

## FILLING THE GAP BETWEEN TARGET NEEDS AND STUDENT WANTS IN ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTAL PURPOSES

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**ABSTRACT.** *Filling the Gap between Target Needs and Student Wants in English for Academic Environmental Purposes.* The present paper sets out to bring forward some of the current issues in nowadays ESP teaching, such as, in what ways can ESP teachers produce and design a balanced approach to their syllabi in terms of content needed by their ESP students, but not necessarily wanted or liked by those. To be more precise, we are going to use a deductive method to find out what freshmen students from the faculties of Biology and Environmental Science and Engineering would want and like in their EAEP course and see if it matches or not with the teacher's intended EAEP curriculum.

**Keywords:** *English for Specific Purposes, needs analysis, curriculum development, ESP syllabus, English for Academic Environmental Sciences.*

**REZUMAT.** *Reducerea decalajului dintre nevoile de bază și preferințele studenților din programa de Engleză pentru Scopuri Academice Specifice în Știința Mediului.* Lucrarea de față își propune să aducă în prim plan unele dintre cele mai stringente și actuale aspecte din predarea disciplinei Engleză pentru Scopuri Specifice, cum ar fi, sub ce formă pot profesorii de ESP să creeze o programă echilibrată în ceea ce privește conținutul necesar studenților de ESP, dar nu neaparat dorit sau plăcut de aceștia. Mai exact vom folosi o metodă deductivă pentru a afla ce își doresc în cadrul cursului de ESP studenții de anul I ai facultăților de Biologie și Știința și Ingineria Mediului, UBB și vom analiza dacă există corespondență între doleanțele acestora și curricula de limbă pentru scopuri specifice.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Engleza pentru Scopuri Specifice, analiza de nevoi, dezvoltare de curriculum, programa ESP, Engleza pentru Știința Mediului.*

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## Introduction

English for Specific Purposes teaching can turn out to be a challenge when it comes to deciding the content of the syllabus; the challenge becomes even greater in the case of a large group of students in an ESP course. Bearing in mind the main steps in planning a syllabus, as described in the specialised literature (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998) such as needs analysis, curriculum design, materials selection, methodology, assessment or evaluation, the ESP teacher soon realizes that all these above mentioned steps are not independent, but rather overlapping activities and monitoring the results of a specific phase, such as needs analysis for example, may interact a lot with the success of another stage or phase. In other words, needs analysis is an ongoing process covering a wide range of choices made by the coordinator of an ESP course:

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 analysed in a variety of ways. (Hyland qtd. in Flowerdew 2013, 325)

Recently, a great deal of emphasis has been placed upon *present needs analysis* (PSA) where attention is drawn to the gap between what students are able to do with the language at the beginning of a course and what they need to do at the end of the course (Flowerdew 2013). As opposed to the *target needs analysis* (TNA) in ESP, where attention is directed towards what exactly do the students need the foreign language for, in the target situation, the present needs analysis (PSA) focuses on students' *lacks* and *wants* and tries to gather as much information as possible about all the factors involved in the teaching process, starting from elements such as the student's motivation for choosing a course and ending with information about the teaching environment and, of course, all the palette of existing elements in between. Many recent studies have focused on what type of needs analysis might be the best (Swales 2004) in designing a syllabus, a promising option could be even a combination of the two (Robinson 1991) where the ESP teacher can seek and find information about both PSA and TNA, as Belyaeva (2015, 80) observes:

These two types of needs analysis are combined in learner-centered approach to ESP course design. The approach brings into perspective the knowledge that learners need in order to perform in a target professional situation, the language students want to learn, and inconsistencies between the aforementioned groups, i.e. gaps in learners' knowledge.

