Analysing Communicative Needs in ESP

Dr Rajinder Singh Ahluwalia*

The idea of analysing the language needs of learners as a basis for course development has become synonymous with ESP. Almost every major commentator on ESP has acknowledged the crucial link between ESP and learner's needs. In 1977, Strevens noted that 'special purpose language teaching' or SP-LT occurs whenever the content and aims of teaching are determined by the requirements of the learner'. (p.146). Munby (1978:2) states: `ESP... should focus on the learner and the purposes for which he requires the target language, and the whole of language programme follows from that'. Robinson (1991:7) also finds needs analysis criterial to ESP, though she states, ESP is not the only educational enterprise which makes use of it. Strevens' (1988) criterion for defining ESP accords a central place to learners' needs. He (ibid:p.1-2) distinguishes between four absolute and two variable characteristics of ESP in the following way:

i) Absolute characteristics

ESP consists of English language teaching which is:

- designed to meet specified needs of learners.
- related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
- centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc. and analysis of this discourse in contrast with general English.

ii) Variable characteristics:

ESP may be, but not necessarily,

- restricted as to language skills to be learnt (e.g. reading only)
- not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

Strevens also mentions the *claims* made by ESP practitioners. These are:

- being focused on learner's needs, wants, motives.

- is relevant to learner.

- is successful in imparting learning.

- is more cost-effective.

Clearly, in an ESP course a learner's needs are paramount. It is assumed that the learner is aware of his needs. That he is an adult who has already done a general English course and who wishes to extend or adapt his competence to his particular field of work or study. Rather than studying for an open-ended period of time for a general examination, the learner in an ESP course is usually studying in order to perform a role. He is not studying English for its cultural or educational value but in order to use it for his well-defined and specific communication needs.

Defining needs

The problem with needs analysis, however, is the complexity of the categories for describing needs. The important point to keep in mind as Lawson (1979 quoted in Brindley 1989, p.37) points out, is that 'needs do not have of themselves an objective reality. What is finally established as need is a matter for agreement and judgement, not discovery'. Nevertheless a number of writers (for example, Berwick 1989; Brindley 1989; Mountford 1981; Widdowson 1983) have discussed different meanings of the term `needs'. First, needs can refer to students' study or job requirements, that is, what they have to be able to do at the end of their language course. This is a goal-oriented definition of needs (Widdowson 1984, p.27). Needs in this sense are perhaps more appropriately described as "objectives" (Berwick 1989, p.57). Second, needs can mean what the user institution regards as necessary or desirable to be learnt from a programme of language instruction (Mountford 1981, p.27). Third, we can consider what the learner needs to do to actually acquire the language. This is a process-oriented definition of needs. Fourth, we can consider what the students themselves would like to gain from the language course. This view implies that students may have personal aims in addition to (or even in opposition to) the requirements of their studies or jobs. Berwick (1989 p.55) notes that such

personal needs may be (and often are) devalued by being viewed as wants or desires. Finally, we may interpret needs as lacks, that is what the learners do not know or cannot do in English.

Brindley (1989) provides an integrative framework for getting a complete perspective of learners' needs. He refers to *subjective* and *objective* needs of the learners. The objective needs refer to needs which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language in real-life communicative situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties. The subjective needs refer to the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in learning affective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learner's wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies.

Pragmatically speaking, both kind of needs analysis – subjective and objective – are useful and desirable for having a fuller perspective on learners' needs. In what follows, we shall discuss these two types of analyses in an attempt to understand salespersons' oral communication needs in English during sales encounters.

