

CZU: 811.111'24'271(083.41)

VIEWS ON STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEEDS: MATCHES AND MISMATCHES

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The development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at university level means, among other things, a central role of the student in the learning process, made visible through active participation, interaction and cooperation via pair- and group-work. In order for all these things to happen, the teacher needs to use appropriate methodology, as well as to select, adapt or devise relevant, realistic, and interesting materials based on the students' short- and long-term needs.

This paper focuses on the students' English language needs, as perceived by the students themselves, by foreign language teachers and by specialized teachers. The method used consists in questionnaires devised and administered by the author. The responses given are presented in tabulated form and are further on discussed, analyzed and compared. The comparison reveals similarities and differences as far as the perceptions of the different groups investigated are concerned.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, needs analysis, long-term needs, short-term needs, questionnaire, respondents, students, teachers.*

ASPECTE VIZÂND NEVOILE STUDENȚILOR LEGATE DE ÎNVĂȚAREA LIMBII ENGLEZE: POTRIVIRI ȘI NECONCORDANȚE

Dezvoltarea englezei pentru scopuri specifice la nivel universitar înseamnă, printre altele, un rol central al studentului în procesul de învățare, vizibil prin participare activă, interacțiune și cooperare în perechi și grupe de lucru. Pentru ca aceste lucruri să aibă loc, este necesar ca profesorul să utilizeze o metodologie adecvată, să selecteze, să adapteze sau să elaboreze materiale relevante, realiste și interesante bazate pe nevoile de scurtă sau de lungă durată ale studenților.

Lucrarea se axează pe nevoile studenților legate de studiul limbii engleze, așa cum sunt percepute de studenții înșiși, de profesorii de limbă străină și de profesorii de specialitate. Metoda constă în chestionare elaborate și administrate de autoare. Răspunsurile date sunt prezentate sub formă de tabel și sunt discutate, analizate și comparate. Comparația relevă asemănări și deosebiri în ceea ce privește percepția diferitelor grupuri investigate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *engleza pentru scopuri specifice, analiza nevoilor, nevoi de scurtă durată, nevoi de lungă durată, chestionar, respondenți, studenți, profesori.*

Introduction

The increasing demand of our age regarding the rapid integration in the international job market of young people who have just graduated from a technical university has been a challenge both for those teaching specialized subjects and for those who teach humanist-oriented courses.

One of the main challenges regarding course design is to find a balance between forming and informing, between giving the undergraduate students fundamental, up-to-date content knowledge and preparing them for lifelong learning, as well as for a quick and efficient integration at the workplace.

Such concern should be reflected in course and materials design. If we refer to English Language Teaching (ELT), we might say that course design has become a fundamental aspect of the teacher's job description in the area of Academic English or English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The centrality of needs analysis in any language course has been acknowledged by many voices in the literature [1-8]. As Hutchinson and Waters point out, "whereas course design plays a relatively minor part in the life of the General English teacher...for the ESP teacher, course design is often a substantial and important part of the workload" [2, p.21]. In other words, if as far as General English is concerned, we still meet the TENOR (Teaching English for No Obvious Reason) approach, "ESP (...) is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need" [2, p.19]. What really differentiates ESP from General English is this awareness of specific needs as perceived by all the stakeholders: learners, language teachers, specialized teachers, employers, educational establishments and sponsors. Mere awareness is not enough if it remains on a subjective, individual level. In order to devise a syllabus and materials tailored to the needs of the students, the first step is to collect data from the different stakeholders in the form of responses to needs analysis questionnaires and/or interviews.

This is in fact the purpose of this study, which focuses on the English language needs of the students from the Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology in Iași, Romania, as perceived by the students themselves, by English language teachers and by specialized teachers.

1. Methodology

1.1. Participants

The participants were all from "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași: 50 freshmen and 50 sophomore students from the Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology, 15 specialized teachers and 3 English teachers. While all the specialized professors are currently teaching electronics engineering students, only one of the English teachers is currently teaching undergraduate electronics engineering students.

1.2. Instruments

The instrument used to collect data about the students' language needs was a questionnaire made up of five questions, each offering several items to be evaluated on a four-point scale: *very important* (4 points), *important* (3 points), *not very important* (2 points), *not at all important* (1 point). The questionnaire was similar for all the participants. The only difference was the language in which the questions were formulated: thus, while the students' and the English teachers' questionnaires were written in English, the specialized teachers' questionnaires, although including the same questions, were written in Romanian.

2. Results. Discussion of Results

The results obtained after collecting and analyzing the data are presented synthetically in tabulated form under four headings: 1st year undergraduate students, 2nd year undergraduate students, English teachers, specialized teachers. The figures in the tables represent the mean value of the responses associated with each item for each category of respondents.

