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## The Issues Involved in ESP Course Design

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### Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown in leaps and bounds in the last decade. Course design is one of the key stages in ESP. Hutchinson and Waters see ESP as an *approach* rather than a *product*, by which they mean that ESP does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material and methodology. Language varieties are self-contained entities which extend from a common core of language. This paper has highlighted some of the issues involved in ESP curriculum development. The main focus is on the topic of language varieties and on the type of investigation ESP curriculum developers use to identify the gap between what learners already know and what they need to know in order to study or work in their specific target environments. Apart from this it examines the topic of wide- versus narrow-angled course designs.

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**Key Words:** Language Variety, English for Specific purpose, Wide angle, Narrow angled, course design.

## Introduction

English language is deemed significantly important in almost every area of discipline especially in this globalised era where communications among individuals all over the world are borderless and through a variety of channels. With the globalization of trade and economy and the continuing increase of international communication in various fields, the demand for English for Specific Purposes is expanding, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language (Gao, 2007). Johns & Dudley-Evans (2001, 115) state that, '*the demand for English for specific purposes... continues to increase and expand throughout the world.*' The '*internationalism*' (Cook, 2001, 164) of English seems to be increasing with few other global languages, i.e. Spanish or Arabic, close to competing with it. Belcher (2006, 135) states that '*ESP assumes that the problems are unique to specific learners in specific contexts and thus must be carefully delineated and addressed with tailored to fit instruction.*' Mohan (1986, 15) adds that ESP courses focus on preparing learners '*for chosen communicative environments.*' Learner purpose is also stated by Graham & Beardsley (1986) and learning centeredness (Carter, 1983; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) as integral parts of ESP. Lorenzo (2005, 1) reminds us that ESP '*concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures.*'

## Focus of This Paper

This paper highlights some of the issues involved in ESP curriculum development. It emphasizes that language varieties are self-contained entities, based in and extend from a common core of language. Needs analysis is an entirely pragmatic and objective endeavor to help course developers identify course content that is truly relevant to the learners, the syllabuses should specify content and method. Apart from this it also focuses on the ESP courses should be as narrow-angled as possible.

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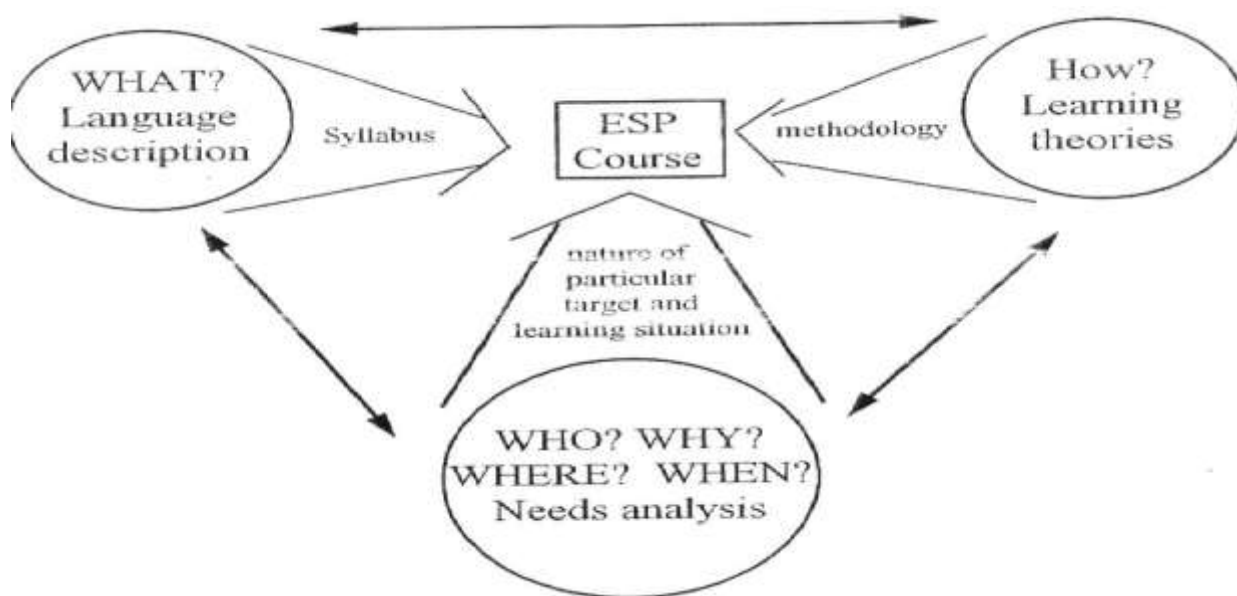
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## Concern with Designing Appropriate Courses