Analysing learners' subjective needs

The learner is at the heart of an ESP programme. He is not there as a participant with his real needs analysed by a designer. He is also there by virtue of his own wishes, perceptions and expectations. Richterich (1984:29) comments: "A need does not exist independent of a person. It is people who build their needs on the basis of data relating to themselves and their environment". Especially for teaching professional communication, it is important to put the learner at the centre of the needs analysis process. With professional, job experienced learners, this means exploiting their knowledge and experience both for content and preferred strategies of learning. Richterich and Wilkins (1975:46) therefore, propose defining learners' language needs and content by obtaining quantitative and qualititative data from surveys. Analysis of content means observing and examining the oral and written use made of a language by a given person or class of persons, and then deducing objective needs which are foreseeable and generalisable. They point out that a person about to learn a language has only a vague idea, if any, of his future needs and therefore, a survey of the language needs of a predetermined category of adults should

be carried out by analysing the language use among persons already using the language in the same field as the category of person concerned (ibid.p.49). They also advocate surveying the learner group in order to discover their motivations and their opinions as to their needs.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987:55) also emphasise that there is little point in taking an ESP approach, which is based on the principle of learner involvement, and then ignores the learners' wishes and views. In their framework for analysing learners' needs, they take into account the analysis of learners' subjective as well as objective needs. They (ibid.:55-57) look at the learners' needs in terms of *necessities, lacks* and *wants*. By *necessities* is meant what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. He or she will need to know the linguistic and conceptual features – discoursal, functional, structural, lexical – which are commonly used in the situation identified. The situated discourse can be observed and then analysed in terms of its constituents.

To identify necessities alone, however, is not enough, since the concern in ESP is with the needs of particular learners. We also need to know what the learner knows already, so that we can then decide which of the necessities the learners lack. In other words, the target proficiency needs to be matched against the existing proficiency of the learners. The gap between the two can be termed as the learners' *lacks*.

Alongside the objective observations of learners' target needs, we also need to take into account their subjective perceptions and preferences of their communicative need which Hutchinson and Waters (ibid.) term as *wants*. Bearing in mind the importance of learners' motivation in the learning process, learner-perceived wants cannot be ignored

Gathering subjective needs using Present situation analysis

A present situation analysis involves finding out not only what students are like at the outset of their course, but also more about their teachers, the teaching institution and, going further, the wider society around. One needs to know the level of ability both of the students and of the teachers: how much do they know already, what are their weaknesses, what are they capable of? Secondly, one needs to know what resources, both financial and physical, the students and the teaching institution have. What length of course and degree of sophistication,

for example, can they afford? Finally, one needs to know what views are held on the whole business of language teaching and learning. What is the attitude of the community to English? Is the attitude generally positive or negative? Either way, this attitude will affect the success of the teaching enterprise. What is the locally preferred method of language learning (e.g. rote learning, grammar-translation, discovery method, etc.)? Obviously, the more one knows about those involved in the teaching programme, the more one will be able to ensure that what is devised will suit them. It is no use, for example, including in the syllabus something that the TSA has revealed as important if in fact the local teachers are not capable of teaching it, or if it requires equipment which the institution cannot afford.

The PSA approach to needs analysis derives from the work of Richterich and Chancerel (1980) for the Council of Europe. Their work takes more account of the human factor than Munby's and emphasizes the importance in any language course of its context in society. They suggest that needs analysis should be on-going throughout a course, for students' (perceptions of their) needs may change as the course progresses. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) call such kind of PSA as 'gathering information on learners' learning needs.' The analysis of such information will show how the expert communicator learnt the language items, skills and strategies that he or she uses.

Problems in analysing learners' subjective needs

There are however, a few problems that need to be sorted out while considering learners' subjective needs. The first problem is whether to assess the needs of each individual or focus on the common core needs of a group of learners. Munby's (1978) procedure for analysing need is essentially concerned with individuals; at most it presupposes groups which are completely homogenous in the goals of their learning. One of the early solution to this problem is suggested by the British Council document which states, "It seems... that any attempt to apply needs analysis to the development of a multi-purpose course must... weight skills functions in terms of their centrality and frequency : those which are central to the greatest number of individual purposes constitute the common core". (1979:121).

Secondly, the planning and execution of an ESP course involves various categories of people whose attitudes towards the learning objectives and the learning process need to be taken into account. Developing an English language training programme for salespersons, for instance, would involve at least three participants viz. the salespersons, the trainers, and the company. We shall have to take into account everyone's perceptions and then to try and negotiate a satisfactory compromise to arrive at a reasonably accurate and feasible description of salespersons' needs.

Thirdly, it is also important to remember that needs are not static but keep developing and changing. Thus needs analysis is not a once-for-all activity. It should be a continuing process, in which the conclusion drawn must be constantly checked and reassessed.

