

**An Investigation of the Present Situation Communicative Needs in an ESP Context:
Civil Engineering Students in Focus**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Present Situation Communicative needs of civil engineering students at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. The study used a needs analysis questionnaire having 43 items to investigate the needs of civil engineering students. Out of the total 318 third year civil engineering students, 200 of them were selected by simple random sampling technique to fill the questionnaire on present situation ESP learning needs. A total of 43 communicative events were found under the four English language skills. Students expressed their need on each sub-skill. The findings showed that writing skills and sub-skills were most needed by civil engineering students followed by reading and speaking skills. The study also revealed that listening skills were least needed by civil engineering students of Bahir Dar University. Furthermore, civil engineering students pointed out that the ESP course they are taking at present is not in line with their needs. This study concluded that there was a discrepancy of what students need to learn and what English language teachers were teaching in civil engineering classrooms. Finally, it was recommended that Target Situation Needs Analysis should also be done on workplaces and ESP teachers' views should be incorporated to design an ESP syllabus which meets the needs of civil engineering students in Ethiopia.

Key Words: Technical Report Writing, Present Situation Needs Analysis, English for Specific Purpose

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

English language teaching has passed several stages, and the question of how to teach the language has been a point of argument for a long time. Some methods and approaches have influences on the present ELT, whereas some others are less remembered during the present era of foreign language teaching. For the last hundred years, language teaching has been conceptualized in terms of methods of teaching (Brown, 2000; Richards, 2001). Some methods and approaches were considered top only at some points in the past while others have left their influences up to the present era of ELT. English language was taught through a controlled input during the Grammar Translation Method and more communicative approaches began to be favoured since the last couples of decades. Most studies in recent times show that the target of English language teaching has shifted from teachers to learners. Learners are considered as active participants and builders of their own knowledge and risk takers for their own learning in the present era of English language teaching (Richards, 2001).

When we plan to teach ESP courses for learners of various disciplines, we should keep in mind that the course contains activities a learner can potentially use outside class (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). In this study, the researcher investigated the Present Situation Communicative needs of civil engineering students at Bahir Dar University, civil engineering and water resources department. The department offers Technical Report Writing course to its civil engineering students as part of the university curriculum. Although the course has been delivered for more than four decades, no major revisions or needs analysis has been done in these years. The course needs the collaboration of technical teachers and English language teachers.

However, the researcher has learned from ESP teachers that no contact has reportedly been made between the two stakeholders for decades.

Civil engineering students stay for five years in Bahir Dar University and take Technical Report Writing course at their third year stage. Every semester, the English language teacher reports students' grades to the university's registrar office. Apart from the course description found from the university's curriculum, the course has neither fully fledged learning material nor well established content lists. English language teachers usually collect materials from different books and internet sources in a very fragmented way to teach their students. As a teacher of this course, the researcher would like to study Current Situation Communicative Needs of civil engineering students first in order to design appropriate learning material.

English for specific purpose (ESP) is an approach which considers the needs of learners on syllabus design, content selection and methods of teaching. ESP emphasizes analyzing the **Target Situation Needs** (workplace place needs) and **Present Situation Needs** (current learning needs of students). This study focuses on analyzing current learning needs of students. Hence, Target Situation Needs analysis is not the scope of this research although conducting both types of needs analysis helps professionals and students to effectively communicate at workplaces and classrooms (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Many scholars in the area of ELT define ESP in different ways. A well-known view of ESP is the one which considers it as an approach rather than a product (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In the same vein Douglas (2000) states that students study English mainly because they need English for either study or work purposes. The point in these two views is that ESP is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve an end and its

purpose is to increase and develop linguistic potentialities of a specific group of learners who need English to perform their activities and/or studies. This shows that we do not have a particular type of language teaching material or methodology in ESP. Why a learner wants to learn a foreign language such as ESP is the main emphasis of offering the course (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Accordingly, one may say that ESP is an approach to language teaching based on learners' objectives and reasons for learning a language. It helps learners develop linguistic features and competencies needed in their specific disciplines.