The first question asked the respondents to evaluate the importance of skills and language-focused activities according to the four-point scale mentioned above. The mean values obtained, which can be seen in Table 1 below show a clear similarity of perception as far as the top place is concerned: 1st year students, 2nd year students and English teachers consider *speaking* the most important skill, with a mean value of 4 (the highest) in the case of language teachers, 3.8 in the responses of sophomore students and 3.76 in the case of freshmen. Unlike them, specialized teachers believe that *reading* should be the given the main weight in an English course and they allot this skill a very high mean value (4); in their view, the second most prominent place should be occupied by *writing*. Contrary to the other categories, professors teaching specialized subjects consider that *speaking* should be the least prominent skill in an English course and allot it a mean value of 3.0(6).

Table 1

Mean value of skills and language-focused activities according to their perceived importance

	1 st year students	2 nd year students	English teachers	Specialized teachers
1. reading	3.4	3.3	3	4
2. writing	3.5	3.44	2.(6)	3.(6)
3. listening	3.64	3.44	3	3.4
4. speaking	3.76	3.8	4	3.0(6)
5. translation	3.2	3.24	2.(6)	3.(3)
6. others (please specify)	-	-	-	-

Therefore, we witness a mismatch in the students' and language teachers' responses as compared to those of the specialized teachers: the first categories favor oral communication skills, while the last one favors written communication skills. It is clear that this mismatch comes from different views on the students' language needs: the learners, just like the language teachers think that oral communication is necessary both in social and professional contexts; as such, it should be the primary goal of an English course. In their view, the other skill responsible for oral communication, i.e. *listening*, occupies the second place from the point of

view of importance. Specialized teachers, on the other hand, seem to project their own needs (reading journal articles, writing scientific papers) onto their students. Translation occupies a low place in all responses: it has the lowest mean value in the students' and English teachers' responses and it occupies the last but one place in the case of the specialized teachers.

The second question, which includes 11 items, concerns the importance attributed to various aims of the speaking activities of an English course. As can be seen from Table 2, we witness again a similarity in the answers given by the freshmen, sophomore students and the language teachers as far as the top place is concerned. They consider that the most important aim in speaking is to convey "a clear, intelligible message when speaking". The mean values are quite close: 3. (6) in the case of English teachers, 3.58 in the case of 1st year students and 3. 52 for 2nd year students. The mean value of this aim in the responses given by specialized teachers is 3.7(3).

Table 2

Mean value of speaking aims according to their perceived importance

	1 st year students	2 nd year students	English teachers	Specialized teachers
1. conveying a clear, intelligible message when speaking	3.58	3.52	3.(6)	3.7(3)
2. speaking accurately	3.44	3.36	3	2.9(3)
3. speaking fluently	3.48	3.12	3	2.4
4. participating in classroom discussions	2.74	2.7	3.(6)	2.9(3)
5. speaking in informal daily life situations	3.12	3.06	3.(3)	2.9(3)
6. pronouncing words correctly	3.5	3.18	3.(3)	2.(6)
7. making presentations/ oral reports	2.94	2.84	3	3.8(6)
8. using a wide range of general vocabulary	3.18	3.2	3.(3)	2.2
9. using a wide range of technical vocabulary	3.24	2.84	2.(6)	2.4
10. participating in international interactions	3.04	2.68	2.(6)	2.9(3)
11. others (please specify)	-	-	-	-

Although it is in fact higher than the previous ones, the first item of the second question occupies only the second place in the responses of the specialized teachers; in their case, the top position is occupied by "making presentations/reports". Therefore, while specialized teachers have in view the longer-term, professional needs of the students, represented by participation in conferences or scientific sessions, the other categories of respondents seem to consider that the most important aim of speaking activities is to make oneself understood. As far as the lowest place is concerned, there are many variations if we are to compare the mean values of the different groups of respondents: thus, freshmen place "participating in classroom discussion" on the lowest position with a mean value of 2.74. Their view is totally different from that of the English teachers, who place class participation on first position together with transmitting "a clear, intelligible message when speaking." Sophomore students allot the lowest position to item 9 - "participating in international interactions". Strangely enough, some English language teachers seem to share this view; they also place on the lowest position item 10 - "using a wide range of technical vocabulary". The lowest mean value in the case of the specialized teachers' response is obtained by item 8 - "using a wide range of general vocabulary".

The third question refers to the relative importance attributed to various listening subskills. As shown in Table 3, all four categories of participants agree on the most important goal - that of "understanding instructions in English". The mean values are situated round 3. (6) for most groups of respondents, with the exception of sophomores, where the mean value is a little lower, i.e. 3.32, similar to item 1 - "understanding lectures/seminars in English".

Table 3

Mean value of listening aims according to their perceived importance

	1 st year students	2 nd year students	English teachers	Specialized teachers
1. understanding lectures/seminars in English	3.62	3.32	3	3.6
2. understanding instructions in English	3.68	3.32	3.(6)	3.(6)
3. understanding native speakers	3.36	3.3	3	2.8
4. understanding video and audio programs in English	3.54	3.3	3.(3)	3
5. others (please specify)	-	-	-	-

The same similarity can be noticed as far as the lowest place is concerned: for all groups of respondents, this place is occupied by item 3 – “understanding native speakers”. It seems that understanding native speakers of English is not regarded as an important aim by the respondents to this questionnaire. A strange thing is the low mean value attributed by the teachers of English to the item “understanding lectures/seminars in English” (the lowest place together with item 3).