Fourthly, variation in the ways in which people learn, comprehend and produce language, leads to the heterogeneous proficiency levels among learners. With such a group we simply don't have a 'Threshold' level of competence, a kind of springboard from which to take off into more detailed areas. This problem is typical of professional ESP where learners come from different levels of a company, or with different specialisms.

Last but not the least, the objective and the subjective views of needs can, and do, conflict, with a consequent de-stabilising effect on learner motiviation. For instance, an analysis of learners' test scores or situated discourse might come in conflict with their subjective perceptions. Or teacher's/ trainer's perceptions may differ from those of the learners'. What should the teacher do in such a situation? There can be no clear-cut answers. Each situation has to be judged according to the particular circumstances. What is important is that the ESP course designer or teacher is aware of such differences and takes account of them in materials and methodology.

From our brief discussion above, we gather that learners' subjective perceptions about their needs as well as an analysis of the objective data concening their target discourse, their proficiency levels, etc. play crucial roles in the proper identification and specification of their needs. Most of the ESP writers, however, look at the needs analysis using the *product-process perspective,* and not the *subjective- objective perspective.* They distinguish between two major approaches to needs analysis i.e. Target Situation Analysis (TSA) and Present Situation Analysis

(PSA) keeping in line with the two mainstream traditions in applied linguistics : 'product-oriented' tradition and the 'process-oriented' tradition. The product-oriented tradition is based largely on work on needs analysis, speech act theory, and discourse analysis, and more generally, the growth of sociolinguistics and related disciplines.

The process-oriented tradition, on the other hand, is experiential and participative in character and, reflects mainly North American experience of immersion, emphasis on content, awareness of human relations, and language acquisition research. In the section that follows, we shall briefly review the basic tenets of the TSA and PSA approaches to needs analysis and try to find in what respects they can help us in analysing salespersons' oral communicative needs.

Analysing learners' objective needs

Target situation analysis

The most common form of needs analysis is devoted to establishing the learners' language requirements in the occupational or academic situation they are being prepared for – 'target situation analysis' (Chambers 1980:29). In Target Situation Analysis (TSA), the analyst is concerned with what students have to do at the end of the language course: the goal or target for which the language course is equipping them. As the goal of an ESP student is not primarily to learn language but to perform various tasks through the medium of English, the analyst must first find out what these tasks are. What physical actions are performed, in what situations (e.g. noisy, stressful, etc.), in what locations (which country, in which kind of place), when and how?

Moving towards language, the analyst needs to know which of the four language skills are made use of, which language functions and language forms. An important consideration is the degree of proficiency expected in the target situation. Since many ESP courses operate under a time constraint, it is important that students attain the level of English which will enable them to perform satisfactorily in the target situation.

Applications of Target Situation Analysis

The most widely used procedure for providing detailed data about the precise uses of the target language by different groups of personnel was devised by the English Language

Teaching Development Unit (ELTDU 1970). This procedure sub-divides the four traditional language skills and so arrives at a classification of 20 activities to cover all business and commercial situations. Some of these surveys were carried out on a vast scale and obtained data from training or personnel managers, but the advantage of scale must be balanced against the fact that the data were collected at secondhand.

Another typical application of this type of needs analysis can be found in Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (Munby 1978). This book details exhaustively the parameters within which information about target competence should be sought, building up to give a communication needs profile. The basis of Munby's model is a two part instrument consisting of a communicative needs processor (CNP) which is then converted into a communicative competence specification. The CNP consists of a range of questions about key communication variables (topic, participants, medium, etc.) which can be used to identify the target language needs of any group of learners. Having built up a profile of learners' needs, the next stage is to interpret the needs in terms of specific language skills and functions. Munby gives an exhaustive list of micro skills and micro functions from which syllabus specifications can be made.