ESP teachers are concerned more with designing appropriate courses for various groups of learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1986). There are three factors affecting ESP course design: Language descriptions, Learning theories, Needs analysis. The interdependence of these factors in the course design process is very important. The course design must bring the learner into play at all stages of the design process.



**Fig 1. Factors Affecting ESP Course Design**

The task for the ESP developer is to ensure that all three of these abilities are integrated into the syllabus. This is a difficult task due to the incredible amount of research required. Because ESP requires comprehensive needs analysis and because the learning-centered syllabus is not static, it is impossible to expect that the developer be in a position to identify the perfect balance of the abilities noted above for any particular group of learners.

## Varieties of Language

According to Widdowson (1978), scientific discourse is "a universal mode of communicating, or universal rhetoric, which is realized by different scientific texts in different languages by the process of textualization." Many attempts have been made to make a deliberate Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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choice of a variety of language which is most relevant to particular groups of learners. The so-called ESP is in part application of this view of language variety in language pedagogy. The linguistic factor has tended to dominate the development of ESP with an emphasis on the analysis of the nature of specific varieties of language use. Probably, this has been a necessary stage, but there is a need for a wider view. ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning. According to Bloor and Bloor (1986), there are two perspectives for the term *language for specific purposes*. One is that a specific-purpose language is based on and extends from a basic core of general language. The second is that all language exists as one variety or another and that there is no basic core language. The idea that different varieties of English are based on a common set of grammatical and other linguistic characteristics has been widespread (Bloor & Bloor, 1986). Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartik (1972), who argued that learners need to come to grips with basic English before they study English for specific purposes.

*All language learning is acquired from one variety or another, even if it is 'classroom English' variety. A language learner is as likely to acquire 'the language' from one variety as from another, but the use of language, being geared to situation and participants, is learned in appropriate contexts. This view supports a theory of language use as the basis of language acquisition theory.*

*(Bloor and Bloor 1986)*

All English exists as some variety or another. In short, 'basic' language is what is present in all varieties of English, where the varieties overlap. All languages are learned in some context or another. There is thus no 'basic' variety-less English, there is no 'general English' or English for no specific purposes.

### **Teaching a Specific Variety**

A second perspective is that there is no common core of language preexisting to varieties. The core is, rather, an essential part of any one of the innumerable varieties of the language (Bloor & Bloor, 1986). Teaching a specific variety of English (ESP) can start at any level including beginners. Moreover, learning from the specific variety of English, is highly effective Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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as learners acquire structures in relation to the range of meanings in which they are used in their academic, workplace, or professional environments.

## **Needs Analysis**

Needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a focused course (Brown, 1995; Chambers, 1980; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Jordan, 1997; West, 1994). It plays a vital role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course, whether it be English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or general English course, a key feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on an analysis of the needs of the students. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 126) state as:

*First, needs analysis aims to know learners as people, as language users and as language learners. Second, needs analysis study also aims to know how language learning and skills learning can be maximized for a given learner group. Third, needs analysis study aims to know the target situations and learning environment so that data can appropriately be interpreted.*

It is obvious that needs analysis is a very crucial first step prior to designing and developing a language course, producing materials for teaching and learning, and developing language test.

