

Naira Poghosyan

Components of Task-Based Needs Analysis of the ESP Learners with the Specialization of Business and Tourism

Abstract

In the following paper we shall thoroughly analyze the target learning needs of the learners within an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context. The main concerns of ESP have always been and remain with the needs analysis, text analysis and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation. It is often said that ESP lacks an underlying theory. We believe that a theory of ESP could be outlined based on either the specific nature of the texts that learners require, or on the basis of target needs-related nature of the teaching.

For this reason an ESP teacher is required to implement some analysis concerning the target needs and the learning needs within the scope of teaching ESP as an integral part of the instruction.

The aim of this paper is to cover a number of corresponding issues and steps towards the uptake of some successful task-oriented methodological tools for the development of linguistic skills within communicative instructions of ESP.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, task-based language teaching, needs analysis, target events, language skills, Business English, authentic materials

Introduction

Over the past two decades, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained a considerable momentum in the field of language education. Emerging from early experiences with communicative language teaching, and drawing on incipient research into second language acquisition, the concept of *task* witnessed considerable attention during the 1980s and 1990 as a promising basis for innovation in the foreign language teaching pedagogy and methodology. Language learning needs in a task-based approach were originally analyzed and introduced in an article titled “*Task-based language teaching: from theory to practice*” by Professor Van den Branden (Branden, 2006, pp. 17-46).

Traditionally language learning is described as a goal-directed activity, serving the broader goal of enhanced functioning in society. However such a general description is too vague to guide task-based curriculum design. A first step towards refining this description is to distinguish between the broad domains in which the second language learner aims to function in society. For instance, *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* which was designed by Council of Europe in order to enhance cross-cultural and international communication about foreign language learning, education and testing, distinguishes four broad domains of language use: the personal, public, occupational and educational (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 17). This remains a very coarse-grained categorization as the four domains mentioned are such broad categories covering a range of situations for language use and a wide variety of tasks.

Empirical research into the language learning needs of particular groups of learners or individuals reveals that needs are learner- or group- specific, that they are tied to local contexts and may change over time. Listing individual learner needs may be theoretically sustainable, but in most parts of the world language education, particularly languages for specific purposes (LSP) education has to be organized to suit the target language learning needs in order to remain affordable and practicable. This naturally implies that the seemingly infinite diversity of individuals' language learning needs will have to be re-clustered into a workable number of needs profiles.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) first came to prominence in the 1970s. It came about largely in response to the increasing numbers of overseas students going to pursue university studies in the UK and other metropolitan countries. There emerged a huge call for courses to meet the immediate needs of students to enable them to pursue their subject studies in English. Since then ESP has lost some of its early luster, and has witnessed the hiving off of the English for Business and English for Academic Purposes as largely independent focuses. In contrast to General English Courses, which perhaps unfairly are labelled as "English for No Obvious Purpose", in ESP courses the purpose for learning the language is paramount and relates directly to what the learner needs to do in their vocation or job. It follows that finding out about and analyzing the needs of the students is vital in ESP teaching. In fact one of the main contributions of ESP to the wider world of English language teaching (ELT) has been the development of thorough needs analysis.

Before starting a needs analysis procedure it is important to know as much as possible about the learning situation of the students. In particular:

- Is it an intensive course (concentrated into one period of time) or an extensive course (spread out over a long period of time)?
- Is it assessed or not assessed?
- Is it meeting immediate needs (learners are working and studying in parallel) or delayed needs (students are pre-experience and will be working on the specialism sometime in the future)?
- Is the group homogenous or heterogeneous? For example, are they all at the same level of English? Do they all have the same level of knowledge and involvement in the specialism?
- Is the course designed by the teacher or the institution negotiated with the learner (Harding, 2007, p. 17)?

Once the ESP teacher has got these points clear, s/he can start to work on the particular needs of the ESP learners afterwards. There are some aspects of a needs analysis procedure, which should be taken into a consideration initially by the ESP teacher:

1. "Knowing the subject" testing your knowledge by involving the students and then going on to build a needs analysis together.
2. "I need to read to/for... statements" a variety of ways of approaching needs analysis.
3. "Creation of authentic materials bank" ways of gathering authentic material.
4. "Identifying target events" to design a detailed framework for the whole ESP course.

