

Needs analysis in ESP context: A case study of People's Police University students

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the learning needs of students enrolled in an ESP course at the People's Police University. A qualitative case study research design was employed through in-depth interviews with 20 undergraduate students. The findings show that the students perceived reading and writing as critical English skills needed for their future profession. The need to thoroughly understand the specialized subject matter in both English and Vietnamese was also reported. Also, the students wished to gain access to extra resources to assist their studying of ESP courses. The students experienced difficulties in mastering technical terms and specialization and comprehending online resources in English. Implications are made based on the findings. The study results would serve as a reference for language program managers, course designers, and English language instructors to enhance ESP courses' quality in Vietnamese universities.

1. Introduction

English plays an essential role as a major language for international communication in several domains, including science, medicine, commerce, banking and finance, and the military. In language education, "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP), a subset of language education, was developed to meet learners' language requirements for their jobs. ESP supports graduates with job seeking, work performance, and promotion in their respective professions (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Regarding language education in the police forces, English plays a significant role due to the government's open-door policies, which have attracted many foreigners to Vietnam for tourism, education, and business purposes. ESP is one of the most valuable tools for graduates working in the police forces to handle cases involving foreigners, examine English documents relating to criminals, and especially cooperate with foreign counterparts to deal with international matters.

ESP is regarded as one of the most indispensable components of the undergraduate training programs at People's Police University. ESP courses at the university are made compulsory. Students have to enroll in three English courses, including two General English courses and an ESP course concerning their majors. The English division at the university offers several ESP courses, including "English for Law Enforcement", "English for Investigators", "English for Forensic Scientists", "English for Traffic Police" and "English for Detectives and Surveillance Officers".

Course books for the ESP courses in the university are either purchased from foreign publishers or written by lecturers at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Informatics. The 'English for Investigators' coursebook consists of 10 units in the field of the criminal investigation. Each unit has three parts. The first part comprises reading passages that provide terms and specialization knowledge followed by comprehension questions. The second part, further practice, aims to elaborate and expand the topic. The last part, the presentation, provides opportunities for students to practice speaking on topics related to the readings.

ESP courses at the People's Police University have been delivered to the undergraduates in the university for several years without any investigation of students' needs as advised by language experts. Without needs analysis, it is difficult for the ESP program managers, course designers, and English teachers to know if these courses are relevant and if they need to be modified to meet the language learning goals. Needs analysis conducted on students to determine their learning needs is deemed important to reassess the quality of a language training program. A thorough understanding of the learners' needs can contribute to successful course planning and learning outcomes.

With the purpose of exploring students' needs of ESP courses, the study was conducted among the undergraduates enrolled in the 'English for Investigators' course at the People's Police University. Accordingly, two research questions are posed as follows.

- What are the specific English language-related needs of the People's Police University students?
- What are the difficulties facing students during the course of English for Investigators?

2. Literature review

2.1. English for specific purposes

With the increasing demand for international communication across countries in significant fields such as business, science, and technology, ESP has been popular in language education for decades. ESP refers to the teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language intending to enable students to use English in a particular domain. ESP has now expanded to cover other subsidiary fields of English such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), and English for Sociocultural Purposes (ESCP).

ESP courses are designed to teach the language and communication skills that learners can utilize effectively in their future professions (Basturkmen, 2010). ESP is "an approach rather than a product to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on learner's reason for learning" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19). As pointed out by Hutchinson and Waters, the starting point in determining an appropriate curriculum for an ESP course is identifying the learners' needs. Since ESP courses differ in students' professions and level of language proficiency, selection of skills, topics, situations and functions, and language of instruction, it is important to conduct needs analysis among students to design courses to meet the requirements language learning goals.

2.2. Needs analysis

The term "analysis of needs" first appeared in the 1920s in West Bengal, a province of India. Michael West introduced the concept of "needs" to cover what learners would be required to do with the foreign language in the target situation and how learners might best master the

language during the period learning (Rahman, 2012). Since the ESP course is developed regarding the needs of the learners, analyzing needs of learners before designing an ESP course is considered the critical stage. In language teaching, needs analysis is regarded as the cornerstone of ESP (Rahman, 2012). Therefore, needs analysis is a necessary first step for specific purposes of language teaching. In addition, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 37) also argue that “any language course should be based on needs analysis,” while Hamp-Lyons (2001) opines that needs analysis is a fundamental component to an ESP approach in term of course design.

Dudley-Evans and John (2011) define needs analysis as “the process of establishing the what and how of a course”. They argue that “needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching-needs assessment nor to Language for Specific Purpose and thus to ESP”. They also point to three aims of needs analysis as follows: (1) learners as people, as language users, and as language learners, (2) how language learning and skills learning can be maximized for a given learner group and (3) the target situations and learning environment.

2.3. Working framework for the current study

Needs analysis is viewed as a preliminary stage of ESP instructional design. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), learning needs analysis relates to the learners’ perspectives, including their learning experience, cultural information, reasons, expectations, and attitudes to English. The learning needs analysis framework about the identity and purpose of the learning, the place and time of the study, the people the learners will interact with, or the level of the proficiency required comprises of the following guiding questions:

- Why are the learners taking the course?
- How do the learners learn?
- What resources are available?
- Who are the learners?
- When /Where will the course take place?

(Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 63)

The current study adopted the framework by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) due to the following reasons. Firstly, the framework provides a list of questions for learning needs analysis, which is valuable and suitable for developing the research instruments. Secondly, the framework suits the research purpose, which explores the learning needs of undergraduates. The framework is providing detailed questions for investigating the needs of the ‘English for Investigators’ course and thus would address the aim and objectives of the study.

3. The study

This study adopted a case study as a research approach to explore in detail a particular instance of ESP courses at the People’s Police University. The case study explores the case in its normally naturalistic and usual context. It involves collecting in-depth data to support thick description (Taber, 2014). A case can be studied as a broader class’s representative, and thus, its findings can be used to generalize to a wider population. In this study, the ‘English for Investigators’ course was selected as an example to represent other ESP courses at the university whose students are homogeneous in terms of English proficiency level and professional training.

3.1. Research setting and participants

The study was conducted among the third-year students enrolled in the ‘English for

Investigators' course at People's Police University. Participants included 20 students who majored in the criminal investigation. The students aged between 21 and 25. Before university, they all had learned English as a mandatory subject at secondary school for at least six years.

3.2. Research instrument

Semi-structured interview questions were designed based on the needs analysis framework developed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The interviews were conducted by the researchers and a colleague with 20 years of experience in ESP teaching. The interviews posed eight questions that focus on two major aspects (1) students' perceptions of the learning needs in relation to the ESP course they enrolled in, (2) the difficulties facing students in the ESP course (see Appendix 1).

All the interview questions were open-ended so that the researchers could explore the interviewees' personal learning experiences in depth. Furthermore, to create an informal and friendly atmosphere for the students to share their views and ensure clarity and accuracy of their answers, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. Each interview lasted for 10 minutes.

3.3. Sampling and data collection procedures

To obtain sufficient numbers of participants for interviews, the researcher considered purposeful sampling as the most suitable technique. The purposeful sampling technique is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This technique involves choosing samples conveniently available to the researcher and knowledgeable about the topic under investigation. Also, this technique is time-saving and cost-effective given the limited resources facing the researchers during the Covid-19 pandemic time.

The study was conducted in May 2020. After obtaining permission from the university managers and head of the ESP division, the researchers approached the students enrolled in the 'English for Investigators' course via email and invited them to participate in the study. A total of 20 students responded to the email and were invited to take part in the interviews. However, due to the impacts of Covid-19 in 2020, which did not allow social gatherings and to ensure convenience among participants, most interviews were conducted online through Zoom Meeting, and a few of them were done via video calls.

Before the interviews, the participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded for research purposes only. The interview questions were given to the students beforehand to review their experience with the ESP course.

3.4. Data analysis

The interview recording was transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using content analysis. Firstly, the researchers read the transcription carefully to grasp the overall meaning. Then, the data were categorized into concepts and themes in response to the research questions. All participants' names were changed to pseudonyms 'S' and numbered 01 to 20, according to the order of their interviews to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Finding and discussion

4.1. Research question 1: What are specific English language-related needs of the People's Police University students?

From the in-depth interviews, the findings show that the students wished to improve their overall English skills to communicate well in their future criminal investigation jobs. However,

the majority of students wanted to improve their reading and writing skills the most because they thought these two skills would be utilized more frequently in their future jobs. Some responses are as follows:

"I want to improve in writing skills because my writing is very bad". (S2)

"I want to improve my reading skills because I guess that I may have to deal with a lot of documents about the criminal investigation". (S6, S7)

In addition, most students expected to master more technical terms to deal with documents and materials concerning the criminal investigation. They expressed their intention below:

"I wish I could read English documents relating to the investigation". (S1)

"I want to understand English text about the criminal investigation". (S6)

Some of them wanted to be able to accumulate professional knowledge for future jobs:

"I wanted to gain enough knowledge and skills to deal with some real-life cases relating to the criminal investigation, not English only". (S13)

In this regard, some students wished to enhance professional knowledge in Vietnamese and English, which they considered necessary for their careers as investigators. One of the students shared his thoughts:

"For me, it is necessary to grasp the basic knowledge of the field first. I mean we have to understand the subject matter thoroughly in Vietnamese, then we could explain in English more easily and effectively". (S10)

Most students agreed that mastering technical terms was important. Not being able to understand technical terms may hinder their ability to communicate in English. One of the students expressed her opinion as follows:

"I think understanding professional terms in this course may help me improve my communicative skills, I also could comprehend the reading text and improve my speaking skills in criminal investigation once I fully understand technical terms". (S4)

Some students indicated being able to obtain extra resources was crucial. One of the undergraduates was concerned in this regard:

"Looking for additional resources to understand the subject matter is necessary because the coursebook provides very brief readings which do not have enough background information. Some content in the book is difficult to understand". (S3)

4.2. Research question 2: What are the difficulties facing students during the English course of Investigators?

During the course, the students experienced several challenges. Some of them pointed to a heavy load of technical terms as a significant problem.