## **Perspectives of Needs**

Perspectives of needs vary and the needs analyst has to decide whose perspectives to take into account in designing ESP courses. Different approaches to needs analysis attempt to meet the needs of the learners in the process of learning a second language. Not a single approach to needs analysis can be a reliable indicator of what is needed to enhance learning. A modern and comprehensive concept of needs analysis is proposed by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 125) which encompasses all the above-mentioned approaches. Their current concept of needs analysis includes the following:

Environmental situation - information about the situation in which the course will be run (means analysis);

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- Personal information about learners - factors which may affect the way they learn (wants, means, subjective needs);
- Language information about learners - what their current skills and language use are (present situation analysis);
- Learner's lacks (the gap between the present situation and professional information about learners);
- Learner's needs from course - what is wanted from the course (short-term needs);
- Language learning needs - effective ways of learning the skills and language determined by lacks;
- Professional information about learners - the tasks and activities English learners are/will be using English for (Target Situation Analysis and objective needs);
- How to communicate in the target situation – knowledge of how language and skills are used in the target situation (register analysis, discourse analysis, genre analysis).

Today, there is an awareness of the fact that different types of needs analyses are not exclusive but complementary and that each of them provides a piece to complete the jigsaw of needs analysis. All the works done in ESP have sought to promote the communicative nature of language teaching, because starting with register analysis, ESP teachers have been very concerned with the needs of students as they used the language, rather than language *per se*. For this reason, today needs analysis should not be (and is not) of concern only within the field of ESP, but also that of General English because the needs of the learners is of paramount importance in any language process.

### **A Rigid View**

Therefore, Language Use in Specific Situations is simply too unpredictable to be identified in any certain terms. ESP has sometimes produced a rigid view of language needs and failed to take account of the variation of language use that exists in any target situation.

A striking example of a rigid approach to analysis of language needs is seen in Munby's Communicative Needs Processor (1978). This approach involved the attempt to identify not only the English language functions that would be needed (for example, by a waiter working in a

Spanish tourist resort) but also the actual linguistic formula for realizing these functions. Need analysis has its Issues and drawbacks.

- Language needs are not learning needs. Although learners will need to use certain language structures or features in their target environments, this does not mean that they are ready to acquire them (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).
- Asking learners about their language needs can be problematic because they may lack awareness or Meta language to describe these needs in any meaningful way. It is improbable that students with unsophisticated knowledge about language would make sound decisions about their needs (Chambers, 1980).
- Objective needs are not necessarily the same as subjective needs or wants. For example, engineering students may objectively need to deal with written texts concerned with technical matter but may want to read topics in English on other general interest subjects. Using technical texts, topics, or tasks may turn out to be de-motivating.

### **Deficiency Analysis**

Jordan (1997) maintains that deficiency analysis can form the basis of the language syllabus because it should provide data about both the gap between present and target extralinguistic knowledge, mastery of general English, language skills, and learning strategies.

This paper attempts to present an assessment of students' language "*deficiency analysis*". Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that it is lacks rather than needs that come to determine curriculum since what we are really interested in is the gap between the target proficiency and the present proficiency of the learners. They also state that ESP is not "a product but an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning." Therefore, what learners should be taught are skills that enable them to reach the target, the process of learning and motivation should be considered as well as the fact that different learners learn in different ways (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998).

Needs analysis in ESP often focuses on the skills learners need to study or work effectively in their target environments. In analyzing needs, ESP curriculum designers identify which micro skills from a general pool of skills used across a range of environments are important for a particular group of ESP learners. However, if a course aims to develop language

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skills, instruction needs to offer more than practice opportunities. Finally based on assessments of learners' needs and genre analysis, a syllabus is drawn up, a curriculum is designed and an assessment or evaluation of students' progress subsequently follows.

### **Types of Syllabuses**

Definitions of 'syllabus' vary between very general definitions that are similar to some of the definitions of 'curriculum' already mentioned to very specific ones. One of the first types of definitions is that of Breen's who sees in a syllabus: the meeting point of a perspective upon language itself, upon using language, and upon teaching and learning which is a contemporary and commonly accepted interpretation of the harmonious links between theory, research, and classroom practice. Since different educational theories and approaches differ on syllabus goals and functions, a universal definition for "syllabus" seems impractical. What can be said is that syllabi tend to be representations, reflecting the originator's ideas about language learning: every syllabus is a particular representation of knowledge and capabilities. And this representation will be shaped by the designer's views concerning the nature of language, how the language may be most appropriately taught or presented to learners, and how the language may be productively worked upon during learning (Breen, 1987a: 83).