An ESP teacher should familiarize herself with the subject of the specialism of the students at the start of the course, so as to more easily identify their needs, to

show the students that she is interested in and knowledgeable about their subject. It is the task of the ESP teacher to make a research and find answers to the following basic questions:

- What does the job specialism involve? What subjects do the students usually study at school?
- What qualifications are there in the specialism? What different jobs are covered by the specialism?
- What is the workplace like? What possible career paths are there?
- In what situations will English be used? What language skills (reading, listening, writing or speaking) will be mostly used?
- What materials and resources are used?

Moving on in this procedure the next basic step should be investigating more conventional needs of the ESP students with the help of a worksheet which will help them to think of the features of their specialism in some detail. The aim of the following worksheet is to discover the students' needs for the course and to involve the learners in the creation of their own needs analysis. The worksheet can be transferred to any specialism by adjusting the balance between topic, function and skill.

The worksheet includes the following questions:

1. **Which Business English topics would you like to study?:** business news, market trends, management, marketing, advertising, sales, business English for social purposes, company structures, information technology, law, trade, globalization, leadership, recruitment and human resources, banking and finance, ethics in business, economic policies, production, cross-cultural awareness, time management, setting goals.
2. **Which of the following functions do you need to practice in English?:** telephone English, meetings, introductions, small talk, welcoming a visitor, negotiations, presentations, interviewing, making decisions, arranging schedules and appointments, making travel arrangements, describing processes, making suggestions, offering praise, complaints, asking permission, asking for advice, agreeing/disagreeing, persuading, clarifying and interrupting, summarizing, obtaining information.
3. **Which Business English skills would you like to improve?**
 - **Speaking:** public speaking, describing things when you don't know the exact word, staying on a topic, persuasive questioning, dealing with communication problems.
 - **Writing:** reports, taking notes on talks, memos, messages, emails, business letters, cover letters and CVs, forms: applications, proposals, invoices.
 - **Listening:** to radio, TV and internet broadcasts, for the main idea, key points, to natural speech, to people from non-English speaking countries.
 - **Reading:** reports, correspondence, articles, journals, abstracts and trade publications, quick reading for specific information and key points (Harding, 2007, p. 20).

The ESP learners are invited to rate each item on the worksheet from 1 to 5. Most important as 5, the least important as 1. So they complete the form and send it back to the ESP teacher.

As a notional-functional approach, task-based language teaching is mostly based on the performance of certain assigned tasks. For that reason it is important for an ESP teacher to investigate the functional platform of the ESP learners in their specific field of specialization to be able to successfully implement task-based ESP teaching later during the course.

To identify the functional language that students need in their specialisms, the teacher can prepare a series of function cards, writing different functions on a piece of a paper or a card. For example: *greeting a colleague, introducing yourself, asking for information, giving information, giving orders, giving advice, asking for help and advice, explaining rules, explaining where something is, explaining a process or procedure, making a suggestion, putting forward a formal proposal, asking for clarification, interrupting, inviting someone to do something, making an offer, congratulating, apologizing, dealing with a complaint, etc.*

Students take turns to take a card with one of the above-mentioned functions from the top of the pile, and then they have to say whether the function is used in their specialism or not. If yes, they are invited to provide a situation, when it is used. So, the identified functions should be included in the syllabus and course plan to avoid later errors and to work on appropriate language areas.

The second fundamental phase of a task based needs analysis will be to identify the texts used in the specialism and the particular reading skills needed, which will then help the ESP teacher to select appropriate texts and write appropriate tasks. Regalia of a variety of reading materials, for example, magazines, phonebooks, labels from tins, websites, forms, and timetables can serve as authentic materials bank. The task of the ESP teacher is to find out the subject – specific materials that the students will need to read for general understanding (to get the gist), for detailed understanding of everything in the text, for a specific piece of information, and for pleasure. Afterwards the teacher can hand out “I need to read statements” to the students and they will decide whether the statements there are true or false. The statement may include the following:

- I need to read for general understanding.
- I need to read in detail and understand the whole text.
- I need to read to find out particular pieces of information.
- I need to read and then write a similar text.
- I need to read and then explain the content to a colleague or customer.
- I need to read and then translate into my own language.
- I need to read aloud at the meetings and presentations (Harding, 2007, p. 26).

