Needs Analysis in Developing ESP and EAP Materials

BAHAREH JOUYBAR

ABSTRACT

Language for specific purposes (LSP) is a movement seeking to serve the language needs of learners who need language in order to perform specific roles and who, therefore, need to acquire content and real-world skills by the medium of a second language rather than gain mastery over language for its own sake. English for specific purposes (ESP) programs are specifically developed for professional fields of study. A course in English for agriculture or business writing is considered an example of English for specific purposes. EAP is identified as a term broadly applied to any course, module, or workshop where learners are taught to deal with academically related language and subject matter. He asserts that EAP is common at the advanced level of pre-academic programs as well as in other institutional settings. Needs analysis procedures made their appearance in language planning and became widespread in language teaching. The type of needs analysis for EAP/ESP focuses on gathering detailed language used for academic and vocational or other specific language needs. However, it has been claimed that ESP takes a better care of students’ needs and extends beyond its traditional EAP base. This paper briefly discusses the development of English for academic and specific purposes and talks about the importance of inserting needs analysis before EAP/ESP materials are developed. ELT practitioners, teachers, and materials developers may benefit from the discussions of this paper.

Key words: English for academic purposes, English for academic purposes, needs analysis
Introduction

Communicative views towards language instruction were incipiently incorporated into syllabus design during the 1970s, and the main question for the advocates of this group was what the learner needed to do with the language (Nunan, 2001). English for specific purposes (ESP) programs are specifically developed for professional fields of study. According to Brown (2001), a course in English for agriculture or business writing is considered an example of English for specific purposes. Syllabus, as maintained by Nunan (2001), began to appear when content was determined both in terms of the grammatical element learners were expected to gain command over them and in terms of the functional skills they would need so as to communicate the target language successfully. This movement, in part, was conducive to the appearance of and the development of English for specific purposes (ESP), where “syllabus designers focused, not only on language functions, but also on experiential content” (p. 11), which means the subject matter by which language undergoes instruction.

Language for specific purposes (LSP) is a movement seeking to serve the language needs of learners who need language in order to perform specific roles and who, therefore, need to acquire content and real-world skills by the medium of a second language rather than gain mastery over language for its own sake (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Besides Nunan (1988) contends that LSP became a matter of general interest, and LSP experts were striving to give birth to a more comprehensive and better LSP syllabus, making needs analysis highly appreciated by LSP teachers as an approach to course design focusing on learner's needs.

Vocational ESL is different from ESP in that ESP tends to be applied more in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting and its research focus is based on linguistic analysis, discourse studies, pragmatics, and discourse communities (Murray, 2011). ESP, as discussed by Murray (2011) may also be linked to one skill inasmuch as the particular learners only need, for instance, to read a text. According to Murray (2011), vocational ESL can adopt a variety of forms, pre-vocational, vocational specific and generic fields.

Types of ESP

Carter (1983, cited in Juhary, 2008) identifies three types of ESP:

1. English as restricted language,
2. English for occupational and academic purposes, and
3. English with specific topics.

Besides, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) using the tree of English language teaching offered a different view of ESP. They divided ESP into three branches: English four Business and Economics (EBE), English for Social Studies (ESS), and English for Science and Technology (EST). Each of these subject areas is divided into two branches: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). An example of EOP, as they argue, for the EST branch is English for Technicians, while an example of EAP for the EST branch is English for Medical Studies.
Needs analysis in ESP

The inclusion of needs analysis in second language curriculum development began in earnest in 1960s as language programs started emphasizing English for specific purposes (ESP) instruction. The type of needs analysis for ESP focuses on gathering detailed language used for vocational or other specific language needs (Martin, 2003). Needs analysis is the foremost and an integral part of the materials development processes as claimed by Montazeri and Hamidi (2013) including English for academic and specific purposes.

Dudley-Evans and Johnson (1991) assert that ESP takes a better care of students’ needs and extends beyond its traditional EAP base. However they contend that there is the need for more research regarding the nature of written or spoken discourse that must be carried out by the ones who are enrolled in ESP courses. They further draw attention to the fact that other disciplines are beginning to the draw upon insights ESP related research.

