



IMPROVING ESP SYLLABI BY STUDYING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL STUDIES

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Abstract: *In Bulgaria, ESP syllabi are designed following the state policy on higher education, employers' feedback, academic autonomy and academia's observations and good practices. There are not many studies focused on the research of students' needs to show what learners think of ESP courses and how they perceive the importance of their needs within their education for a successful career. In addition, there is insufficient data about the particular needs of modern learners in terms of their functional communicative competence to reveal the most important elements within the four skills to hone as well as the most difficult ones to acquire in order to ensure students' satisfaction with the quality of their education.*

This is the rationale behind a university project on the ESP needs of students of economics and political studies that the author is carrying out. It involves a comprehensive study based on the research of student perceptions and opinions and includes respondents from Bulgaria and abroad. The study takes into account the specific features of the new generations of learners and the current global situation of intertwining virtual reality with real life. It was further complemented by a survey of lecturers' observations. The report presents the project findings and provides recommendations for the improvement of academic ESP syllabi to enhance course effectiveness and learner achievements.

INTRODUCTION

ESP courses are part of the academic curricula worldwide because English has been the lingua franca for decades and, hence, a graduate's functional communicative competence in English enables them to succeed in their career path as full-fledged team members in multinational organisations or in organisations dealing with foreign partners and customers. It is, therefore, essential for higher education institutions (HIEs) to offer ESP courses that adequately meet the needs of the key stakeholders – students and employers. The way to achieve this goal is to study the needs of the stakeholders with a focus on students so that on their graduation they have all qualifications required to join an organisation and function as competent experts who are fluent in the professional communication in English.

Depending on their profile and the specific features of their particular programmes, universities design their ESP courses following different principles. Thus, for instance, there are academic courses that are short – 30 hours per academic year focused on specialised

vocabulary or 60 hours per academic year focused on the basics of specialised language and discourse, and academic courses that are two years long and of 90-150 hours per year with a written and oral state exam at the end of the second year. The latter are aimed at honing the four skills by improving all components of communicative competence in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) of the EU. This is also the type of ESP courses offered at the University of National and World Economy.

Taking into account the rapid socio-economic and scientific development of the world reflecting in the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and more intensive communication with foreigners on the one hand and the lack of sufficient research on the current needs of the students majoring in economics and political studies, on the other, ESP needs analysis in the tertiary sector becomes a must for the HEIs whose mission is to educate following contemporary trends and meet the needs of the business and society in a knowledge-based economy.

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: WHY SPECIFIC?

Unlike English for General Purposes or General English (GE), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is aimed at meeting specific needs of the learners with relation to their career realisation in a particular sector of the economy. According to Wright, it is “that type of language learning which has its focus on all aspects of language pertaining to a particular field of human activity” [1]. Widdowson expanded this definition by underlying the specific nature of ESP courses: “ESP is simply a matter of describing a particular area of language and then using this description as a course specification to impart to learners the necessary restricted competence with this particular area” [2]. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) stated that ESP is not a product, but rather an approach because it is based on a learner’s need and analysing this need results in making decisions about satisfying this need, i.e. learning the language needed. Hence “ESP is an approach to language teaching which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” [3]. (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 19)

ESP can be defined using absolute and variable characteristics like Strevens who emphasized the pre-defined methodology and the specific skills to hone [4], and Dudley-Evans and St. John [5]. The latter expanded Strevens’ definition so that the scope of ESP included high school students and there was the assumption that ESP may not be related to a specific discipline:

“Absolute characteristics: ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner, makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines that it serves, is centred on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable characteristics: ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines, may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English” [5].

Based on the target situation and needs, it is possible to distinguish three types of ESP: English as a restricted language; English for academic and occupational purposes; and English with specific topics [6]. In addition to this classification, in 1983, Carter elaborated further by characterizing ESP courses in comparison with GE ones and outlining their major features: authentic material, purpose-related orientation and self-direction [6]. Thus, an ESP course is expected to provide for authenticity by using appropriate authentic materials, creating an authentic environment and facilitating learner’s cultivation of an authentic response. Furthermore, real-life activities must be included in the educational process such as project work, simulations, case studies, etc. Finally, having completed the course, students have to be able to guide their further language education by assessing their own particular

needs, being able to decide how to improve their functional communicative competence or what to do in order to solve a problem related to ESP at work.

Therefore, the ESP practitioner should be able to design a syllabus facilitating the acquisition of the required ESP knowledge and skills by implementing the methods and techniques that would best suit the goals of the particular ESP course and would contribute to learners' optimised performance and achievements based on enhanced engagement and motivation.

ACADEMIC ESP SYLLABI

In the ELT community to which ESP practitioners belong, there is a discussion related to the notions of syllabus and curriculum. In 1984, Candlin suggested that curriculum is focused on the general characteristics of a course such as language learning and purpose, experience, evaluation, teacher-learner relationship [7]. Syllabi are focused on the accounts and records of classwork - what happens in the classroom and how teachers and learners follow the curriculum. Nunan shared this view and proposed a slightly specified definition according to which "curriculum is concerned with planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programs. Syllabus, on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content" [8].

