

Language Needs Analysis of Art and Design Students: Considerations for ESP Course Design

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ABSTRACT

Students studying Art and Design courses need to have good proficiency in English in preparation for today's globalised work contexts. This study evaluated the perceptions of 47 final year diploma Art and Design students and 10 members of staff about the current English Language course in a private college in Penang, Malaysia. This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data from the students and the academic staff. The data gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed in terms of frequency counts and percentages whereas data collected from the interviews were analyzed based on the responses provided. The findings of this study revealed that the 96% of students perceived the speaking skill to be important for their Art and Design courses and their career whereas the listening skill was rated the second most important skill by 95% of the respondents. Reading and writing skills in English were regarded as 'fairly important' by 80% of the respondents. The findings also revealed that the students were 'moderately satisfied' with the current English language course in their college. The results of the study indicate that a new ESP course focusing on speaking and listening skills should be developed at this college. The ESP course should include workplace-based oral presentations, specialised vocabulary activities and course materials and topics relevant to students' area of specializations. Language teaching strategies such as games, puzzles and riddles could also help improve the ESP students' proficiency in the English language.

Keywords: ESP, needs analysis, course design, materials development

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). Malaysia as a rapidly developing nation plays a crucial role in equipping its graduates with all the necessary skills which are considered highly-in-demand in the current market. Dominant areas in ESP are now Business English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and course design issues need to take into account the target learning needs of ESP students. A local Malaysian English daily (The Star, 12 May 2008) reported that a survey conducted by a public university, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), revealed that English language ability among employees was the second most important characteristic sought by prospective employers after critical thinking ability. The Higher Education Minister, Tan Sri Khaled Nordin says that “critical thinking, communication skills, excellent English proficiency and enhanced IT skills must form the common foundation for all graduates regardless of their chosen disciplines” (The Star, 12 May 2008). Lack of industrial training and poor English are among five factors why graduates are unemployed, according to a study conducted by the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (The Star, 12 February 2009). In this regard, graduates of Art and Design background face similar problems in terms of seeking employment.

Currently, there are 401 private colleges and institutions which offer a variety of courses nationwide (www.mohe.gov.my). The number of private colleges in Malaysia has been increasing according to the demand of courses by students. For instance, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Higher Education, the number of certificate level students enrolled in Art, Design and Music courses in 2007 was 3,437 compared to 1,157 in 2002. The increase in the number of Art, Design and Music students indirectly indicates an increase in the number of colleges offering these courses in Malaysia whereas there was a drop in the number of diploma

students of the same courses. In 2002, the number of students who enrolled for these courses were 2,841 whereas in 2007, it was just 1,533. In a report by Malaysia's National Higher Education Research Institute in 2004 on 'Enhancing Quality of Faculty in Private Higher Education Institutions', it was stated that private higher education institutions especially those without Universities and College Universities were experiencing difficulty in engaging a teaching workforce with high academic qualifications, experiences and professionalism appropriate to the courses they conduct. Therefore, this could have caused the drop in the number of diploma students specialising in Art, Design and Music.

English Language Needs of Art and Design Students

Preece (1997) posits the view that many different techniques are used for EAP courses to address specialised language and communication needs of a wide range of ESP students from medicine, law, business as well as Art and Design students engaged in studio-based and design environments. In an earlier study, Preece (1994) stated that generally, developments in the language of Art and Design do not seem to have occurred at universities and colleges with diverse programme offerings, but rather at independent Art and Design schools where all of the students are preparing for one primary area of study i.e. Art and Design. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reasons for learning. Thus, as an approach to effective course design for ESP learners, the course needs to be evaluated from time to time to determine if the set goals have been achieved. Taking a similar stance, Strevens (1968) has been widely quoted as stating that ESP instruction is derived to meet learners' needs. According to Iwai et al. (1999), the term 'needs analysis' generally refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students. Mehdi (2008) conducted a study on 'Introduction to Needs Analysis' and made the assertion that the role of needs analysis in any ESP course is indisputable. Arguably, such an orientation in ESP contexts is seen as the logical first step in course design as it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. Tajino et al. (2005) in their

study on meaningful collaboration in EAP course design quoted Brindley (1989) saying that a good starting point for designing an EAP course is an understanding of students' needs.