Munby's work marked a watershed in the development of ESP. With the development of CNP the machinery for identifying the needs of any group of learners had been provided: all the course designer had to do was to operate it. In his work Munby aimed to be systematic and detailed, where ELTDU was brief and simple. ELTDU concerned on 'activities', whereas this is the one component ('event') for which Munby offers no inventory. The Munby model has been widely studied and discussed. Among its useful features are comprehensive data banks for example, of micro skills and attitudes, which can be used as checklists for the resultant syllabus. A helpful insight which Munby codifies relates to target level performance; it helps us pinpoint the stage at which 'good enough' competence for the job is required.

Munby's model however, has been found to have some shortcomings. Minimally, these shortcomings can be summarised under four headings:

Complexity

Munby's attempt to be systematic and comprehensive inevitably made his instrument inflexible, complex and time-consuming (Coffey 1984:7). Its complexity and impracticality have been enough to put many off altogether (Nunan 1988:43; Berwick 1989:2). All subsequent systems of needs analysis have striven for simplicity - the system of Holliday and Cooke (1982), for instance, starts with a blank piece of paper.

Learner-centredness

Despite Munby's claim, his CNP is not learner-centred (Nunan 1988:24): the starting point may be the learner but the model collects data *about* the learner rather than *from* the learner. The very sophistication of the variables and their associated inventories and taxonomies tends to mean that the profile is drawn up by a needs anaysis specialist with limited reference to the participant, what White (1988:89) calls a 'hands-off' approach. Pointing to yet another limitation, Coleman (1988:156) says that Munby's tendency to idealise the individual language learner's needs, make the large-scale application of the model to the analysis of needs of heterogeneous groups problematic.

Constraints

Munby saw constraints as matters to be considered after the needs analysis procedure had been worked through. These constraints were classified (Munby, 1978:217) as socio-political (e.g. status of the target language), logistical (financial constraints, numbers of teachers available), administrative (time available), psycho-pedagogic (previous learning methods) and methodological (recommended methods and materials available). Many (e.g. Frankel, 1983:119; Hawkey,1983:84) felt that these practical constraints should be considered at the start of the needs-analysis process and, in later statements, Munby (1984:64) revised his view somewhat, allowing that 'political factors affecting the target language and the homogeneity of the learner group should be applied at the needs analysis stage'. Nevertheless, it was Munby's failure to consider such constraints in his 1978 model that led to the development of means analysis (Holliday and Cooke 1982).

Language

One criticism is that Munby fails to provide a procedure for converting the learner profile into a language syllabus (Richards, 1984). It was also somewhat strange that Munby should include functions derived from social English, especially the work of Wilkins (1976) and the Council of Europe (Van Ek, 1975). The work of Candlin et al. (1974, 1976, 1981; Ranney 1992) clearly demonstrate that ESP language functions are related to 'job-specific tasks' (Candlin et al.1976:246) and, as such, are likely to differ from those used in social or general discourse. It has been noted that the language used in real-world ESP situations differs from that predicted by course designers (Williams 1988, on business meetings; Mason 1989, on service encounters). It is for this reason that subsequent needs-analysis procedures have tended not to work with a pre-ordained inventory of language items, and certainly not items derived from non-ESP contexts.

Another limitation of Munby's system is that he gives no suggestions about how the data can be obtained, nor does he show what should happen next. Thus despite his title, he is really only describing one step in syllabus (or course) design, and although the communicative approach urges that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, Munby simply details the parts.

Munby's view of needs analysis is TSA. In a real-life situation, however, TSA is only half the story. As well as knowing one's destination, one also needs to know one's starting point and route. One needs to know what students are like at the outset of their course, as well as where they should beat the end. Thus a present situation analysis or PSA is also required

A pragmatic approach to needs analysis

Recently, more and more commentators (e.g. Bhatia 1991; Dorneyi and Thurrell 1994; Swales 1990) have felt that product is as important to learners as the process of learning it. The identification of product provides the learners with specific language input, which they can put to use in their communication. Coulmas (1981) point out that there are many fixed expressions or conversational routines that crop up constantly in natural conversation. Polished conversationalists are in command of hundreds of such routines and use them, for example, to break smoothly into a conversation, to hold the listener's interest, to change the subject, to react

to what others say, and to step elegantly out of the conversation when they wish and so on. Widdowson (1989:135) goes as far as to say that a great part of communicative competence is merely a matter of knowing how to use such conventionalized expressions, or as he terms them, 'partially pre-assembled patterns' and 'formulaic frameworks'. These lend themselves ideally to explicit teaching, and can serve as important language inputs for ESP learners. Explicit teaching is especially important in case of salespersons because most of their communication is strategic i.e. it is cosciously designed to influence the buyer. In order to persuade a buyer, they need to think of their strategic language options well ahead of their actual encounter. Hence for analysing the needs of professionals like salespersons, we need an approach which should combine the product-centred and process-centred aspects of language teaching, keeping in view their needs and concerns.

