Needs Analysis for Language Course Design: A Holistic Approach to ESP

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An amazing group of authors collaborated to write Needs Analysis for Language course Design. Three of them are from Finland: Marjatta Huhta from Helsinki Metropolia University who have published many reports in language and communication needs in business. Esko Johnson from Centria University whose research interests include teacher/professional growth, intercultural communication and learning, online teaching, foreign language literacy and language program evaluation. Heikki Tulkki who currently works as the Head of Languages at the Finnish Adult Education Centre in Helsinki. Finally, Karin Vogt from Germany, who is a fully trained teacher with several years of teaching experience.

One of the biggest challenges that novice and experienced language teachers encounter in their workplace is that of having to design an efficient course which suits the learners' profession needs effectively. There are many restraints that affect the process of course design such as the need of preparation time, the lack of experience and the social and professional. Without a coherent analytical framework, even professional and experienced teachers wouldn't be able to achieve this challenge. In response to that issue, Huhta, Vogt, Johnson and Tulkki offer in their book Needs Analysis for Language Course Design an evidence-based approach to needs analysis using the Common European Framework (CEF) professional profile as an instrument. It is a practical manual that builds on past models of needs analysis to create an inclusive model for identifying and dealing with the requirements of the complex discourse of the modern workplace. The book's audience is not restricted to new language teachers. The analytical framework presented in this book will help experienced teachers and course designers to make the essential identifications and use them to outline that foundation for the design of professionally oriented courses and learning activities.

In the comprehensive account of the CEF Professional Profile Project that pervades in this book, Chapter one explains that evidence-based needs analysis provides a solid foundation for course design in the field of ESP and describes the characteristics of an effective need analysis. A need analysis should identify the communicative tasks and the discourse that learners have to practice in order to function in their profession. This identification should consider multiple perspectives ranging from the individual learner and his/her teacher, through to the HR developer and institutional administrators as well as the need of society in general. When developing a curriculum for an ESP course, the needs resulting from the different perspectives should be prioritized and balanced to ensure a successful curriculum development.

Furthermore, this chapter advocates the use of a balanced, evidence-based needs inquiry: a triangulation of sources and methods to achieve high-quality data and inferences to obtain a contextualized description of professional languages skills and types of discourse. This kind of balanced, evidence-based needs analysis has been the goal of the needs analysts of the CEF Professional Profile. They have produced need analysis which are particularly relevant to communicating in a foreign or a second language through the application of
categories adopted from the action-oriented approach of the CEFR. The CEF Professional Profile provides micro analytical techniques that strong in perspective and details.

In chapter two, the authors suggest the need of shifting the focus of our current and future professional teaching in two ways. Firstly, the focus of ESP should be altered from foreign language education to training in communication for professional purposes. These purposes will be defined by the needs and demands of the specific workplace context. ESP teachers can be aware of the most relevant communication situations through constructing a substantial description in the needs analysis. The CEF professional profile offers a framework for just such a thick description. Secondly, ESP should consider the differences in the discourse communities of each profession. To illustrate, the authors suggest a shift from the idea of an English language which is particular to a specific purpose to the idea of Language and communication for professional purposes. The CEF Professional Profile provides teachers with extensive knowledge on the communication situations of the different professions by describing their discourse communities and their communicative events.

In chapter three, the authors present a model of a completed CEF Professional Profile based on a study of mechanical engineers in Finland. Furthermore, they display practical method for applying the information from the profile to course planning. The profile consists of six parts which present an overview of the mechanical engineering field. Each part gives a gradually more detailed description of the professional language and communication found in that field.

In chapter four, the authors demonstrate a practical application of Professional Profile to course design and the development of practical classroom activities, using the examples of mechanical engineers in Finland, built on foreign language need analysis. The learning activities are sequenced into six groups: (1) addressing participant communication needs; (2) strengthening professional communication identity; (3) contributing to knowledge of the professional field; (4) raising awareness of professional genres; (5) consolidating one-to-one routine communication exchanges; and (6) making use of complex simulations to mirror authentic workplace communication.

In the final chapter, the authors give guidelines for creating Professional Profile that involves five basic steps; (1) considering the depth and coverage of your profile; (2) defining the target group; (3) collecting data; (4) processing the data for the profile; and (5) applying the profile.

The professional profile provides answer to the question of what has to be taught and it makes the teacher's job of designing the course syllabus much easier. To conclude, the authors would like to highlight once again the importance of needs analysis prior to course design in ESP.

After we read the book, we have found it very helpful for novice, experienced ESP teachers as well as workplace communication researchers who will find the holistic approach very beneficial for establishing a well-informed basis for their work. The Common European Framework presented in this book provides a practical manual on conducting a needs analysis in modern enterprises. Moreover, it gives detailed instructions on how to apply this framework on a particular field giving the field of mechanical engineering as a sample. This book solves the problem of the limited resources, practices and values that most ESP teachers encounter with the professions they are dealing with through focusing on Language and Communication for Professional Purposes. Thus, enabling ESP teachers to identify the communication needs of a workplace and to devise realistic activities that promote professional communication competence. Moreover, the book offers numerous exercises, informative appendices and a glossary to assist the reader and optimize his/her understanding of the materials.
This holistic approach is innovative but it is possible also to point two weaknesses. The focus is very much on engineering. This means that readers looking for extensive examples of research from different occupational or workplace settings might be disappointed. However, most of the material, although focused on engineering, will have considerable relevance to other areas of ESP. A further possible limitation in the approach to research in the CEF Professional Profile Project is the inability to utilize stratified random sampling for two reasons: First, this kind of sampling is too expensive and not practical since the contributions to the European project come from different backgrounds. Thus, it is impossible to aim at a sample that was representative of a host of different cultures. The cultural aspect is not well presented in the CEF as indicated by Risager (2007).

REFERENCES


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