

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN DESIGNING ESP COURSES

*A. Smykouskaya*

*Senior Lecturer of the Foreign Language Communication Department  
of The Academy of Public Administration under the aegis  
of the President of the Republic of Belarus*

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes and courses help to prepare learners for future communication in a foreign language in professional setting. As ESP courses have become part of the curricula in institutions of higher education and further professional training, there are high expectations for their quality and the desired learning outcomes. The present article is an attempt to prove the importance of needs assessment stage in designing ESP courses on the example of the English for Journalists ESP course [1].

The English for Journalists ESP course was developed in 2015 by English language educators across ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe in partnership with the Regional English Language Office for Central and Southeastern Europe, the Voice of America, and the University of California in Berkeley. This course is being offered by UC Berkeley as part of the U.S. Department of State's MOOC Camp, and as professional development blended course across ten countries of Central and Southeastern Europe (including the Republic of Belarus).

When designing the course, its developers emphasized the importance of identifying the target learners' needs as a means of making the course meet the learners' expectations. For this aim, the identification of the target audience and the analysis of their specific needs were defined as key tasks. Other issues concerned the core elements of ESP course design: course goals and objectives; course details; materials design; assessment and evaluation.

The Needs Assessment process comprised several stages: the Target Situation Analysis (TSA), the Present Situation Analysis (PSA), the Context Analysis (CA), and the Action Plan (AP). All the stages were realized in every participating country (Latvia, the Republic of Belarus, the Ukraine, Hungary, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Kosovo, Slovakia, Serbia) and required course developers to fulfill several tasks and elicit responses to the specified questions.

For the introductory stage of the course design process – the Target Situation Analysis – every course developer was to find out the demographics of his/her target learners; whether the planned course was new or the one to be revised; the expected learning outcomes. For example, for the Republic of Belarus the prospective target audience was identified as practicing journalists who worked in (a) broadcast media and (b) print media, and were planning to transfer to the emerging service of International broadcasting in the Belarusian National Broadcasting Company. Both categories of learners already had certain professional training and/or experience in Journalism (though in different types of media),

needed to acquire English skills for performing workplace activities connected with operating a TV news service in the English language. The course was identified as new and to be implemented as part of study program in mid-career training provided by the Institute of Journalism at the Belarusian State University, Minsk, Belarus. By the end of the course, the learners were to acquire knowledge and skills to adapt news stories derived from original English language news sources (print, web, radio) for broadcasting, to draft their own news stories in accordance with language and format requirements of the broadcast news genre in the English language, and to present news stories on air in English. The data on the relevance of the suggested course goals and content was collected from interviews with representatives of administrative bodies responsible for curriculum development at the Institute of Journalism, recent graduates of Journalism programs (the BSU and independent providers), and practicing journalists from the English language service of Radio Belarus. To illustrate the relevance of the course content and methodology, samples of authentic texts of the ‘breaking news’ genre from official news providers were analyzed and specific aspects of the genre were identified as key language aspects to teach in the course:

- rigid story structure with a lead, development, and signature – to make the genre recognizable and unfold stories in a predictable way;
- short sentences – to ease comprehension of story’s message by viewers;
- typical grammar patterns – Present Perfect to break major items of information, and Past Simple to add more details on an event;
- specific use of Passive Voice – to refer to unidentifiable sources of information;
- attributions go first – as different from print media genres;
- strong preference of nouns (not pronouns) – to clearly indicate doers of actions;
- avoidance of evaluative adjectives and adverbs -not to deliver personal bias;
- no inferences made or author’s personal opinion on the story [2].

The stage of Present Situation Analysis (PSA) looked at the learners’ level of English, their knowledge about the content area of broadcast journalism, and their expectations from the course. The expected learners’ English proficiency was within the Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate levels, as the learners were supposed to successfully complete the course within a rather short period of time. To this end prospective learners were to present proofs of previous experience of using English for studies or professional activities. Learners’ knowledge about the content area of broadcast journalism was varied. Some prospective learners already had experience of working on TV and performing similar sets of tasks as outline in the ESP course goals, but in their native language (Russian or Belarusian). Other learners also came from the media field, but had experience of working in the media other than TV – print, web, or radio journalism. The Needs Analysis (NA) questionnaires revealed that prospective learners expected to improve their English proficiency as related to Journalism field, and most importantly to acquire English skills necessary to successful-

ly perform their new workplace tasks. Respondents of NA questionnaires and interviews emphasized they would expect to receive a focused and concentrated training within the scope of their job specialization. They regarded the ESP course to be a good basis for career growth. Concerning the organization of the learning process, they would prefer it to be led and monitored by an instructor rather than relying on self-studies.

Information about learners' institutional affiliation (political stand) also proved to be really important for planning group work, as journalists from state and independent media were to communicate within one group. Computer skills, availability of hardware, access to the internet proved to be importance aspects to take into account when planning the course, too.

The stage of Context Analysis (CA) involved considering the stakeholders' interests, the physical setting of the course, the nature of the course, and the teaching resources. The stake holders in this course included practicing journalists seeking to improve their English skills and increase career prospects, the BSU Institute of Journalism – to enrich the list of educational services by introducing a new course to mid-career training program and to meet the demand in qualified specialists for the country, the National Broadcasting Company – to receive specialists capable of working in a new direction of International broadcasting. The blended format was chosen for the course, the major part of the content delivered online with a limited number of face-to-face sessions (obligatory f2f sessions in the beginning, in the end, at least two sessions in the middle of the course; plus two or three sessions if requested by learners). The enrollment to the course was voluntary; entry test required; course duration – forty academic hours taken over ten weeks. Summative assessment was used in the end of the course.

Teaching resources included:

4. current news stories from web sites of major news agencies and channels (authentic, constantly available),
5. an authentic edition of the Associated Press Stylebook,
6. an edition of manual on News Reporting and Writing, the Missouri Group,
7. grammar reference books, dictionaries,
8. selections of newspaper articles (authentic, derived from original sources).

Other available resources and equipment included black / whiteboards, overhead projectors, DVD / videotape players, a photocopying machine, computers with internet access, a printer, the online course management platform (MOODLE).

The final stage of the needs assessment process – the Action Plan – contained the steps on preparing the designed course for launching: submitting the draft of the course for evaluation to relevant authorities, developing an entry test, discussing and setting the issues of computer software and hardware availability, developing feedback forms for learners and other stakeholder to fill in after completing the course.

A thoroughly conducted needs assessment adds to the overall quality of an ESP course. Needs assessment should start from analyzing learners' particular needs. Based on learners' needs and their future language use, goals and objectives of the course can be determined, a process which involves consideration of specific grammatical functions, terminology comprehension, and the abilities required for future workplace communication. Assessment and evaluation should also be integrated into the design process to ensure that these goals and objectives are achieved.

### *References*

1. English for Journalists, Part 1 [Electronic resource], – UC Berkeley, 2015 – 2020. – Mode of access: <https://www.edx.org/course/english-for-journalists-part-1-2>. – Date of access: 28.02.2020.
2. Английский язык: Изучаем СМИ. Смотрим и анализируем теленовости =English: Media studies. Watching TV news: пособие для студентов факультета журналистики и факультета философии и социальных наук / [авторы-составители: Е. П. Смыковская, П. Л. Соловьев]. – 2-е изд., исправленное и дополненное. – Минск : БГУ, 2008. – 92 с.