According to Phan (2005), during the 1970s, needs analysis procedures made their appearance in language planning and became widespread in language teaching. In their first days, such procedures were used as the initial process for the specification of behavioral objectives which then explored different syllabus elements, such as functions, notions, lexis, in a more detailed manner. “At the same time, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) became a matter of general interest and LSP experts were making efforts to give birth to a more comprehensive and better LSP syllabus. As a result, needs analysis was warmly welcomed by LSP teachers as an approach to course design, which focused on learner's needs” (Nunan,1988).

Based on Richards et al. (1992), in language teaching, needs analysis is the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities. Therefore, in developing ESP materials, needs assessment makes use of both subjective and objective information (e.g. data from questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation) and seeks to obtain information on:

a. the situations in which a language will be used (including who it will be used with)

b. the objectives and purpose for which the language is needed.

c. the types of communication that will be used (e.g. written, spoken, formal, informal)

d. the level of proficiency that will be required

Needs assessment is a part of curriculum development and is normally required before a syllabus can be developed for language teaching. According to Nation and Mcalister (2010), English for specific purposes course has been taught for many years. Many of the suggestions regarding needs analysis are applicable for the design of an ESP course within a particular context. When more generic courses are being designed, or when information is not available locally, we could also look at publicly available corpora, especially specialized corpora, for language needs analysis purposes. These may become an increasingly valuable tool as more and more corpora become available and search engines become more powerful and more user-friendly.
Developing EAP Instructional Materials

Brown (2001) defines EAP as a term broadly applied to any course, module, or workshop where learners are taught to deal with academically related language and subject matter. He asserts that EAP is common at the advanced level of pre-academic programs as well as in other institutional settings.

Thompson (2001) in order to provide a definition of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), considers it to be a sub-branch of ESP (English for Academic purposes). As he states, one of the features of ESP is the focus it has on meeting the specific needs of the ones learning a foreign language (FL). EAP appears to have pragmatism as its underlying ideology. The reason why EAP is assumed to be pragmatist is the special emphasis it places on learners needs. In main stream courses, however, the emphasis is on what is going to be required. As Thompson states, EAP has the potential to provide foreign language learners with the means allowing them to make their own choices.

As Stoller (1999) maintains, EAP curricula make use of extended content the main purpose of which is not to solely instruct language skills. He considers content based approach to curriculum particularly appropriate in EAP settings in which there is the urge for the students to prepare themselves for content learning demands.

Ruthkrug and McGhee (1996) make a distinction between EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and vocational ESL (VESL). As they assert, the relationship between these two areas of language teaching is highly analogous to that of English instruction and real life English. EAP teaching requires teaching of something beyond language instruction. They expound the clash that may occur between ESL and academic goals of EAP. They run a discussion about the difficulty in segregation between learning basic skills and the need for further training and education in, for instance, reading, writing, and math abilities. There happen to be many times when there appear to be cogent reason for the amalgamation of these two issues. Stoller (1999) compares the change in ESL to some other societal changes, like the change in our organizations. The change in ESL program can be attributed to the evolving needs of students and faculties. In contrast to some L2 programs which have undergone minute changes, many EAP programs seems to have experienced drastic changes, adapting themselves with the miscellaneous needs of learners and turning away from discreet-skill instruction to such new approaches as content based instruction aimed at meeting ESL learners academic content learning and language skill needs.

Needs analysis in EAP

Finding the real academic needs of the learners in higher education is of high importance. Zareva (2005) discusses about the new TOEFL IBT test and the degree it covers test takers’ academic needs. As he maintains the greatest attempt has been made to match the test format with learners’ real academic needs; however, a scant success has been achieved. He further contends that there is a raft of evidence that the needs of English for academic purposes are both linguistic and cultural. What he means by cultural needs is that learners should have comprehensive information of academic norms and what they are required to do in university. They should be able to meet the academic needs expected of them. He also explains that in connection with academic discourse and genres, it is not the non-native speakers of English who have to make the necessary discourse and genre familiarity and
adaptation; even the native speakers have to adapt to demands of thought. They should, for example, be able to make the theoretical and practical distinction between written and spoken genres. Regarding EAP’s needs analysis the primary focus research, as he reports, is bestowed upon identifying foreign language learners’ needs in all four skill areas of writing, reading, speaking, and listening. With respect to the point of view which is under research, level of study, and area of specialization, the distribution of needs will vary. Zareva (2005) finally notes that In EAP literature a great deal of emphasis should put on speaking and writing skills regarding the fact that these skills are supposedly secondary to reading and listening skills in an academic milieu. Students need to be able to communicate what they have learned through speaking, with respect to the yearn for the communicative language teaching which is highly favored in today’s especially language teaching, thereby demanding the learners to be able to exchange ideas through speaking. Needless to say for the information documented and illustrated, it has to be moulded in written script, requiring its own skill and genre.