There are certain matters to be considered before designing an ESP course. When designing an ESP course, the primary issue is the analysis of learners' specific needs. Other issues addressed include: determination of realistic goals and objectives, integration of grammatical functions and acquisition skills, and assessment and evaluation. Although ESP contexts view these issues from their own perspectives, the proposed framework for ESP course development is argued as being of benefit to teachers who may encounter problems in ESP course design (Gao, 2007). Chen (2006) and Kaur and Clarke (2009) also reached the conclusion that ESP course designers should explore and identify the learners' potential needs in the first place. ESP course designers, in designing a course for students of a particular discipline, should conduct a thorough needs analysis as this would be more effective and efficient in determining the language skills needed by the particular students for their professions. In contrast, if that course is for in-service students, it could be designed to improve on any precise skills lacked by the students. If this is done, then there is a higher probability that the students could accomplish their job-related tasks efficiently after attending that ESP course.

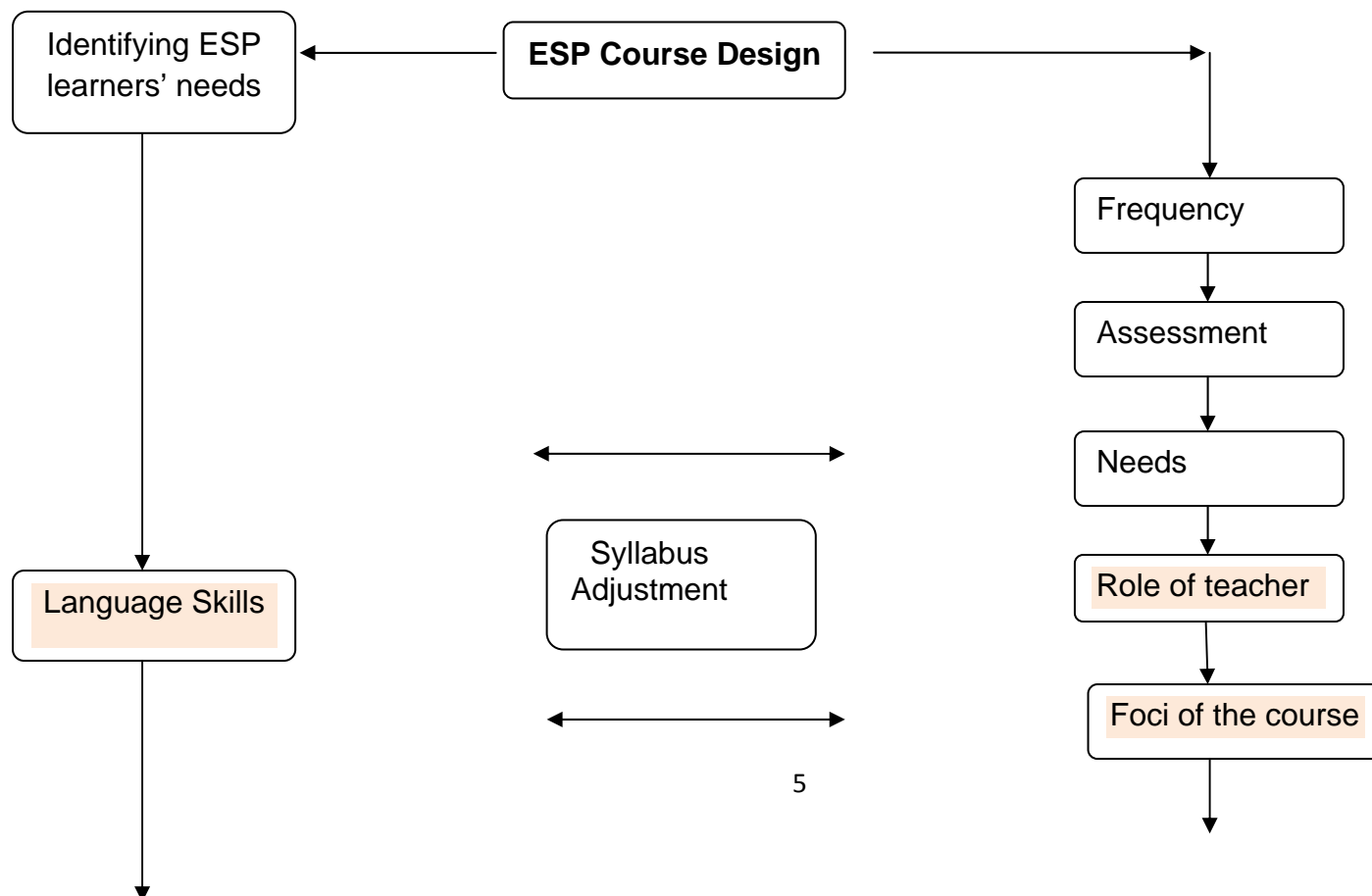
Parameters of ESP Course Design

According to Dudley Evans and St. John (1998: 145-154), there are a number of parameters which need to be investigated in making decisions about course design. The questions listed below by them should be investigated by course designers before making decisions on designing an ESP course.

1. Should the course be intensive or extensive?
2. Should the learners' performance be assessed or non-assessed?
3. Should the course deal with immediate needs or with delayed needs?

4. Should the role of the teacher be that of the provider of knowledge and activities or as a facilitator of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?
5. Should the course have a broad or narrow focus?
6. Should the course be pre-study or pre-experience or run parallel with work?
7. Should the material be common-core or specific to learners' study or work?
8. Should the group taking the course be homogeneous or should it be heterogeneous?
9. Should the course designed be worked out by the language teacher after consultation with the learners and the institution, or should it be subject to a process of negotiation with the learners?

A comprehensive English language needs analysis is definitely needed in order to design an effective ESP course for students following Art and Design courses. Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of this study and the identification of English language needs relies on Hutchinson & Waters' needs analysis model (1987), whereas aspects of designing an ESP course were adapted from Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998).