Once we decide that ESP course is needed for a particular group of learners or professionals, the first thing to do is to conduct a needs analysis. A course designed by making thorough needs analysis is believed to achieve intended learning goals. This will in turn prepare learners to their future workplace environment. The main concern of making particular needs analysis on the group of learners is to have a justifiable foundation on the skills, activities and language functions which are going to be included in ESP syllabus (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Munby, 1987).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Although the use of English language has increasingly become enormous in Ethiopia, recent studies show that engineering students lack the necessary competence in using the language for different purposes. Focused group discussions with engineering professionals at different construction sites revealed that they are incompetent and lack the necessary skills to perform activities using English language in their workplaces. The formal discussion the researcher held in 2013 with civil engineering professionals working in Bahir Dar city showed that civil engineers cannot properly use the language

to perform certain activities in their respective companies. Consequently, conducting needs analysis, designing a syllabus based on the needs analysis results, implementing the new syllabus and evaluating are the pillars of teaching learning process for an ESP course. This research will take the first action in identifying Present Situation Communicative Needs of civil engineering students. The remaining phases will be activities of the researcher in his coming works.

The preliminary data obtained from civil engineering teachers in Bahir Dar University and the ESP (Technical Report Writing) course description show that civil engineering students in the university are taking English for occupational purposes. This means ESP is given in engineering classrooms to equip students with the skills necessary for future workplace needs. However, study by Medhanit (2010) shows that there are problems with regard to delivering the course according to the specified objectives and purposes.

In order to tackle the resulting poor English language proficiency, the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia together with other international organizations has been giving different trainings to teachers and learners at different levels. For example, the English Language Improvement Centre (ELIC) is established in government higher institutions of Ethiopia with the help of British Council. This centre is established to give short and long term trainings, facilitate situations so that learners from different disciplines can improve their English language proficiency. Despite such efforts, studies show that civil engineering graduates face difficulties to use the language for the intended purposes. Since English is taught to Ethiopian students as a foreign language, it may be difficult to bring native like communicative competence. However, as far as the language is being used as a medium of instruction in every high school of Ethiopia and

there are some workplaces at which professionals are using English, students should acquire at least basic communication skills. Hence, developing courses to meet the needs of learners should be given high emphasis. To do so, analyzing classroom realities is taken as a necessary step by the current researcher.

Though the course has been offered for nearly three decades, professionals, students and teachers are telling their dissatisfaction. This indicates that research should be conducted to find better ways of delivering the English language particularly in higher institutions. This is because higher institutions are places which prepare learners to different workplace environments. Unless interventions are made, graduates may be inefficient in their future careers and higher institutions will fail to achieve desired goals.

If civil engineering graduates are going to use English in their future careers, the need to use the language for a specific purpose is mandatory. Hence, re-assessing the way English is taught at higher institutions of Ethiopia is unquestionable. This is because companies and different organizations can hire graduates in different disciplines if they find employees competent to respective workplace requirements.

As English is taught in Ethiopia as a foreign language, the ever increasing need for quality English language teaching has given rise to the need to offer ESP courses in engineering classrooms. In ESP classrooms, it might be difficult for language teachers to teach the concepts from learners discipline and the language in order to make learners effectively communicate at workplaces. This needs the active collaboration of Technical teachers from students discipline and language teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The main role of the ESP teacher is facilitating and preparing activities which can help learners to accomplish future workplace activities. In this

case, students may even have better subject matter knowledge than a language teacher (Tratnik, 2008).

Technical Report Writing course is taught to civil engineering students based on the belief that students can perform different activities at their future workplaces effectively. Though higher institutions in Ethiopia are offering such courses, there is a common belief that graduates of such fields lack the necessary language skill in their respective careers. The data collected by the researcher in Bahir Dar city in 2013 from civil engineering professionals who graduated from different Ethiopian universities also strengthens the idea that civil engineering graduates are unable to use English language for the intended purpose at their respective workplaces. This research also revealed that 58 percent of the respondents (civil engineering professionals) developed fear of using the language at workplaces although 65% their written professional communication is in English. The source of their fear according to the study is because professionals do not have the necessary skill to perform specific activities using English language (Aklilu, 2013).

