction in the T.E.I.?’ resulted, after processing, into the categories and sub-categories which are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Suggestions for better ESP training

Categories-Subcategories	Occurrences
<b>1. ESP Course</b>	<b>706</b>
1.1. ESP materials for accountancy students	126
1.2. Needs based ESP syllabus	163
1.3. Focus on subject -specific issues	102
1.4. Guidance in approaching texts and tasks	168
1.5. Consideration of the learners’ deficiencies	147
<b>2. Organizational Issues</b>	<b>441</b>
2.1. ESP courses in all semesters	82
2.2. ESP trained tutors	41
2.3. Streaming students by competence	79
2.4. Preparatory courses for low level students	105
2.5. Fewer students in the ESP classroom	73

#### 2.2. The students’ interview

Rich insights into the learners’ views concerning ESP training provision were provided through the interviews which complemented the findings of the questionnaire. The data after being coded resulted in 57 codes which were grouped into 10 categories classified into three basic themes: a) ESP course: reasons for attendance and expectations b) the present situation: an appreciation of the ESP context c) suggestions for better training, presented on Table 2.

Table 2. Themes, categories and pattern coding

Themes/ categories	Codes –Coding Patterns
<b>A. ESP COURSE: REASONS FOR ATTENDANCE AND EXPECTATIONS</b>	
1. Profile	Gender English Language Competence-Self evaluation Degree in the English Language
2. Reasons for taking the course	ROEIL=Role of English an International language ENGCAPRO=English for career prospects ENGSTUTEI=English for study in the T.E.I. ENGPOSTU=English for postgraduate studies PAEUMOPRO=Participation in European mobility programs
3. Expectations from the ESP course	INTOEAP=Introduction to EAP MASUSPEVO=Mastery of subject-specific vocabulary EXGRAPRA=Extensive grammar practice TRARESKI=Training in receptive skills TRAPRSKI=Training in productive skills FOCOMSKI=Focus on communication skills DEGRASYA=Develop grammatical and syntactical accuracy DEVFLU=Develop fluency
4. Learning in class	USUSPEMA=Up-to-date, subject-specific materials MARESTLE=Materials relevant to students’ level VISAUDMA=Visual and audio materials ARRFACLEA=Arrangements to facilitate learning

	INDPAIGR=Individual, pair- or group-work ACINVESEP=Active participation in ESP
<b>B. THE PRESENT SITUATION: AN APPRECIATION OF THE ESP CONTEXT</b>	
5. Needs' Identification	NOCOSTANE=No consideration of students' target needs NOCOSPENE=No consideration of students' present needs NOCOSTLS=No consideration of students' learning styles NOCOSPRME=No consideration of students' preferred methodology NOCOSLALALE=No consideration of students' language level
6. Teaching approach/ methodology	TRATEAME=Traditional teaching methodology CONTACTI=Controlled activities ABCOMTA=Absence of communicative tasks NOGUPROT=No guidance in processing tasks NOCOOSTU=No cooperation between students
7. The ESP syllabus	INEORGSY=Ineffective organization of syllabus TESKSKTR=Testing skills rather than skills training INPRALISK=Inadequate practice in listening skills INPRAWRSK=Ineffective practice in writing skills SCPRASPSK=Scarce practice in speaking skills OCPRARESK=Occasional practice in reading skills FOLEXITE=Focus on lexical items NOAUTHTE=Non authentic texts employed TAOUTDEM=Tasks outdated and demotivating
8. Teacher roles	TEASOUKNO=Teacher as a source of knowledge TEACOLEPR=Teacher as a controller of the learning process TEASS=Teacher as an assessor
<b>C. SUGGESTIONS FOR BETTER TRAINING</b>	
9. Developing a needs- based syllabus	EFDEESAP=Effective development of ESAP EFPRSKMA=Efficient practice in skills at the macro-level EFPRSKMI=Efficient practice in skills at the micro-level CODALNEA=Consider the data from learners' needs analysis ACPRELEST=Acknowledge preferred learning styles ACPREMET=Acknowledge preferred methodology FASTATTA=Facilitate students in attempting a task ACLESTWE=Acknowledge learners' strengths and weaknesses
10. Teacher Roles	FALEAPRO=Facilitator in the learning process SECHADLE=Sensitive to characteristics of adult learners TRESPEAPI=Trained in ESP/EAP issues

### 2.2.1. The students' expectations and suggestions

The data from the students' interview highlighted the significance of the ESP course for the learners' present and future needs and revealed the mismatch between the learners' expectations and the present situation establishing the need for redesigning the ESP curriculum in a way that it would effectively meet the needs of the target group of learners. Among the issues raised by the learners is the need for an ESP course which encompasses the learners' subject-specific and academic needs, involves authentic, challenging ESP materials, encourages productive learning in a relaxed atmosphere, focuses on language skills development, and caters for any deficiencies of the learners. Also, it needs hardly be argued that the role of ESP teacher should be reconsidered as well.

## 4. Conclusion

The data from the students' questionnaire and interview have illustrated a number of issues which need to be considered as they offer significant implications for introducing curricular change.

First of all, the findings of the study revealed the need for setting up a language course with a clear focus on English for Specific Purposes and on the target discipline, accountancy. In addition, there is a call for a highly specific ESP course to be implemented in the experimental needs-based syllabus document as part of the curriculum renewal process (Richards, 2001). It was also indicated that the present situation arrangements are not at all in agreement with the "identified needs" (Long, 2005) of the target group of learners.

Furthermore, the fact is stressed that the participants have different expectations with respect to their need to use the target language, for study or professional purposes, which highlights the merits of needs analysis concerning the identification of the learners' needs. On this basis, certain differences among the responses in terms of ranking the students' reasons for using English can be justified. As such, the need is stressed for an ESP course, which addresses

the learners' immediate needs as students in the context of the T.E.I. and their long-term needs as postgraduate students or professionals in the accountancy business. It should be noted that this diversity of present and future needs justifies an approach to English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) which is considered as more appropriate for the particular teaching context since it integrates academic skills with subject-specific skills which derive directly from the learners' subject discipline (Jordan, 1997). Such an approach is expected to facilitate the learners in the process of mastering both academic and subject-specific aspects of the target language as well as motivate them in order to become actively involved in the ESP course.

Moreover, it was indicated that the participants need a flexible approach to ESP syllabus design which provides practice in both the receptive and productive skills. Consequently, the needs-based syllabus document is expected to reflect their needs in terms of skills at the macro- and micro-level, by selecting and grading "authentic materials" (Cowling, 2007). The responses of the participants indicate the need for exposure to an integrated skills approach; however, due to time constraints, it is inevitable to prioritize the practice provided in each skill (West, 1994).

It is acknowledged that the target group of learners despite the fact that they are all adults, are far from what could be categorized as a homogeneous group (Mc Kay & Tom, 1999) considering their previous learning experience and their level of linguistic competence; As such, the newly developed course has to consider their previous learning experience and their level of language proficiency as well as the difficulties they face in terms of skills and to attempt to bridge the gap between the learners' competence at the beginning of the course and the competence required of them in the future for academic or professional purposes.

Apparently, ESP tutors are faced with a major challenge and have to be properly trained on aspects of ESP principles and practice as the outcome of their effort to deliver effective and efficient ESAP courses is heavily dependent on the multidimensional nature of the roles assumed of them (Chostelidou, Griva & Tsakiridou, 2009).

Concluding, although the complexity of adopting a needs-based approach to ESP cannot be ignored, needs analysis as a decision making process which informs course design specifications (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002) is regarded as an indispensable component of any ESP course (Long, 2005).

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