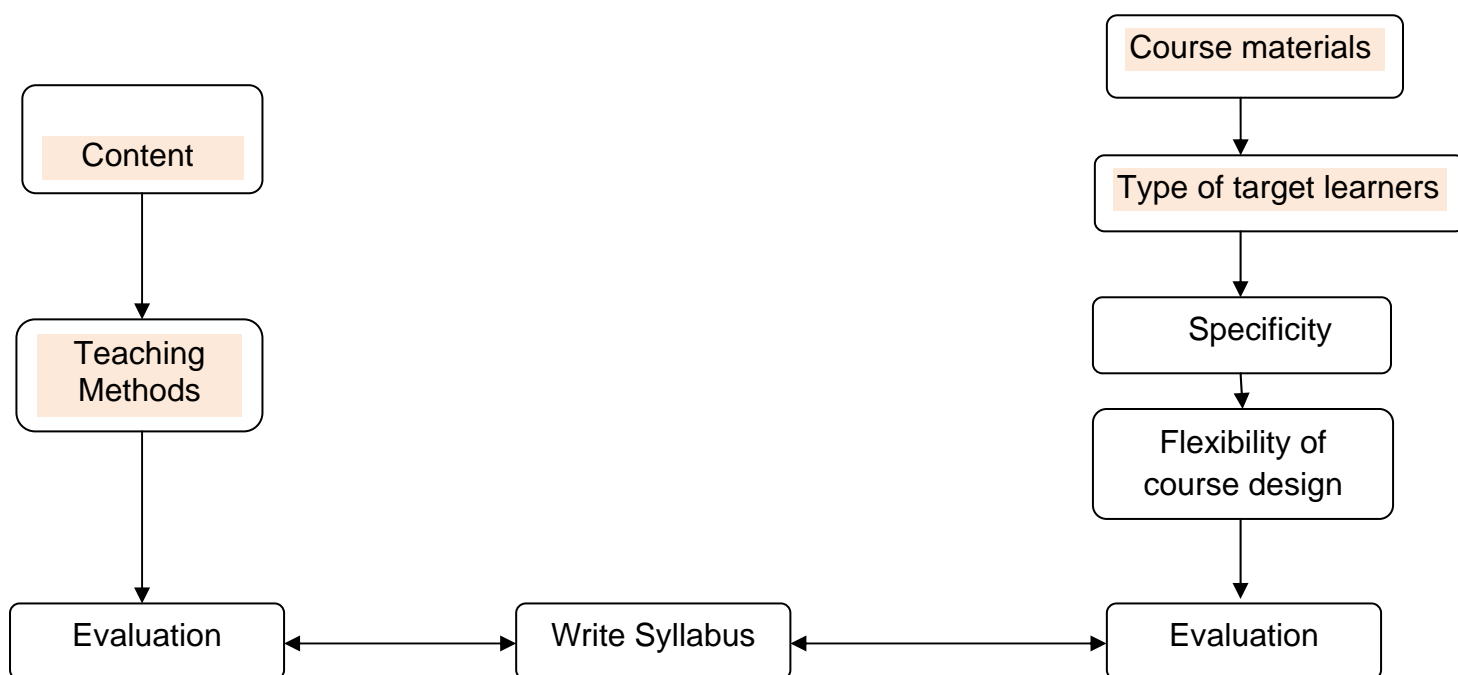


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Adapted from Hutchinson & Waters (1987) & Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998)

Methodology

The subjects for this study were 47 Art and Design students of diploma level in a private college in Penang. All of them were doing their final year of their diploma course in various specializations such as Fashion Design, Interior Design and so on in this college when the study was conducted. This study used both quantitative and qualitative research instruments i.e. questionnaires for the students and semi-structured interviews for both students and teaching staff. A single approach to analyze the language needs of the students in any context only yields a limited data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The researchers implemented both quantitative and qualitative methods for this study. They were able to get the participation of seven teachers teaching different Art and Design specializations to the students of certificate and diploma levels.

By interviewing the lecturers, the researchers were able to evaluate the English course as a whole based on their perceptions and provide some suggestions for the improvement of the course. Besides these lecturers, the researchers also interviewed the Principal, the Vice Principal I and the Vice Principal II of this college. The researchers did not carry out a survey among these members of staff as none of them teach English proficiency courses at the college. Instead, one of the researchers interviewed them to cross-investigate the answers provided by the students of the existing English language course offered at the college through questionnaires and interviews. The subjects selected for the study were based on systematic random sampling as it did not require any table of random numbers and computer programmes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). As the Principal of the college had requested anonymity, the researchers assigned a pseudonym for this college: 'PBS College'.

