

Conceptualisation of ‘Needs’ in ESP Needs Analysis: A Plethora of Terms

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Abstract

Although there exists extensive literature on needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), there is still a disagreement over the exact definition of the term needs. Consequently, there is a plethora of terms used synonymously with the word needs. Terms such as necessities, wants, lacks, desires, deficiencies preferences, requirements, etc. are often encountered in the literature on ESP. Senior scholars or people already familiar with the field of ESP may take these terms for granted. Yet, students and/or novice researchers may find themselves confused about the meaning of these terms. This paper is therefore intended to shed the light on how the term ‘needs’ is conceptualised by different ESP scholars. It shall demonstrate the meaning overlap that exists between the terms used to refer to the concept of needs and discuss the recent categorisation of needs which may prove useful to students and novice scholars in the field of ESP.

Keywords: Categorisation, ESP, Meaning overlap, Needs, Needs analysis

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is now acknowledged as a separate branch of English language teaching (ELT). A recent definition of ESP is provided by Anthony (2018). According to this scholar, ESP is an approach to language teaching that targets the current/and or future academic or occupational needs of learners, focuses on the necessary language, genres, and skills to address these needs, and assists learners in meeting these needs through the use of general, and /or discipline-specific teaching materials and methods [Emphasis is added].

A simple analysis of Anthony’s definition indicates that the term ‘needs’ is used thrice. This shows that ESP is different from General English in that ESP is designed to meet specific needs of learners. Thus, needs analysis is the initial stage in ESP course development. It is considered as the cornerstone of any ESP course development (Brown 2016; Basturkmen 2010; Otilia 2015; Rahman 2015). For Brown (2016), ‘needs analysis and ESP are inextricably intertwined’.

Since the importance of needs analysis is now hardly disputed among the ESP community, there is extensive literature on ESP needs analysis. But, how is the term ‘needs’ conceptualised among ESP scholars? Put differently, what does the term “needs” refer to in ESP needs analysis?.

To people already familiar with the field of ESP, the above questions (in fact, one question asked differently) may appear irrelevant. Yet, to students and/or novice researchers in ESP encountering terms such as necessities, wants, lacks, desires, preferences, requirements, goals, subjective needs, objective needs, to name but few, answering these questions may prove interesting.

This paper is therefore intended to shed the light on how the term ‘needs’ is conceptualised by different ESP scholars in ESP literature. It shall demonstrate the overlap in meaning that exists between the terms used to refer to the concept of needs

Typology of Needs in ESP

For readers about ESP in general and needs analysis in particular, it is very likely that they will come across the terms just enumerated above: necessities, wants, lacks, desires, preferences, requirements, etc. These terms reflect the multifaceted nature of the concept of needs. To put it differently, the term needs covers a broad range of meaning in the ESP context. While commenting on this issue, West (1994) explains that “the very concept of language needs has never been clearly defined and remains at best ambiguous”.

Target Needs: Necessities, Lacks and Wants

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) use the terms necessities, lacks, and wants to refer to what they call target needs, that is, what the learners need to do in the target situation. Necessities can be defined as what the learners have to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. They are the type of needs determined by the demands of the target situation (West, 1994). These necessities correspond to the learners’ language requirements in the academic or occupational settings. For example, a non-English background student studying at an English medium university might need to know how to listen effectively to a lecturer, how to do an oral presentation, etc. Similarly, a medical practitioner might need to know the appropriate language for consultations, how to handle communication across cultural contexts, etc.

As for lacks, they are identified after analysing what learners already know in the language. They are the gap between what learners can currently perform and what they will need to do in the target situation. This kind of need is also referred to as deficiencies (Anthony 2018; Basturkmen 2010; West 1994).

Wants, on the other hand, refer to what the learners believe they lack or need or what other stakeholders think students need or lack (Anthony 2018; Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Other terms that are used to refer to wants are desires,

expectations, requests (Brown 2016). It is possible that what sponsors, teachers and course designers regard as necessities clashes with what learners want or think they lack. A consideration of learners’ wants will increase their motivation. Indeed, as Anthony (2018) explains, ‘learners almost universally want their courses to be interesting, enjoyable, manageable, and relevant to their future goals’

Learning Needs

Learning needs is another type of need. As explained above, target needs refer to what learners have to do in the target situation; they are the destination of an ESP course (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). However, as these authors insist, ‘analysing what people do tells you little, if anything, about how they learnt to do it. Put differently, in addition to identifying what learners have to do in the target situation, an ESP course designer should determine how it will be acquired. This difference between what has to be learnt and how it should be learned is reflected in the definition on needs analysis provided by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998). They argue that needs analysis is the process of establishing the “what” and the “how” of a course.

Learning needs therefore include the learners’ preferred learning strategies, their attitudes, their motivations or reasons to take the course, learning styles, learners’ expectation from the course etc. Learning needs also include the constraints of time, place and available resources. An understanding of the learning needs will help to meet the necessities of the target situation. Indeed, an ESP learning should not be viewed as a mechanical project to be imposed mechanically on the learners (Tahir 2011). The learning should rather be an enjoyable, pleasing, manageable, generative, creative and productive activity. For example, a text might well reflect what learners need to do in the target situation (necessities), but because of lack of motivation on the part of the learners, the learning may prove difficult.