"There are a lot of technical terms in the investigation area, and they are hard to understand. The lessons seem to relate to one another and the whole system and working principles of investigation. If we don't understand some key terms, then we might not understand the rest". (S20)

"I have spent a lot of time and effort on researching the working principles, but I still did not understand much of it". (S9)

The students claimed to lack background knowledge of the investigation field to understand English reading texts thoroughly. For example, when they read about the working principle of arrest, they could not interpret the concept maps in speaking and writing.

"I cannot interpret the concept maps in writing and speaking because they include a sequence of activities illustrated in diagrams without any text". (S8)

The students claimed that they had to look up extra resources online to understand the subject matters. However, most resources online were available in English which some students had difficulties reading the Internet sources.

"There are many websites written in English about my field, but I cannot understand much when reading them". (S3)

"Some words seem not to have their equivalence in Vietnamese. I have to learn some definitions in English by heart which is tough". (S6)

Some students found it hard to explain the working principles of the elements of some topics. As a result, they turned to YouTube as an effective and necessary source of reference. However, in some cases, YouTube channels were neither reliable nor relevant to their major and their level of English proficiency. In addition, resources in Vietnamese in their field are limited.

"The available resource meets about half of my learning needs. I need more for my career as an investigator". (S4)

Most students used Google search engine to look up terminology in both English and Vietnamese.

"I did not have a reliable source, but I used Google quite often. I searched for the information and found Google helpful". (S12)

To master professional knowledge, the students also shared some of their strategies such as referring to the glossary, reading materials in Vietnamese before reading materials in English, watching videos about criminal investigation, using concept mapping to review the lessons after class.

"I used to use concept mapping to summarize and organize the information about the lessons I had learned in class, and I found it was effective". (S11)

"I used videos on YouTube to improve my listening skills and understanding of English lessons in my class". (S16)

The results show that reading and writing skills were perceived as the very essential English skills for People's Police University students. This finding echoes the results of previous studies (Labassi, 2009; Rais, 2007). The finding contrasts with Basturkmen's (1998) study, which reports that writing was not a very important skill for ESP students. The variations in the results about students' perception of the importance of language skills can be accounted for by the ESP courses at People's Police University, which tend to be language-based, where more focus is on reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Students indicated the need to master both English and content simultaneously and demanded additional resources to meet their language learning needs. The findings align with the literature, which emphasizes the balance of language learning and content with a demonstrable discourse purpose.

5. Implications and conclusions

Based on the findings, a number of recommendations were made to enhance the ESP courses for People's Police University students. A highly structured ESP course focusing on

reading and writing skills related to students' discipline should be framed. If based on a pervasive and comprehensive 'needs analysis', it is expected to facilitate the process of mastering both English and subject matter as well as motivate students to become more actively involved in the process of learning. A needs-based syllabus is expected to accommodate ESP needs regarding skills at the macro and micro levels. However, worthy of note is that needs analysis is not a process administered once and for all at the beginning of the course; rather, it should be an ongoing process repeated during the operation of any specific ESP program.

Secondly, course materials should incorporate (a) task understanding, (b) the use of appropriate language skills, and (c) a means to access some aspect of the "real world" (Freiermuth, 2001). These would enhance students' motivation for language learning. In People's Police University, course materials should be modified and simplified to suit students' levels of English proficiency. Furthermore, additional supplementary materials should be developed and adopted alongside the coursebook to assist students with their comprehension of subject matters and their development of writing skills. For example, a glossary of the technical terms in investigation discipline could be added to the coursebook to ease students' comprehension of the reading passages and support their mastery of technical terms. In addition, extra resources should be made available to support students' learning of ESP courses, such as access to relevant websites, specialization dictionaries, mobile phone apps for learning vocabulary, and extra readings on real-life cases on a criminal investigation in both Vietnamese and English.

The findings can serve as a reference for course designers and language instructors to improve the quality of ESP courses at the People's Police University and other institutions. In other words, course instructors, syllabus designers, and ESP program managers have to join efforts and find solutions that address the students' needs, including language needs, learning needs, and field-specific needs, among many others.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions

No	Framework	Questions	Theme
1	Who are the learners?	Please introduce yourself (name, age, your school year)	Information about the participants
2	What do the learners already know about the subjects?	Before the course, what knowledge and skills relating to criminal investigation you have already known?	Learners' prior knowledge of criminal investigation
3	What do learners think they will achieve?	What did you expect to achieve from the course at the beginning of the course?	Their expectation for the course
4	What is their attitude towards the ESP course?	What is your attitude towards the course? Do you think that the course has provided you with necessary skills and knowledge for the later courses and for your future careers?	Learners' attitude towards the course
5	What resources are available?	In the process of learning English for Investigators, what resources of information did you often use?	Available resources
6	What are their interests?	Which part did you find the most interesting in the course, and you desired to develop more in the future? Why?	Their interest
7	What are their difficulties?	Which part did you find the most difficult in the course? Why?	Their difficulties
8	Suggestions	What is your suggestion for self-study?	Suggestions