The construction of the questionnaire was based on the conceptual framework mentioned earlier. Aspects of identifying language needs was adapted from Hutchinson & Waters (1987) whereby the foci include the language skills which are deemed more important, content of the course (general or subject-related), and teaching method. In terms of designing an ESP course, this study leaned upon the nine parameters forwarded by Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998). The questionnaire was pilot-tested as the researchers wanted to be certain that similar respondents understood the items on the questionnaire. The pilot study revealed that a small number of students faced some difficulty in understanding two items on the questionnaire and these vague items were improved before the final study was carried out. During the data collection phase, the questionnaires were distributed and interviews were held by one of the researchers who was the English teacher in PBS College.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the information collected from the respondents, the results were analyzed by the researchers. Table 1 below shows students' perceptions on the importance of the four language skills:

Table 1: Analysis of the Importance of English language skills for Art and Design Courses

Subsections of item 2	Listening		Reading		Speaking		Writing	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Not important at all	1	2	2	4	0	0	2	4
Of some Importance	2	4	4	8	2	4	6	13
Important	17	37	21	45	11	23	16	34
Very Important	27	58	20	43	34	73	23	49

It was revealed that listening and speaking skills were deemed the most important skills according to these students as these two skills recorded the highest percentages (58% and 73% respectively). This indicates that Art and Design students have to listen to their lecturers of their respective disciplines and present their work in classes. This could be the reason they rated these skills as such.