Three major views were formed in terms of curriculum and syllabus depending on scholars' approaches. Thus, according to Stern, three schools became popular: the Lancaster School represented by Candlin and Breen, the London School represented by Widdowson and Brumfit and the Toronto School represented by Allen [9]. The Lancaster School disapprove of fixed syllabi and think that syllabi must be negotiable and open, while the London School find this unrealistic with Widdowson proposing a structural syllabus combined with a communicative methodology. Yalden [rf. 9], who belongs to the Toronto School, proposed a way to make a compromise and bridge these two positions by assuming that the learner may participate in curriculum development. For her, designing a syllabus is a primary teacher task and a syllabus must present the teacher's view in terms of course objectives and content. Allen was more focused on developing a curriculum based on sound theory and usefulness in practice. He sees syllabus as an indispensable part of teaching [rf. 9].

In Bulgaria, the term "curriculum" is applied to overall detailed specialty programmes whereas "syllabus" is used for a particular course in a discipline that is part of the curriculum. Until last year, syllabi covered a whole course even when it was two years long like the course in foreign languages. Now, in such cases, a syllabus is prepared for each year of a programme. Syllabi are designed by academic faculty following a professional discussion along with university requirements. The circumstances taken into account are the state policy on higher education and education (higher education being the next stage after school education); employers' feedback received at discussions, round tables, council meetings; academic autonomy being at the heart of an HEI policy, academia's observations and good practices. Ideally, needs analysis must be carried out in order to establish students' perceptions and attitudes and, hence, improve syllabi effectiveness. However, locally, there is insufficient research on learners which results in lower motivation and learner results that are not as good as desirable by stakeholders. Another point to consider is the influence of the new generations' specific features. The new generations of learners can be characterised by the following traits that require changes to current syllabi: interest in new ICT technologies – as a matter of fact, these young people have grown up with a host of devices and ways of communication that, in turn, have led to a different kind of perception, learning and communicating; more time spent in virtual reality which results in the need to implement different teaching and learning strategies; greater interest in the reasons why they study a particular content or use certain materials and how they are assessed; greater self-confidence

often misleading them about the actual level of their general and functional communicative competence in English [10].

ESP NEEDS ANALYSIS AT UNWE

To study the needs of the modern generations of learners at UNWE, a university project was started aimed to collect data that would allow to establish learners' real needs, attitudes and perceptions with regard to their needs, respectively, expectations – needs (necessities), wants, lacks, motivation to study and engagement in the educational process. The project includes a survey of students that was conducted at two stages. The first stage included UNWE students while the second one included students from local and foreign universities with a profile similar to that of UNWE. In addition, to provide for an in-depth investigation and during the first stage, a survey was carried out with lecturers from UNWE who teach language and/or subject. The students who responded were from Bulgaria, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Lithuania, Latvia, Brazil, China, Romania, Spain and Portugal with the breakdown as follows: students – 1106 altogether of whom 939 from Bulgaria (372 from six local HEIs and 567 from UNWE) and 167 foreigners; lecturers – 32 from UNWE. The survey was conducted in the form of an online personal structured interview with a questionnaire of 28 questions, both open and multiple-choice ones with a 5-point Likert scale where applicable. Furthermore, the collected data was supposed to contribute to the formulation of key criteria for recommendations on the updating and optimisation of the academic ESP courses for economics and political studies by adjusting and improving syllabi. Data processing has not finished yet, so data from the surveyed Bulgarian students is presented and analysed in the paper. Nevertheless, sufficient information was gathered to reveal insights into the current situation in the teaching and learning of academic ESP (for detailed results see [10] and [11]).

According to survey results, students' expectations (needs and wants) are mostly related to specialised speaking (58,1% “Strongly agree”, 22,2% “Agree”), terminology (53,7 % “Strongly agree”, 26,5 % “Agree”), reading (52,4 % “Strongly agree”, 28,5 % “Agree”) and written communication (51,7 % “Strongly agree”, 29,2 % “Agree”). A correlation was established between course hours and motivation – the more the hours, the greater the motivation to acquire specialised knowledge and skills. If the number of hours is perceived insufficient, then students find it pointless to make efforts to work in ESP classes. Even though in class students give ideas and recommendations as to how to vary work and make it more interesting, the survey showed that, in fact, they feel a little anxious when it comes to participating in course content creation and optimisation as well as in developing and introducing interactive tasks based on modern technologies and team cooperation. It might be due to the insufficient learner awareness of the relation between the material taught and real-life professional situations or to peer relations. However, they are more motivated to work and show greater engagement when there is more intense interaction and use of social media, the Internet and modern means of communication, teaching and learning. Involved in the creation or co-creation of interactive tasks and in suggesting topics and activities relevant to the course and based on their personal imagination and inventiveness can lead to synergy and enhanced productivity that facilitate ESP acquisition and improve learner achievements. Reflected in syllabi, these tasks, ideas and activities can provide for the success of each ESP course and each group of learners in the future.