Objectives vs Subjective Needs

A number of scholars distinguish between objective and subjective needs (e.g. Brindle 1989; Dudley-Evans & St John 1998; Nunan 1988). On the one hand, objective needs refer to factual information about learners, that is, their age, sex,

nationality, marital status, education background, previous language courses, current proficiency level, language difficulties, use of language in real life, the length of time spent in the target culture and previous, current and intended occupation (Brindley 1989; Nunan 1988; Robinson 1991). Similarly, Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) view objective (or perceived) needs as derived by outsiders from facts, from what is known and can be verified. To put it simply, objective needs are gathered from objectively observable data (Brown 1995). Such a type of need does not require the attitudes and views of the learners to be considered (Nunan, 1988)

On the other hand, subjective needs refer to information which is not objectively observable (Brown 1995). They are derived from insiders (that is learners) and correspond to the cognitive and affective factors (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998). These factors include the learners' wants, desires, expectations, personality, self-confidence or other psychological manifestation (Brindley 1989, cited in Niemiec 2016). They include "the preferred length and intensity of a course, the preferred learning arrangement (whether the learner wants to engage in classroom or non-classroom-based instruction), the preferred methodology (which will include the types of materials and activities preferred by the learner), learning styles" (Nunan 1988).

Goal-oriented and Process-Oriented Needs

Widdowson (1983) makes a distinction between two types of learner need: goal-oriented needs and process-oriented needs. On the one hand, goal oriented-needs refer to what the learners need to do once they mastered the language. On the other hand, process-oriented needs refer to the means of learning and has to do with pedagogical objectives (Widdowson 1983, as cited in Niemiec 2016).

Meaning Overlap between the Terms Referring to the Concept of Needs in ESP

A close look at all the terms used to refer to the concept of needs in ESP reveals some degree of overlap in their meaning. For example, what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) refer to as necessities falls under Widdowson (1983)'s goal-oriented category of needs. This kind of need also belongs to the category of objective needs (see for example

Dudley-Evans & St John 1998). Similarly, what is referred to as wants by Hutchinson and Waters falls into the category of subjective needs. And what they refer to as learning needs falls in Widdowson's (1983) category of process-oriented needs.

A Recent Categorisation of Needs in ESP

Given the multifaceted nature of the concept of needs in ESP, Brown (2016) appears to have provided a useful categorisation of needs. Having reviewed extensively the literature on needs analysis, he concluded that the different conceptualisations of the term needs fall into four categories. These categories represent the different needs viewpoints that can be taken while conducting a needs analysis: These views are summarised below:

Democratic View of Needs: This view of needs represents whatever elements that the majority of students and other stakeholders want. This definition of needs includes, as Brown (2016) explains wants, desires, expectations, requests, motivations. It is notable that Brown does not only emphasis on the learners 'wants, but on the wants of all stakeholders.

Discrepancy View of Needs: This view considers the students' needs as the difference or discrepancy between what students are currently able to do and what they should be able to do in an ESP situation. A needs analyst taking this view will be interested in students' deficiencies lacks and gaps. It can be seen that, as Anthony (2018) noted, the discrepancy view corresponds to Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) term 'lacks'.

Diagnostic View of Needs: Taken within this view, the term needs refers to whatever elements of ESP that will cause harm if they are missing. In other words, as Anthony (2018) interprets, the term needs in this view correspond language, genre, and skills that are considered as necessities, essentials, or pre-requisites.

Analytic View of Needs: According to Brown (2016), students' needs within this view are whatever elements of ESP that they should learn next (next step) based on the best available second language acquisition (SLA) theory and experience. While discussing on how to follow this view, Anthony (2018) explains that ESP designers need to review

the literature on SLA & ELT & consult with teachers who are familiar with learning theory and Practice.

Despite this useful categorisation of needs, Brown (2016) warns needs analysts that selecting only one viewpoint will be favouring certain facets of needs. He therefore advises that in order to capture the maximum number of facets of needs, it may be useful to include two, three or all these four needs viewpoints.

Conclusion

There exists, as Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) noted, a confusing plethora of terms referring to the concept of “needs”. To put it simply, the term ‘needs may take different meanings to different people. Indeed, words such as necessities, wants, lacks, desires, deficiencies preferences, requirements, etc. are used synonymously with the term needs and are often found in ESP literature. It follows that, among scholars in the field of ESP, there is still a disagreement over the exact definition of the term “needs”. To minimise confusion, it seems essential that students and /or young researchers in the field of ESP get aware of all these terminologies. The four different views of needs explained by Brown (2016) may prove useful to avoid such confusion. They (students and /or young researchers) should always bear in mind that, as Richards (2001) argues, what is identified as a need is dependent on judgement and reflects the interests and values of those making such a judgement.

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