Table 2 below shows how students responded when asked which language skills were important for their future careers:

Table 2: Analysis of the Importance of English Language for Students' Future Career

Subsections of item 3	Listening		Reading		Speaking		Writing	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Not important at all	1	2	1	2	2	4	1	2
Of some Importance	1	2	4	9	0	0	5	11
Important	11	24	16	34	7	15	11	23
Very Important	34	72	26	55	38	81	30	64

The students again rated the listening (96%) and speaking (96%) skills as the two most important skills for their prospective jobs. Such perceptions indicate that students feel prospective employers would place greater emphasis on employees' speaking and listening skills when assigning tasks or activities at the workplace. The interview sessions revealed that this perception was prevalent among many respondents who stated that they would be required to carry out job duties involving speaking and listening skills in English in their future careers (some of the examples cited having discussions with clients, explaining company designs to clients, listening to customers' needs and requirements, etc.)

Table 3 below shows the findings of the study in relation to the Art and Design students' overall perceptions of the existing English course offered at their college.

Table 3: Analysis of Students' Overall Perceptions about the Current English Course

Students' Perceptions	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I am satisfied with the current English course	5	11	34	72	6	13	2	4
I am ready to use English in my future job	14	30	28	60	4	8	1	2
The total hours for this present English course is enough	8	17	26	55	11	24	2	4
The current English course is interesting	1	2	31	66	11	23	4	9
The oral presentation is related to our area of specialization	6	13	28	60	11	23	2	4
The essay writing is related to our area of specialization	6	13	26	55	12	26	3	6
The listening skill activities are related to our area of specialization	7	15	26	55	12	26	2	4
The reading comprehension passages are from the topics which are related to our area of specialization	8	17	23	49	13	28	3	6
The materials in this English language course are relevant to the Art and Design studies	5	11	25	53	15	32	2	4
Peer discussions are applied in this course	3	6	34	73	9	19	1	2
Productive skills (Speaking and writing) are stressed in this course	2	4	33	70	8	17	4	9
Receptive skills (listening and reading) are stressed in this course	2	4	29	62	10	21	6	13
Games, puzzles and riddles in language are included in classroom activities	5	11	21	45	12	25	9	19

From Table 3, it can be observed that only five students (11%) chose the option 'strongly agree' to express their satisfaction with the current English course. It may very well be that these students are those who have lesser or no problems in accomplishing tasks given to them in this course as they have good proficiency of English language. Notwithstanding this fact, 34 students (72%) selected the option 'agree' to indicate that they were satisfied with the English course (which is coded THY 2142). Only 17% of students stated that they were not satisfied with the current English course.

On the other hand, majority of the students were quite confident that they were ready to use English in their future job whereby 14 students (30%) chose the option 'strongly agree' and 28 students (60%) chose the option 'agree' on this matter. However, 10% of the students felt that the course did not prepare them for using

English in their workplace. Notwithstanding such perceptions, it can be surmised that the current English course was quite helpful in assisting the students to gain confidence in using English in their workplace. This indicates that students who are not ready to use English and feel that they are not confident about using English should start improving their English language proficiency so that they can be more confident about using English in their future workplace.

This private college allocates two hours of teaching for the English course (THY 2142) in a week. These students are given a number of course assignments and need to spend most of their time completing their given assignments and reports for their major courses. Invariably, most students stated that they were happy with the total hours of teaching allocated for this English course as any further increase in the teaching hours for the English course might have a bearing on the time they spent for completing their academic assignments and reports for their core courses at the college. A large majority of students (72%) felt that the teaching hours allocated for the course were adequate for the present time. However, 28% of the respondents felt that the allocated hours for the English course needed to be increased. The interview sessions with students revealed that the teaching hours for this diploma English should be increased by another hour a week, making it three hours a week. Considering the interview responses from the students, it would be better if the college administration considered this matter and increased the total teaching hours for this English course.

A majority of the students (68%) stated that their current English course was interesting for them. However, as this item sought to find out their overall perception of the course, it was not clear exactly which aspects of the course these students found to be interesting. However, 32% (15 students) stated that they did not find the English course interesting. Based on the findings, it is uncertain whether the present English course at the college can capture students' attention and interest in inculcating the importance of English proficiency. There is a need for the college administrators and the teachers to draw up and include interesting activities in the course so that students will find the course more workplace-based and relevant.