Graves (1996) discusses the language curriculum and syllabus as a broad statement of the philosophy, purposes, design, and implementation of the entire language teaching program and the syllabus as a specification and ordering of content of a course. One of the fundamental questions for language teaching is what language is to be taught. In this respect, syllabus is aligned to the overall 'philosophy' of the course or courses. The teachers and course developers specify as course content and how they organize them reveal their ideas of the nature of language and learning. If they interpret language as a set of communicative purposes, they would probably list various pragmatic functions (speech acts) of language (such as request, report, and describe) as course content.

Syllabuses can be synthetic or analytic. Those who embrace the view that learning occurs when learners acquire individual items of language one by one and later combine them might opt for a synthetic syllabus that lists the linguistic items to be learnt. Those who embrace a view that learning occurs when learners perceive patterns in language samples and induce rules from them

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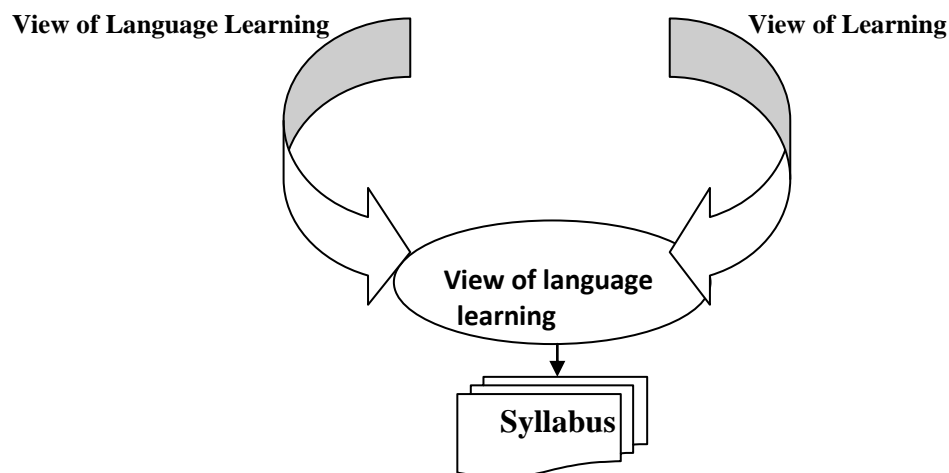
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might opt for an analytic syllabus and list items that do refer not to language units but to some other sort of unit, such as task, situation, or topic. Components of language are not seen as building blocks which have to be progressively accumulated. Much greater variety of linguistic structure is permitted from the beginning and the learners task is to approximate his behavior more and more closely to the global language. Analytic approaches are behavioral they are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning languages and the kind of language performance that are to meet those purpose.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who claimed that specifying course content was value laden and revealed the notions of what language is and how language is learned. In short, the selection of course content reflects our ideas of language learning.



**FIG. 2. Views of learning and course content.**

To teach all of the languages is not possible; teachers and course designers must be selective. It is often by selecting what to teach that language teachers show their notions of what language is and their beliefs as to what is important in language learning.

Based on their observations of general English language courses, Brown (1995) and Richards (1990) list the following types of syllabuses. They also point out that courses are often based on a combination.

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**Structural** (organized primarily around grammar and sentence patterns).

**Functional** (organized around communicative functions, such as identifying, reporting, correcting, and describing).

**Notional** (organized around conceptual categories, such as duration, quantity, location).

**Topical** (organized around themes or topics, such as health, food, and clothing).

**Situational** (organized around speech settings and the transactions associated with them, such as shopping, at the bank, at the supermarket).

**Skills** (organized around micro skills, such as listening for gist, listening for specific information, listening for inferences).

**Task- or activity-based** (organized around activities, such as drawing maps, following directions, following instructions).

In EAP teaching, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001a) list the following types of syllabus:

**Lexico-grammatical** (organized around structures and vocabulary).

**Functional-notional** (organized around language functions and notions).

**Discourse-based** (organized around aspects of text cohesion and coherence).

**Learning-centered** (organized on what the learners have to do in order to learn language items and skills, not the items and skills themselves).