ESP course is offered to civil engineering students in all government universities of Ethiopia, but the researcher has found no study which analyzed civil engineering students' needs in Ethiopian higher institutions context. Tertiary institutions in Ethiopia should, therefore, re-assess the extent to which students' future career needs are being considered by the existing ESP courses and find proper remedies. This study will contribute empirical result by analyzing the Present Situation communicative needs of civil engineering students. The data which will be obtained from such analysis will be used as an input to design an ESP syllabus for civil engineering classrooms of the university. This will equip civil engineering technology graduates in particular with skills which are likely to be applied in future careers.

Needs analysis is usually accomplished through questionnaires and discussions with the students, professionals, and other stakeholders. Many curriculum designers emphasize the current needs of learners (Present Situation Analysis-PSA) and ignore workplace realities (Target Situation Analysis-TSA). The result of these enquiries may sometimes show that there is a conflict between learners' necessities (as perceived by the teacher) and their wants (Hyland, 2006). The ESP teacher is expected to find some sort of compromise between these conflicting forces by designing a course that should be both useful and interesting for the target learners (Douglas, 2000). In Ethiopian context, both kinds of needs analyses have not been done yet, so conducting both types of needs analyses and studying the relationships between the Target and the Current Situation needs is very important to design a syllabus which is of interest to learners and useful to equip them with the skills necessary for the future career environment. However, the scope of this article is to analyze the Present Situation Needs of civil engineering students.

8

To address the gap mentioned above, the researcher aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the English language skills and sub skills that civil engineering students in Ethiopia need currently?
2. How important are the contents included in the ESP course to civil engineering students in Bahir Dar University?

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1. Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study were third year civil engineering students, who joined Bahir Dar University, Civil Engineering and Water Resources Department in September, 2012. The total numbers of students were 318 of which 270 were males and 48 were females. Students in civil engineering department take five years course to graduate with B.Sc. degree. From the total of 318 students, only 200 were randomly selected to fill in the questionnaire on Present Situation needs analysis.

There are basic reasons for the researcher to select third year civil engineering students. The first reason is that third year civil engineering students would definitely have specific and many views regarding their Target Situation Needs and Present Situation Needs as they have sufficient experience in the classroom and field study. Unlike their juniors, third year students have access to field work and know what is happening at construction sites. Second, using students as primary sources of data is also a key to design an ESP syllabus which the researcher has planned to design in his coming work. Since students' wants and needs are important in any needs analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), the researcher will use students as primary sources of data. In addition, drawing conclusions based on students' perceptions is an essential activity in the learner centered approach to course design as Nunan (1988) suggests. Therefore, students at this level are chosen because they are expected to have sufficient knowledge about their language needs as they have studied for more than two years at Bahir Dar University and experienced field work. These students had also taken Basic Writing Skills and Communication Skills courses for one semester during their first and second years of study respectively.

First and second year students were excluded based on the belief that they are not capable of identifying specific tasks which are going to be performed after graduation as they do not get sufficient exposure to field work at this level and cannot make genuine language decisions (Saleh, 2010).

2.2. Instruments

Questionnaire on Needs Analysis adapted from Saleh (2010) and Kaewpet (2009) was used to collect data for this research. Before data collection, the researcher pilot tested the questionnaire items in a class of 51 civil engineering students

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

The data from students were collected while the teaching learning process was going on. Hence, it was possible to get maximum number of respondents and to avoid possibility of missing of questionnaire items. Students were given 50 minutes time during the normal session so that they can freely and comfortably respond to each questionnaire items.

10

3. Results

3.1. Civil engineering students' Present Situation Needs Analysis on English skills and sub-skills

Civil engineering students' perception on the needs of English language **macro skills**

Skills	Frequency	Percentage
Speaking	26	13
Writing	130	65
Listening	13	6.5
Reading	31	15.5

Table 1: Percentage and frequency of macro skills used by civil engineering students

The table shows that writing skill is needed most by civil engineering students at Bahir Dar University. Reading and speaking skills are also used next to writing skills. The results also revealed that listening skill is the least needed skill among the four macro skills of English language.