In English for Academic Environmental Purposes (EAEP), a great emphasis is placed upon stating the goals and objectives, since the ESP teacher has to carefully plan and switch accordingly between EAP and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) demands. Thus, the need analysis will be comprised of a target-situation, where we set to find out what they will need the course for, a present-situation analysis, which can be run through a diagnostic test (especially if the group is a large one and we have to determine the linguistic level of the group and their linguistic abilities prior to our ESP teaching), a strategy analysis, where the ESP teachers have to discover what students prefer, a means analysis (Holliday & Cooke 1982; Swales 1989), where we pay attention to what equipment and materials are needed and a language audit (Robinson 1991), where we need to find out as ESP teachers, most of the time, if there is a specific requirement for work-related tasks that they need to perform in the near future, the level of language proficiency they need to reach, if the students are already members of the scientific community or employees in the specialised field (Belyaeva 2015). The data obtained from the students' needs analysis will help in designing the ESP syllabus, especially if the course is held in a tertiary institution and is intended to cover both EAP and EOP areas. The close relationship between the needs analysis and syllabus design has become well established in the field literature, supported, in particular, by the necessity of linking and tailoring *content*, *skills* and *methods* to the results of the need analysis. According to Martin (2000), we can focus on content in terms of a particular topic in language instruction, for example, environmental legislation for Environmental Management students. In such an instance, attention is directed towards the communicative techniques used in the target situation. As far as skills and method are concerned, Belyaeva (2015, 78) observes:

Skills-based syllabi deal with teaching basic language competencies such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This type of syllabus is more relevant for English for Specific Academic Purposes course; it can help teach students use English to prepare oral and written reports following the conventions of their chosen field of study. Method-based syllabi are organized around target tasks students will have to perform using the English language, such as dealing with customer complaints in the workplace.

It has to be mentioned that a syllabus in Environmental Science and Engineering will rarely make use of only one model, most of the time it is a combination between those, the selection being made according to the results obtained in an ample needs analysis process as it has been described so far. Another important step in ESP course design is, nevertheless, the choice of methodology. Belcher (2009) considers that the focus should be on context and interaction and the selection of materials and methods should be done in such a way as to enable needs-responsive instruction. This type of instruction will require authentic materials from the learners' professional and job-related contexts. In the case of English for Academic Environmental Purposes there is a limited exposure to the specialised language in an academic setting. Attending academic gatherings, symposiums or conferences, once or twice per year would not suffice in terms of exposure to authentic settings, thus a heavy responsibility in this case would rely on a very thorough selection of the content of the syllabus. But academic writing activities may not be necessarily regarded as enjoyable activities by the students, as Flowerdew (2010) investigates after examining the results of a needs analysis for a module on proposal writing for the workplace where students seemed not interested in a course in which they could not see immediate necessity. The mismatch between the intended learning outcomes and students wants may become a problem, especially in the case of a course comprising of both EOP and EAP.

All in all, maybe the most important phase in an ESP course development is that of assessment or evaluation. Needs analysis, course design, teaching-learning, assessment and evaluation are not linear processes but cyclical and they always influence each other. (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998)

The present study focuses on the assessment phase carried out at the beginning of an EAEP course at a tertiary level institution meant to detect the ESP students' goals and needs in English for Academic Environmental Purpose.

### **Method**

The subjects in this study were 1<sup>st</sup> year students from the Faculty of Environmental Science and Engineering and the Faculty of Biology and Geology at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The research was carried out using a deductive method, respectively a survey in the form of a written questionnaire, in which students from different specializations under the umbrella of Environmental Sciences field had to answer 10 questions regarding their goals and expectations for the EAEP course. The survey was conducted at the beginning of the first semester, academic year 2018-2019, right after the linguistic diagnostic test (the linguistic test helps set the level of the groups

according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and was comprised of a set of 6 open questions and 4 multiple choice questions. There were 13 groups of students, belonging to 13 different 1<sup>st</sup> year specialisations, a total of 166 students, both male and female, aged between 18-20 (with 10 exceptions of older students studying for their second bachelor degree). The diagnostic linguistic test's results showed quite a homogeneous linguistic level, 80% of the students obtained a general qualification of B2, whereas 20% a level of C1. These students come from a variety of ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds; the distribution of these aspects within groups/ specialisations being not relevant for the present study. Taking part in the study was anonymous and not compulsory; 166 students out of the total of 170 took part in the survey.