**Skills-based** (organized around particular skills).

**Genre-based** (organized around conventions and procedures in genres) as units of analysis).

**Content-based** (organized around themes).

Some syllabus types (structural, functional, notional, discourse- and genre-based) list the language to be taught. White (1988) identified three options, listing content (forms, situations, function, and topics), skills (language or learning), or methods. One methods option is the task-based syllabus, it comprises a list of tasks (for example, giving instructions or following directions) that the students will perform. It is argued that tasks provide a purpose for using language meaningfully and that through struggling to use language to complete the task, the students acquire language. Long and Crookes (1992) argued that task-based syllabuses in ESP specify ‘real world tasks.’ In general English language teaching the precise definition of the tasks is not a primary concern. In general English language teaching tasks are chosen for the Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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pedagogical value; in ESP they may be chosen for their relevance to real world events in the target environments.

### **Narrow- and Wide-Angle Course Designs**

The Concern that often arises in the design of ESP courses is the level of specificity that should be adopted. The issue is related to what Bloor and Bloor 1986 refer to as the common core hypothesis in applied linguistics. According to proponents of this hypothesis there is a common core of grammatical and lexical item that predominates in any linguistic register. Thus, in all types of text we may analyse, a common set of linguistic structures run through them. When applied to language teaching, it follows according to this position, that before embarking on any specific purpose, learners may master the basic set of linguistic items which make up the common core.

There are number of Issues with the common core hypothesis. The common core is a formal system, separated from meaning and use. As meaning is determined by context, if it has to be incorporated it cannot escape from the notion of specific varieties. Mastery of any language system is claimed to be a part of the common core, must take place within the context of a specific variety.

Proponents of narrow angle can argue that, as common core is found in any variety, then it is possible to learn the common core simultaneously while learning the specific variety. Such an approach is more cost effective as mastery of the specific language of the target discipline can begin at any level of overall competence.

In its application to pedagogy another problem with the common core hypothesis is that it assumes an incremental model of language acquisition. Learners can first master the common core and then go to the variety specific features. Finally, with its focus on language items, a common core approach neglects language skills. An EAP discipline is defined as much by its typical language forms and meanings. Its needs to prepare learners to read textbooks, listen to lectures, write essays and do library research etc. Curriculum planners cannot wait until mastery of common core is complete before focusing on these disciplines specific activities. Some

remedial measures have to be taken on common core items at the same time as developing the discipline- specific skills.. How specific, or narrow angled, ESP courses should be.

Some approach it as a practical problem related to the specificity of needs. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) state that where needs are limited, a narrow-angled course may be appropriate and the course can legitimately focus on a few target events and use content or topics from one discipline. Where the needs are more general, the course can focus on a wider range of target events and use content and topics from a range of disciplines.

Some practitioners have argued for wide angle EAP/ ESP on general pedagogic grounds. Widdowson (1983) has claimed that narrow angle ESP is a type of training as opposed to education. ESP to have broader competency has to play a major role as a part of the educational process which focus on purposeful activity than specific language. On the same Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue, claiming that competency in the skill required in target situation is more important than the specific language of those situation. Therefore the ones who reject the common core hypothesis argue that the specific language associated with the specific skills might just as well be the target of learning than a register.

## **Conclusion**

ESP is today more vibrant than ever with a bewildering number of terms created to fit the increasing range of occupations that have taken shelter under the ESP umbrella. It seems with increasing globalization and mobility of the world's workforce that the demand for specific courses will not decrease but only rise. This paper has highlighted some of the issues involved in ESP curriculum development. It can be argued that language varieties are self-contained entities. Needs analysis can be seen as an entirely pragmatic and objective endeavour to help course developers identify course content that is truly relevant to the learners. It also states that syllabuses should specify content (what is to be taught). Or they should specify method (how language is to be taught). According to some analyst the ESP courses should be as narrow-angled as possible. Others argue that this is not practical or that it is unnecessary as learners can transfer what they learn from a more general course to their own highly specific area at a later stage. Designing an appropriate ESP course that suits target groups in an academic setting is not easy task for course designers/ESP practitioners.

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