Table 4 presents the mean value of writing aims according to their perceived importance in an English course.

Table 4

Mean value of writing aims according to their perceived importance

	1 st year students	2 nd year students	English teachers	Specialized teachers
1. using a wide range of general vocabulary	3.44	3.3	3.(3)	2.(6)
2. using a wide range of technical vocabulary	3.16	3.02	3	3.(3)
3. writing lab reports in English	2.9	2.68	2.(3)	2.9(3)
4. writing instructions in English	3.24	2.72	3.(3)	3.0(6)
5. taking notes in English	3.36	3.08	2.(6)	3.0(6)
6. writing essays	3.16	2.86	2.(3)	2.1(3)
7. writing research papers	2.94	2.64	2.(3)	3
8. translating technical and scientific texts	3.12	2.92	2.(6)	3.(3)
9. writing informal texts (e-mails etc.)	3.2	3.12	3.(6)	3.2(6)
10. writing a CV and application letters	3.7	3.5	3.(6)	3.2
11. writing summaries	2.96	2.84	2.(6)	2.9(3)
12. using appropriate connectors (linking words)	3.38	3.2	3.(6)	2.8(6)
13. mechanics (spelling, punctuation, format)	3.42	3.08	2.(6)	2.8(6)
14. others (please specify)	-	-	-	-

We notice again a similar option for the top place as far as freshmen, sophomore students and English teachers are concerned, represented by writing a CV and application letters, with a mean value varying from

3.7 (freshmen) to 3.5 (sophomores). It is interesting to observe that in the case of language teachers, the top place is shared with another aim, i.e. "writing informal texts."

The specialized teachers' option differs again from that of the other categories of respondents. The highest mean value, 3. (3) is obtained by items 2 – "using a wide range of technical vocabulary" and 9 – "translating technical and scientific texts". This discrepancy lies in the different perception regarding the students' needs – preparing for a career by writing job application documents vs. preparing one's graduation exam.

In what concerns the lowest mean values, we witness some differences, but also similarities across the four groups of respondents. In the case of English teachers, the lowest mean value – 2.(3) - is shared by three writing aims: "writing lab reports in English" (which also occupies the lowest position in the case of 1st year students), "writing essays" (which also occupies the lowest position in the case of specialized teachers) and "writing research papers" (also considered the least important aim by 2nd year students).

Table 5 displays the mean value of reading aims according to their perceived importance in an English course.

Table 5

Mean value of reading aims according to their perceived importance

	1 st year students	2 nd year students	English teachers	Specialized teachers
1. reading textbooks	3.32	3.08	2.(6)	3.(6)
2. reading scientific articles	3.22	2.86	2.(6)	3.(6)
3. reading works of fiction in English	2.9	2.72	2	2.(3)
4. reading instruction booklets/user manuals	3.12	2.8	2.(6)	3.2
5. reading reports	3.02	2.74	3	3.4
6. reading texts from the internet	3.4	3.32	3.(3)	2.7(3)
7. reading graphs, charts	3.04	3.46	3	2.7(3)
8. reading newspaper articles	2.74	2.8	3.(3)	2.(3)
9. reading for general information	3.38	3.28	4	3
10. reading for specific information	3.56	3.32	4	3
11. others (please specify)	-	-	-	-

As can be seen from Table 5, there are differences among the four groups of respondents as far as their perception regarding the importance of various reading aims is concerned. Thus, specialized teachers place two reading aims on top – "reading textbooks" and "reading scientific articles", each with a mean value of 3. (6). Their perception of the students' needs refers mainly to the students' academic short and long-term needs and may also involve a projection of the specialized teachers' own needs. The English language teachers allot the highest mean value (4) to two reading subskills: "reading for general information" and "reading for specific information". The latter subskill also occupies the top position in the perception of 1st year students with the mean value 3.56, while 2nd year students consider that the most important reading aim of an English course should be that of "reading graphs, charts". This preference might be accounted for by the fact that one of the recent topics of their English course was devoted to the description of data presented in graphic form.

There is a great similarity in the participants' perception regarding the least important reading aims, which refer mainly to the reading of texts belonging to the literary or journalistic style (items 3 and 8). Thus, specialized teachers attribute the lowest mean value to items 3 ("reading works of fiction in English") and 8 ("reading newspaper articles"), both with a mean value of 2.(3); sophomore students and language teachers attribute the bottom place to item 3 ("reading works of fiction in English"), while freshmen give the lowest place to item 8 ("reading newspaper articles").

Conclusions

The paper focused on the students' English language needs, as perceived by four categories of respondents: freshmen and sophomore students, specialized teachers and English teachers. Data were obtained by means of a questionnaire administered to each of the respondent groups mentioned above. The mean value of each response was calculated for each group in the study and was presented in tabulated form.

The results generally display a similarity as far as the perception of students and English teachers is concerned and a contrast between the students' and the specialized teachers' perception. These similarities and differences were discussed and accounted for by the author throughout the study. The results obtained can, should and will be taken into account to design a new English course for electronics engineering students.

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Prezentat la 14.04/2019