Students' answers for the six open questions were grouped according to the frequency of the common items/ keywords using a soft programme (WordSmith) on one hand, and according to the key idea/ intention expressed in the whole text chunk, per item, on the other. The answers for the 4 multiple choice questions were generated into percentages.

## Results

The following table centralizes the main results for the 6 open questions, followed by the table of the 4 multiple choice questions:

**Table 1.** Results for the Open-Ended Questions

Open-Ended Questions	Frequency	Key Idea/ Conclusion
1. Do you think you will need to use General English or Specialised English in your future? Why?	English (21 times) Specialised English (140 times) Job (135 times) Communication (24 times) Information (17 times)	ESP is seen as very much needed for the future job.
2. What kind of language-based tasks in your domain do you find difficult to do in English?	Specialised terms (145 times) Presentations (110 times)	A sort of fear regarding the ability to use the specialised vocabulary in the scientific community.
3. Name at least two instances in your occupational area where you love to use English.	Reading specialised materials/ articles (130 times) Watching documentaries in my field (21 times)	Receptive skills.
4. What's your preferred way of learning something new in general?	Practising (62 times) Interactive (41 times)	Lerner-centered approach preferred.

Open-Ended Questions	Frequency	Key Idea/ Conclusion
5. For how long have you been studying English as a foreign language and what do you consider you need to improve?	Speaking (110 times) Communication (28 times) Vocabulary (30 times)	General English has been studied for at least 8 years, although there is reluctance towards speaking in public.
6. How would your ideal ESP course look like?	Interactive (129 times)	Interesting. Stimulating. Easy. Interactive.

**Table 2.** Results for the Multiple-Choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions	Results
1. Why did you choose this course?	78,8 % I need it for my future career 13,9 % It seemed interesting 7,3 % I don't know
2. What do you like most and in what order?	49,7 % Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking 23% It does not matter, I enjoy all of them 13,9 % Speaking, Writing, Listening, Reading 13,4 % Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking
3. What's the most difficult task for you in a foreign language?	54,9 % To speak 20,1 % To listen 20,1 % To write 4,9 % All of them
4. What would you like to study in your ESP course?	64 % ESP and Academic Language 24,4% Specialised Vocabulary 11,6 % It does not matter, all the above mentioned

## Discussion

The answers of the first open question *Do you think you will need to use General English or Specialised English in your future? Why?* indicate a raised awareness among the students regarding the use of English in their future job, even though they may not be all aware of what exactly it entails in terms of language skills. In order to explain the results we should correlate them to the linguistic level of the group: an average of B2/C1 is exactly the reason why such results are possible. Students are not interested in the immediate outcome of the course as they are more interested in their long term needs, considering they handle the language at the required level<sup>2</sup> and investing in the “future” seems a better option. A very large amount of answers pointed out that working abroad could be an option at some point in the future, so probably for a few percentages this could explain the interest in both: “Both of

<sup>2</sup> Babes-Bolyai University language policy requires B1 level in CEFR for Bachelor and B2 level for Master Programmes (for further details about the levels see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/the-cefr-descriptors>)

*them. I will need General English for day to day communication and Specialised English for communication at the workplace.” or “Both of them, the first one for the daily use and the last one for my specialization.”*

The findings of the survey have also tackled the issues of studying abroad, travelling, or taking part in summer schools or Erasmus Programmes abroad. All the answers expressed the clear intention of developing the ESP abilities in order to reach a “comfortable level” in doing all the above-mentioned activities, whereas little or no attention was given to the ESL instruction. Upon a very close and attentive reading of the survey, the “comfortable level” from the students’ answers could be translated as “getting rid of the fear of speaking in my scientific community”. Question number 2. *What kind of language-based tasks in your domain do you find difficult to do in English?* shed some light upon the interpretation of the results since it explains the difficulties they have encountered so far in ESP: the specialised vocabulary. Most of the students have already been exposed to ESP, as taking part in different projects or activities in their High Schools and/ or Volunteering Programmes, thus the contact with the specialised lexicon has already taken place but with no adjustment time. Keeping in mind that the survey was done at the beginning of the EAEP course, it is understandable that students should manifest a reluctant attitude towards the specialised vocabulary; it usually disappears towards the end of the first academic semester when students get used to the exposure to the specialised language. Another very important aspect would be the design and organization of the ESP curriculum, such results in the evaluation phase will require the organisation of a lot of outside opportunities of specialised language exposure, so having to coordinate interdisciplinary activities and taking part in specialised academic activities can turn out to be quite a challenge for the ESP teacher.