The details related to the perceptions of the most important elements within each key skill (reading, writing, listening and speaking) indicate that discussions should be held with students with regard to the awareness of the contribution of each element or subskill within a key skill. In addition and accordingly, corrections in course parameters should be made to cope with this problem and improve overall course effectiveness. For instance, analysing the

results from the survey, it became clear that in terms of specialised writing students find the skills for writing business letters and presenting positions the most important while report writing, summarising and describing trends are perceived as the least important subskills. This is a discrepancy because it is not possible to write a business letter without being able to present one's position or summarise arguments, other people's positions and facts. Furthermore, report writing is often based on trends analysis and graphs description and is an essential part of an economist's or manager's job. Based on the analysed data in reports and graphs, an expert prepares presentations. Similar discrepancies are observed with the rest of the key skills, though productive ones stand out. These findings can be reflected in syllabi adjustments with regard to topics, interdisciplinary approaches, hours breakdown, teaching methods and strategies.

According to the respondents, the most difficult specialised skills to acquire are the productive skills of speaking (42,4 % if the percentage is 100% and 59 % if the percentage is more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one answer to the question, 42,4 % / 59 %) and writing (26,7 % /37 %). If the data is added about the perceived needs for mastery of the grammatical constructions typical of communication in respondent's professional field (32,9 % /61,5 %), confident use of different stylistic registers depending on the communicative situation (31,5 % / 58,8 %) and knowledge of specialised terminology for the profession - terms, idioms, collocations (35,6 % /66,4 %), then it can be inferred that more hours are needed for ESP acquisition, more tasks and activities involving production should be introduced based on a careful selection of authentic materials and situations that provide for satisfaction of student needs and cope with their lacks in a way that motivates learners to make conscious efforts in ESP classes and for extracurricular activities. Therefore, reorganising course syllabi by making changes to content, methods and hours and assessing performance based on the interactive work and interdisciplinary approach can result in optimised course effectiveness and student achievements, thus leading to higher educational quality satisfying in turn all stakeholders, including employers, academic managers and society.

CONCLUSION

Based on the survey results and considering the key parameters of ESP syllabi in Bulgaria – time, course content and objectives, teaching methods, extracurricular activities, assessment, qualification goals and literature, the following implications should be considered in order to enhance ESP course effectiveness and learner achievements: discussions should be held with academic management in order to keep and increase them instead of reducing them, which has been a negative trend in the country for almost two decades; student participation in content creation should be enhanced to stimulate learner motivation for ESP acquisition along with the revision and updating of topics based on interdisciplinarity; modern media should be used widely in teaching and learning thus providing for improved performance; team work with teacher and peers should be encouraged so that synergy is achieved and the improvements in course syllabi are fully taken advantage of. The benefits of the needs analysis and the introduction of the changes and adjustments to course syllabi should be directed to teachers in terms of fostering their cooperation in the compiling and exchange of materials (creating materials banks) and developing guidelines facilitating teacher work.

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ПОДОБРЯВАНЕ НА УЧЕБНИТЕ ПРОГРАМИ ЗА АСЦ ЧРЕЗ ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ НА ПОТРЕБНОСТИТЕ НА СТУДЕНТИТЕ ПО ИКОНОМИКА И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИ НАУКИ

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Ключови думи: АСЦ, анализ на потребностите, анализ на потребностите от АСЦ, курсове по АСЦ за икономика, курсове по АСЦ за политически науки, изследвания в областта на АСЦ

Резюме: В България програмите на курсовете по английски език за специални цели (АСЦ) се разработват при отчитането на държавната политика във висшето образование, изискванията на работодателите за квалификацията на подготвяните кадри, академичната автономия, както и наблюденията и добрите практики на преподавателите. Липсват достатъчно изследвания за проучване нуждите на студентите, с които да се установи какво мислят обучаемите за курсовете специализиран език и как оценяват важността на потребностите си от тези курсове

в рамките на своето обучение за бъдеща успешна кариера. Освен това, няма достатъчно данни относно конкретните нужди на съвременните учащи по отношение на тяхната функционална комуникативна компетентност с подробна информация за усвояването и усъвършенстването на най-важните компоненти за всяко от четирите основни умения, както и за тези, които се възприемат като най-трудни за придобиване. Тази липса не позволява постигането на максимална удовлетвореност на студентите от качеството на образованието им.

Тези основания доведоха до започването на проект за анализ на потребностите на студентите по икономика и обществено-политически науки от английски език за специални цели. Проектът се осъществява от авторката и включва задълбочено изследване нагласите и мненията на студентите у нас и в чужбина. Проучването взема под внимание особеностите на новите поколения обучаеми, както и настоящата световна тенденция за преплитане на виртуалната реалност с реалния живот. За по-голяма пълнота на изследването е проведена и анкета с преподаватели. Така се постига по-висока степен на информативност въз основа на наблюденията им. Докладът представя резултатите от проекта и включва препоръки за усъвършенстване на академичните учебни програми по английски език за специални цели с оглед осигуряването на по-голяма ефективност на курса и по-добри резултати на обучаемите.