The language audit approach (Pilbeam 1979) is one such approach which shows a pragmatic understanding of learners' communicative needs rather than conforming to any theoretical position. It combines TSA and PSA to plot the role played by a foreign language in a commercial or industrial enterprise. First, the precise language skills needed to carry out specific jobs are determined, thereby establishing target profile of language part of a job description and facilitating in selection of personnel for new positions. In order to draw up this profile, the auditor/analyst must find out what tasks or activities people perform in their jobs (for example, chairing formal meetings, making presentations, writing telexes and memos) and must then decide what level of language performance is required for these tasks. Next, a profile of present ability needs to be established showing the extent to which present personnel match up to their job requirements. This can be done by means of tests or, better, by means of an attainment scale and test battery (for example, the ELTDU Stages of Attainment Scale and Test Battery) which will specify different levels of achievement of various tasks. Finally, the auditor must determine how much language training is needed (in terms of time and facilities required to bridge any gap between the employees' present ability profile and the company's target profile. Such a language audit might be commissioned by a commercial company from a team of language consultants, as a preliminary to deciding whether to engage in language training or not.

Language audit approaches thus first determine the learners' language needs in terms of the target language skills and functions, and then prescribe the suitable methodology to help them learn these pre-specified items. The pre-specification of the items is the result of the detailed consultations between the language auditor and the learners. The analyst takes into account both the subjective as well as objective data to get a good idea of learners' needs. (cf. Brindley 1989). He may use such survey instruments as questionnaires and interviews to obtain data regarding learners' 'personal agendas' – their subjective perceptions of their preferences, attitudes, lacks and strengths.   In addition, he may analyse their situated discourse to get objective insights into the actual language behaviour of learners' targetted communicative roles.

Consistent with the language audit approaches, we believe that both kinds of anlayses – an analysis of learners' subjective needs as well as an analysis of their situated discourse – should be performed to determine learners' specific language and communicaion needs. These two types of analyses will help us determine learners' needs with considerable accuracy. Khuwaileh (1993:37) suggests that both needs analysis (where questionnaires, interviews, etc. can be used) and genre analysis can be used together, side by side, to specify learners' needs. He says :

To combine more than one technique makes the identification of needs more comprehensive and realisitc.The dimension of using more than one technique cannot only specify learners' linguistic needs but it can also figure out their lacks, wants, motivation, cultural difficulties, etc. by assigning questions to be asked about these issues (e.g., in questionnaire. interview, etc.) and by studying ESP texts, their communicative events and their characteristics. This dimension provides complete insights into both learners' needs and text-processing.

Hence most of the recent proposals on analysing needs in specific communication contexts thus put a great emphasis on taking into consideration both the subjective and the objective needs of the learners. It is suggested that we may use such survey instruments as questionnaires and interviews to obtain data regarding learners' 'personal agendas' – their subjective perceptions of their preferences, attitudes, lacks and strengths. And we may analyse

learners' target discourse in order to get objective insights into the actual language behaviour of learners' targetted communicative roles. The results obtained from these analyses can then help us arrive at a complete and integrated perspective on the learners' needs.

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* Dr. Rajinder Singh Walia is an Associate Professor of English at Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Yamuna Nagar (Haryana). He holds M.Lit. and Ph.D. degrees in English Language Teaching from Central Institute of English and Foreign languages, Hyderabad and an MBA from IGNOU. He has taught English language, literature and business communication at undergraduate and post graduate levels for more than 25 years. He has successfully completed a post-doctoral UGC project on `Written discourse of selling' and has presented research papers in more than 70 international and national conferences and seminars.