Civil engineering students' perception on the needs of English language sub-skills

	Communicative events	Frequency	Percentage
	Reading Sub-skills	N	%
1	Reading English in design drawings	40	20
2	Reading written instructions/advice	16	8
3	Reading/using computer programs	5	2.5
4	Reading exercise/test questions	3	1.5
5	Reading textbooks	0	0
6	Reading abstracts of projects	11	5.5
7	Reading journals/publications	9	4.5
8	Reading technical manuals	3	1.5
9	Reading project documents	53	26.5
10	Searching the Internet English resources	5	2.5
11	Reading office documents	11	5.5
12	Reading safety signs	2	1
13	Reading professional texts	16	8
14	Reading e-mails	6	3
15	Reading contracts	20	10
	others (please list)		

Table 2: Percentage and frequency of reading sub-skills needed by civil engineering students

Table 2 shows the reading sub-skills needed by civil engineering students. Forty three communicative events were identified in this category. The communicative events were divided into the four skills of English language. Although students had indicated the English language skill which they need most frequently, they also expressed the kind of sub-skill they need in each macro skill

Regarding reading skill, many students expressed that reading project documents was the most frequently used sub-skill. About 53 students (26.5 %) indicated that they need this sub-skill of reading most frequently than the rest. Next to reading different project documents,

the data obtained from students showed that reading English in design drawings is the top second sub-reading skill needed by civil engineering students in the Present Situation needs analysis. Students' response also indicated that reading contract papers is the other sub-skill of reading needed by them in the third place.

Civil engineering students' perception on the needs of writing sub- skills

Communicative events		Frequency	Percentage
Writing		N	%
16	Recording/completing equipment and safety checklists/forms	2	1
17	Writing English in design drawings	14	7
18	Communicating through emails	9	4.5
19	Writing minutes of meetings	13	6.5
20	Writing daily/periodic reports	51	25.5
21	Writing documents for projects (e.g., proposals, lists of building materials)	32	16
22	Writing resume	5	2.5
23	Writing business letters	7	3.5
24	Writing study reports	4	2
25	Writing abstracts for projects	9	4.5
26	writing field trip reports	4	2
27	writing lab reports	21	10.5
28	writing short projects	7	3.5
29	taking notes in lectures	2	1
30	memorandums	20	10
	Others (please list)		

Table 3: Percentage and frequency of writing sub-skills needed by civil engineering students

Writing was the most favoured skill by civil engineering students according to the data from table 1. Students also indicated their need for sub-skills of writing as shown in table 3. According to the data in table 3, the most favoured sub-skill of writing by students was writing daily or periodic reports. This accounts 25.5% of the total sub-skills of writing. Next to preparing daily (periodical reports), students' needs assessment at Bahir Dar University,

Technology institute signified that students need to write documents for different projects. Students' responses to the open ended question under writing sub-skills revealed that they prepare projects such as laboratory reports, feasibility studies, analytical reports, proposals and progress reports.

Civil engineering students' perception on the needs of speaking sub- skills

	Communicative events	Frequency	Percentage
	Speaking	N	%
31	Delivering oral presentation on professional issues	72	36
32	Attending meetings/seminars	12	6
33	Attending to occasional visits	7	3.5
34	Talking about everyday tasks and duties (e.g., coordinating work, talking/conversing in the professional context)	52	26
35	speak to foreign visitors	2	1
36	speak to foreign colleagues	5	2.5
37	speak on the phone	23	11.5
38	give instructions	27	13.5
	Others (please list)		
	others (please list)		

Table 4: Percentage and frequency of speaking sub- skills needed by civil engineering students

The Present Situation Needs Analysis for the reading macro skill indicated that delivering oral presentation on professional issues was the most favoured sub-skill of speaking by students of civil engineering department. This was followed by the sub-skill which needs students to talk about everyday tasks and duties in their profession. Students expressed the needed to talk about their daily progress reports of their field practice. These two sub-skills account 36 % and 26% of the macro skill (speaking) respectively. Civil engineering students also needed to practice giving instructions and making telephone conversation as their current learning needs. These two sub-skills account 13.5 and 11.5 percents respectively.