Many of the suggestions pertaining to needs analysis can be applicable for the design of an EAP course within a particular context (nation & Macalister, 2010). According to Nation and Macalister (2010), when more generic courses are designed, or when information is not locally available, it is possible to look at publicly available corpora, especially specialized corpora, for language needs analysis purposes. These may become an increasingly valuable tool as more and more corpora become available and search engines become more powerful and more user-friendly.

According to Stoller (1999), the content-based approaches which are adopted by an EAP program seem to have the following benefits:

1. They eliminate the artificial separation often existing between subject matter course and language instruction giving a sense of reality and purpose to language classrooms.
2. They help students learn content and at the same time develop both language and academic skills.
3. Content-based instruction units lend themselves to integrated curricular modules.
4. Expertise in a topic develops as learners are involved in hierarchically difficult tasks.
5. Thematically organized materials set in content-based classrooms pave the way for easier remembering and learning.

Stoller (1999) further explains that EAP students’ needs fall into three general areas:

Language skills, including academic reading, writing, speaking, listening, and vocabulary 2- academic skills, including sustained content learning, computer literacy, critical thinking, test taking, metacognitive strategy, and note taking 3- acculturation skills, helping students understand the culture of academy and the related expectations.

Conclusion

Based on what has been mentioned above, it seems logical to conclude that the first step in the construction of a language course is defining objectives which have been specified by the analysis of needs of learners (Maftoon,
Being involved in a communicative syllabus design without identifying and analyzing the language needs of learners, based on Maftoon (2001, cited in Montazeri & Hamidi, 2013) appears to be impossible the reason being that if language is a system for expressing meaning and if language learners have different communicative purposes, these materials are to be reflected in the materials the learners should be taught and to be included in the activities expected of learners to later engage in the target language. The same discussion can be true for EAP/ESP materials. As it has already been mentioned above, ESP takes a better care of students’ needs and extends beyond its traditional EAP base (Dudley-Evans & Johnson, 1991). However they contend that there is the need for more research regarding the nature of written or spoken discourse that must be carried out by the ones who are enrolled in ESP courses. They further draw attention to the fact that other disciplines are beginning to the draw upon insights related to ESP research. All the same, in developing EAP/ESP materials, needs analysis is an important issue.

Needs analysis here, based on Benesch (1996), is a political and subjective process. The identification of elements of a target situation depends on the analyst's ideology, as has been pointed out. Some will look at the situation and see what students must do to perform well in that situation; others will see where possibilities for change exist. Critical needs analysis in the development of the EAP/ESP materials assumes that institutions are hierarchical and that those at the bottom are often entitled to more power than they have. It seeks areas where greater equality might be achieved (Benesch, 1996). Critical needs analysis is a reaction to the pragmatic stance of EAP/ESP: Changing existing forms is unrealistic whereas promoting them is practical. For example, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) promote a learning-centered approach while dismissing a learner-centered approach to ESP as a theoretical attack on established procedures rather than a practical approach to course design.

A learner-centered approach to EAP/ESP is impractical as claimed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). They believe that since most learning takes place within institutionalized systems, it is difficult to see how such an approach could be taken, as it more or less rules out predetermined syllabuses, materials, etc. In this case, materials should allow teachers and students to make choices. Scholars suggest the materials designers may offer flexibility in terms of content by providing a rand of possible inputs. Teachers must evaluate the benefits and costs of designing their own teaching materials for EAP or ESP students and make their own decision as to whether it is worth the time and effort. All in all, a skilful materials developer or designer is a person who has first done comprehensive needs analysis, who is masterful in collecting materials, and uses coherent language program in this regard.

References


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bahareh Jouybar is an M.A. graduate student in TEFL from South Tehran Branch of Islamic Azad University. She has recently finished her M.A. studies at the above mentioned university. She has been teaching English for about 8 years in different qualified English institutes in Tehran, Iran.