From the viewpoint of a task-based needs analysis, the answers to these statements will provide the ESP teacher not only with the right types of texts to be used in the course, but also the types of the tasks, that the teacher will need to set. The same procedure can be followed by the ESP teacher for the other language skills (listening, speaking and writing) to identify needs, types of text and interaction.

The purpose of an “authentic materials bank” creation is to establish an awareness of students’ needs based on authentic materials that the students themselves bring in and contribute to the ESP course development, and assist the teacher with the course design. The teacher should also have awareness about the authorization right of using the authentic material provided by the students. To start this procedure the teacher should introduce the topic of types of communication:

How do people communicate in different jobs?: face-to-face, phone, email, memo, letter, report, invoices, etc. Which ones are used in their specialism? The teacher should get the students to bring some actual examples and complete the chart to show what s/he means by “authentic materials”. The example of a hotel receptionist is introduced below:

- **Reading texts** – computer reservation screens, forms in general, bills and invoices, etc.
- **Spoken situations** – checking in/out a guest, dealing with enquiries and requests, handling complaints, liaising with colleagues, speaking on the phone, etc.
- **Listening needs** – understanding different accents, understanding phone messages, etc.
- **Writing needs** – completing forms, sending responses to enquiries, etc. (Harding, 2007, p. 28).

Apart from the initial set-up, this is not a single activity, but an ongoing source of reference during the course, to be used at regular times (depending on the course timetable).

The final stage of a task-based needs analysis is identifying target events in the specialty. The ESP teacher should carry out a comprehensive investigation of the target events to design a detailed framework for the whole ESP course, incorporating target events, skills areas, language work, materials and classroom activities and involving the students in the ordering and organization of the course. An example of a target event for a travel agent would be:

- Welcoming clients and making them feel relaxed.
- Writing emails to confirm booking arrangements.
- Booking airline tickets through a CRS (computerized reservations system), etc.

The teacher with her students is automatically engaged in the creation of a chart of the target events. Once the chart is ready, it becomes a valuable document throughout the course. So, the limited range of specific target events are introduced and analyzed with their multiple component descriptions in a chart, where each target event looks like the following:

- **Target event:** Welcoming clients and making them feel relaxed.
- **Skill:** speaking.
- **Function:** welcoming, being polite, making offers.
- **Language area:** indirect question forms: Would you like?
- **Interaction:** teacher presentation, dialogue, role-play.
- **Related areas:** identifying client’s needs, customer service.

As it stands, this activity is very lengthy, time-consuming and on-going. In many situations this will not be the case as there may be a pre-existing course plan and an externally imposed syllabus. Nevertheless, the basic activities described in this paper can be used to test any such plans and syllabuses and make sure they are meeting the true needs of the ESP students.

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at the most characteristic feature of ESP course design – needs analysis. We have tried to show that it is a complex process which involves much more than simply looking at what the learners will have to do in the target situation. Analysis of target situation needs is concerned with language use. But language use is only part of the process. We also need to know about language learning. Analysis of the target situation can tell us what people do with language. What we also need to know is how people learn to do what they do with language.

In order to implement a task-based needs analysis we would suggest the ESP teachers and practitioners to make an analysis of their own learners' needs using the “Framework for analyzing target events”, to analyze their own teaching/learning situation using the “Framework for analyzing learning needs” and after studying the ESP authentic materials bank to try to organize the ESP instruction, which will hopefully ensure the successful development of the learners' communicative linguistic competence in their professional field.

References

- Branden, K. & Norris, J. (2009): *Task-based Language Teaching*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Branden, K. (2006): *Task-based Language Teaching: from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (2001): *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Douglas, B. (1994): *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Harding, K. (2007): *English for Specific Purposes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1993): *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tony-Dudley, E. (2010): *Developments in ESP: A Multi-disciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Associate Professor, Dr. Naira Poghosyan, Yerevan State University of Languages and Social Sciences, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia, nairapoghosyan@yahoo.com