Civil engineering students' perception on the needs of listening sub- skills

	Communicative events	Frequency	Percentage
	Listening	N	%
39	Receiving spoken instructions/advice	26	13
40	listen to reports	47	23.5
41	listen presentations	98	49
42	Listening in seminars/ conferences	17	8.5
43	listen to interviews	12	6
	others (please list)		

Table 5: Percentage and frequency of listening sub- skills needed by civil engineering students

From the least favoured skill (listening), students most favourably need to listen to presentations and reports respectively. Students also expressed that they need to listen how to receive spoken instructions or advices and interviews. Though this is the least needed skill compared to other macro skills, the researcher compared the frequency of each sub-skill as shown in table5.

In general, table1 shows that writing skills and sub-skills were perceived to be the most important. According to the Present Situation Needs Analysis, reading and speaking skills and sub-skills respectively were needed by civil engineering students at Bahir Dar University next the writing skills. The result revealed that listening skills were perceived by students as the least important. Although students result showed the skills and sub-skills which need prior attention, there were also other macro and sub-skills which learners need to be incorporated in the ESP syllabus. Hence, the data above showed that each of the four macro skills of English language need to be addressed in Technical Report Writing Course for civil engineering classrooms.

3.2. Civil engineering Students’ Perceptions regarding usefulness of the current English Language Course

When one thinks to design an ESP syllabus, he/she should keep in mind that the contents should be designed in way the learner can authentically use outside class and inside the classroom (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Similarly, researchers or syllabus designers should also check how useful the current ESP course is before trying to design a new one because the drawbacks which might be obtained from this evaluation could be used as an input to design an ESP syllabus which can satisfy the needs of professionals and learners. In the same vein, Civil engineering students at Bahir Dar University were asked whether ‘The Technical Writing’ (ESP) course they are taking currently is useful to them or not. Table 6 below shows the details in this regard.

A= Very useful, B= Useful, C=Of some use, D=Of little use, E= Not useful

How useful is the ESP course you are taking currently with regards to your language needs	A		B		C		D		E	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	-	-	30	15	38	19	64	32	68	34

Table 6: Students’ perception on the usefulness the current ESP course

Students were asked whether the ESP course offered by English language teachers meets their need or not. Table 6 shows 32% of civil engineering students think that the ESP course they are taking currently has only little use. From the total participants, 34 % of respondents confirmed that they do not think the course they are taking fulfils Present Situation Needs of civil engineering students. Moreover, 19% of the respondents replied that the ESP course they are taking is useful to some extent. Only 15% of the respondents confirm that the ESP they are taking currently is useful. No one replied that skills incorporated in the current ESP teaching learning process is very useful. This data shows that thorough intervention has to be done and an ESP syllabus which meets the needs of students should be designed accordingly.

In sum, the data obtained from the needs analysis questionnaire shows that a syllabus which includes more writing activities should be designed. The other macro skills and sub-skills need to be incorporated according to the percentages in each category.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The main purpose of this study was to explore the importance of macro skills and sub-skills of English language to civil engineering students of Bahir Dar University. In addition, this study also investigated whether the ESP course offered by English language teachers at Bahir Dar University was in line with students needs or not. According to the data obtained from students, writing skill was found to be the most important macro skill by civil engineering students. However, the data revealed that listening skill was the least important macro skill of English language. Reading and speaking skills were also considered as important macro skills at second and third stages respectively. Finally, it can be conclude that the Technical Report Writing Course civil engineering students are taking currently does not meet the current communicative needs of learners at Bahir Dar University though there is a need to use English language skills and sub-skills by civil engineering students.

16

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The delivery of Technical Report Writing course to civil engineering students should be made according to the needs of learners.
2. Designing a good ESP syllabus requires analyzing classroom and workplace realities. This research was conducted to analyze the Present Situation Needs (students learning needs) in civil engineering contexts. However, the Target Situation Needs (workplace realities), ESP teachers' perspectives and other stakeholders' views should be incorporated to design the syllabus for the course Technical Report Writing.

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