Questions 3-6 in *Table 1* focus on acquiring information needed for deciding the methodology of the EAEP course. Knowing the preferences of your students helps a lot and saves a lot of time during the seminars: for example, a content-based activity chosen by the ESP instructor may be relevant in terms of the technique used but disliked by the students, such an instance leads to in-class ongoing decisions in shifting the activities, wasting precious time with the instruction phase and explanations. In our case, the survey shows clearly the preference for receptive skills, an interactive approach, drills and patterns. It also helps a lot in elaborating a balanced approach syllabus, choosing easier tasks for the least desired skills. For example, the data indicates a reserved attitude towards speaking, 54, 9 % of the respondents considered it to be the most difficult task in a foreign language, in this case the professional and job related contexts that are going to be used in the elaboration of activities should start up with General English for Academic Purposes, slowly making the transition towards English for Specific Purposes.

The results obtained in the multiple-choice section reinforce the existence of the awareness of linguistic demands linked to a future career, proven in the percentages of 78,8% out of the total number of participants who chose the course in order to improve their linguistic skills for their future careers. A surprising result was reflected in the answers to question 4. *What would you like to study in your ESP course?* as 64% of the students chose ESP and Academic Language as opposed to only 24,4% who considered specialised vocabulary to be of uppermost importance. A possible explanation could be the fact that the interest here might have been twofold: the “investment” in the long term needs combined with the immediate expectations. In a subconscious way, students might have been paying attention to the credits obtained in the exam, in this way the runner-up in priorities becoming passing the exam with a high score and attaining the credits.

A last aspect that has to be mentioned is that the particular results of the survey may be attributed to the influence of the specialisations. Even though grouped under the umbrella of English for Environmental Sciences in general, each and every specialisation has its own specificity in linguistic procedures and/or genres: students in Environmental Biology write lab reports, students in Environmental Ecology write observation reports, and students in Environmental Engineering write technical reports and so on. As a consequence, students may prefer writing to speaking because that is what they know about their future job. But handling the specialised language involves more than handling only one language skill.

The needs analysis helps the ESP instructor considerably, once the instructor knows *what his/her students want* it is easier to proceed to the design of syllabus. Of course, there is not such a thing like a syllabus tailored perfectly on students’ expectations and wants; sometimes what they dislike is exactly the area where they need to improve. A very tactful approach has to be decided on here: filling the gap between target needs and students wants may be the key to a successful ESP course after all.

### **Conclusion**

The overall results of the survey show that nowadays “English proficiency is a form of human capital in the workplace” (McManus 1985) and that an ESP curriculum has to be adapted to the demands of the market. Students seem to be more aware than ever of the linguistic requirements in their field of study, with no significant distinction between EAP and ESP, but rather an emphasis on specialised communication. Taking into consideration all these factors, we can conclude that filling the gap between the target needs



and student wants in EAEP course heavily relies on the ESP instructor's shoulders and it includes a very carefully planned syllabus which is impossible to be achieved without a thorough needs analysis and constant feedback during the ESP course.

The effort of making the ESP course attractive is a twofold challenge: on one hand, the ESP instructor has to weigh all the available options and to decide which are the most important aspects that have to be taught in accordance to the curriculum and, on the other hand he/she has to consider the students' preferences and incorporate those in the syllabus. Finding the best way between the two may not be always straight forwarded and constant monitoring of the students is always required.

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