The students were also asked about the incorporation of receptive and productive skills in the current English course. The results show that the students wanted the course to be focused more on productive skills (such as oral presentations) as well as essay writing tasks that more aptly reflect their areas of specialisations. In relation to essay writing and speaking activities, 6 students (13%) strongly agreed that the topics of these activities were from their area of specializations and 28 students (60%) stated the same relevancy for speaking activities. Slightly more than half (55%) of the students felt that the essay writing activities in the course were related to their area of specialisations. In contrast, 13 students (27%) disagreed on this statement for speaking activities. As for the essay writing activities, 15 students (32%) disagreed that the topics were related to their area of specializations.

Students were also asked about the receptive skills taught in the course. In relation to the listening activities, 33 students (70%) provided positive responses on this aspect. Only 30% of the students disagreed that sufficient coverage was allocated for the listening skills and these students stated that the activities were not directly relevant to their course disciplines. On the other hand, for the reading activities in the English course, 31 students (66%) stated that the activities covered in the duration of the course were relevant and workplace-oriented and they seemed happy about this. In comparison, 16 students (34%) did not share this opinion on the relevancy of the reading activities in the English course. The findings suggest that students from the same specialisations should be grouped or placed together so that the English teacher can organise learning materials more effectively to suit the target learning needs of the learners from homogenous specialisations of Art and Design courses.

One of the researchers, as the only English teacher, found that there were no materials tailored for the English learning needs of the students in this private college. Most of the materials used for teaching were from General English textbooks and workbooks (most of these materials were adapted on an ad hoc basis by the teacher in most cases). However, 64% of the students were of the opinion that the materials used in the English course were related to their area of specializations. On the other hand, a fairly significant percentage of the students (36%) did not share

the same sentiment with regards to the relevancy of learning activities in the English course.

The English teacher often involved the students in peer discussions whereby they are given a topic or question which is argumentative in nature and they discuss it with their peers. During the interview session with the English teacher, he expressed the opinion that the students liked it and they really enjoyed this kind of activity. However, the teacher highlighted the fact that some students who possessed lower levels of English language proficiency did not participate well in the discussions held.

Apart from asking them about the relation between the receptive, productive skills and their area of specializations, they were also asked whether these skills were stressed in their English course. A majority of the students (70%) felt that productive skills in the course were relevant for their specialisation areas (but 25% disagreed) and 62% of students felt this was the case for both productive and receptive skills.

Many students stated a preference for activities like games, puzzles and riddles to be included in the classroom teaching. During the interview session, the English teacher stated that he used some of these activities to avoid students from getting bored of the lessons. 26 students (56%) felt this was agreeable to them but 44% did not think so. The teacher used these activities from time to time but felt that they could not be included in every class as they might take up a lot of class time.

During the interview sessions with the teaching personnel and the students, it was discovered that many of them had not given much thought to the importance of having an ESP-focused course for the Art and Design courses. The students' interview sessions supported the findings from the survey. It was revealed that students from different Art and Design specialisations held differing views about the English course offered at the college.

Conclusion

The results of this needs analysis study indicate that a new ESP course focusing on speaking and listening skills should be developed at this college. The ESP course should include workplace-based oral presentations, specialised vocabulary activities and course materials and topics relevant to students' area of specializations. Language teaching strategies such as games, puzzles and riddles could also help improve the ESP students' proficiency in the English language. The goal of developing an ESP course for the Art and Design students at this college would have to take into account the principal findings of this comprehensive needs analysis study. A newly designed ESP course would enable the Art and Design students to learn relevant workplace-specific language context that would serve to prepare them well for their future workplace in their areas of specialisations. Incorporating such distinctions in the ESP course will help the English teacher to emphasise learning activities targeting the ESP students' broad workplace needs (indicating a broad focus) or specific target communication needs (narrow focus and skills-focused). It is also necessary for the college administrators and members of staff teaching the English course to realize that course design for ESP courses is often dynamic, requiring constant re-examination from stakeholders to evaluate its efficacy in helping students enhance their workplace target needs.

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