Towards Bridging the Gap between the ESP Classroom and the Workplace: Content and Language Needs Analysis in English for an Administrative Studies Course

Vesna Vulić

Abstract—Croatia has made large steps forward in the development of higher education over the past 10 years. Purposes and objectives of the tertiary education system are focused on the personal development of young people so that they obtain competences for employment on a flexible labour market. The most frequent tensions between the tertiary institutions and employers are complaints that the current tertiary education system still supplies students with an abundance of theoretical knowledge and not enough practical skills. Polytechnics and schools of professional higher education should deliver professional education and training that will satisfy the needs of their local communities. The 21st century sets demand on undergraduates as well as their lecturers to strive for the highest standards. The skills students acquire during their studies should serve the needs of their future professional careers. In this context, teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presents an enormous challenge for teachers. They have to cope with teaching the language in classes with a large number of students, limitations of time, inadequate equipment and teaching material; most frequently, this leads to focusing on specialist vocabulary neglecting the development of skills and competences required for future employment. Globalization has transformed the labour market and set new standards a perspective employee should meet. When knowledge of languages is considered, new generic skills and competences are required. Not only skillful written and oral communication is needed, but also information, media, and technology literacy, learning skills which include critical and creative thinking, collaborating and communicating, as well as social skills. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the needs of two groups of ESP first year Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study students taking ESP as a mandatory course: 47 first-year Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study students, 21 first-year employed part-time Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study students and 30 graduates with a degree in Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study with various amounts of work experience. The survey adopted a quantitative approach with the aim to determine the differences between the groups in their perception of the four language skills and different areas of law, as well as getting the insight into students' satisfaction with the current course and their motivation for studying ESP. Their perceptions will be compared to the results of the questionnaire conducted among sector professionals in order to examine how they perceive the same elements of the ESP course content and to what extent it fits into their working environment. The results of the survey indicated that there is a strong correlation between acquiring work experience and the level of importance given to particular areas of law studied in an ESP course which is in line with our initial hypothesis. In conclusion, the results of the survey should help lecturers in re-evaluating and updating their ESP course syllabi.

Keywords—English for Specific Purposes, ESP, language skills, motivation, needs analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

A typical problem for not only new, but also experienced language teachers, is that of having to prepare a course that is efficient, relevant, and tailor-made to meet the learners' professional needs. ESP first sprang to prominence in the 1960s and early 1970s. Even in those early stages of modern ESP, there was an awareness both that language competency alone was not the only desirable outcome of a special-purpose course and that the artificial fragmentation of experience into teachable chunks did not reflect the challenges faced by learners in their workplaces and content studies [1]. The globalization process together with the development of information and communications technologies resulted in greater job mobility and new demands for professionals with better linguistic skills, IT literacy, and good communication skills. Jendrych emphasizes that skills can only be acquired through practice, and once acquired is relatively easily maintained. The fact is that while we can 'teach' knowledge, we cannot 'teach' skill. Skill has to be learned, and practice is a central element in that learning [2]. This paper intends to examine to what extent the syllabus of ESP course contributes to specialist vocabulary acquisition and development of specialised skills and competences required for students' prospective jobs. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see how the requirements of ESP course correspond with the needs of professionals in their working environment.

II. DEMANDS OF TEACHING ESP

The role of language teachers according to Dudley-Evans and St. John [3] is to develop their skills dealing with researching and shaping the course material which focuses on gaining of specialized lexicon and registers.

Numerous researchers have attempted to define the notion of language for legal purposes, as part of ESP. Melinkoff, for example, pointed out that Legal English contains distinctive words, meanings, phrases, and modes of expression [4]. Cao emphasizes that legal language includes the language of the law, language about law, and language used in legal

Vesna Vulić is with the Social Department, Polytechnic in Požega, Požega, Croatia (e-mail: vvulic@vup.hr).

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communicative situations [5].

For the Net Generation, the traditional concepts of literacy and linguistic competences have changed, and so the teaching of a language cannot focus only on teaching vocabulary and grammar, but it has to focus on using the language as a medium for acquiring new skills. Some of the skills which have become very important in the 21st century include communication skills, teamwork and collaboration skills, presentation skills, analytical and critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, leadership and time management skills as well as computer skills. In order to be able to decide about the best ways of the specific groups of learners, lecturers have to investigate the needs of their students.

III. ANALYSING NEEDS

The importance of tasks in language learning has been highlighted by the Council of Europe in the document The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The action-oriented approach adopted by CEFR makes tasks central to language learning: it involves persons as individuals as well as social agents who develop various competences in numerous contexts in order to use the best available strategies for accomplishing the assigned tasks [6]. Action-oriented approach to course design means that the learners should accomplish only those tasks that are of most relevance to them in their professional lives. This means that course designers should be able to correctly identify the tasks and situations that the learner has to face in the real world. Needs analysis is the method that offers a good insight into different perspectives and contexts. Needs may be investigated from the perspective of teachers, learners or the employers. One of the problems is the fact that no learner group is homogeneous. We often deal with heterogeneous groups regarding proficiency in the English language, professional experience, and age. The needs of students are likely to be different from those already employed. Various perspectives from which the context can be considered produced a wide range of definitions of what constitutes a "need". Hutchinson and Waters define needs as the ability to comprehend and/or produce the linguistic features of the target situation [7]. Berwick discusses *felt needs* and *perceived needs* in which the distinction is made between a personal, inside perspective and more objective, outside view of the professional learner and his or her professional context for learning [8]. Robinson views needs in ESP on three different levels: the *micro-,* the *meso-*, and the *macro-levels* of needs. Micro level needs are those that arise from the individual learner, the wider context of the workplace is considered at the meso-level, and finally, the needs of society as a whole are considered at the macro level. Robinson, Wilkins, Munby and Dudley-Evans and St John are referred to as first-generation needs analysis, because of their language-centred approaches which focus exclusively on functions and notions, and on the four skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading. The second generation needs analysis requires a comprehensive task-based approach. This does not mean that there is a definite divide between the two

generations, however, Long considers the task as the primary unit of needs analysis. Different research methods are at the disposal of the potential needs analysts of ESP courses [9].

Needs analysis research involves different methods. Data can be obtained through interviews, surveys, questionnaires, language audits, observations and through methodological triangulation. Interviews may be structured or unstructured. Surveys and questionnaires are relatively convenient and cheap for researchers to design, copy and distribute and can produce a large amount of data. Their advantage is that they can be completed by respondents and returned in complete anonymity. Language audits and observations can give a researcher a deep insight into their respective object of study. Koster defines a language audit as an investigation of the language needs of a particular organization, with the findings the audit providing the basis of a report outlining what action the organization needs to undertake in order to increase the language competence of its employees and thereby improving contacts with foreign clients [10]. Observations provide the researcher with a source of rich data embedded in the professional contexts of the participant. In order to increase the reliability and validity of needs analysis, data should be collected from two or more sources using two or more methods. Therefore, experts advocate the use of triangulated methods for needs analysis research. Long points out that it is important to possess knowledge of the field being investigated and of the participants. Learners can be a good source of information, but sometimes they might be confused in expressing their needs in terms of learning a language [9]. When data are collected from a large group of participants, the questionnaire is the most appropriate instrument according to Mackey and Gass [11]. Master claims that needs analysis constitutes the most important aspects of ESP courses. Teachers should adopt the content of the course to fit the needs of students which in the case of Administrative Study students means incorporating the Croatian system of law and related terminology into the foundation of the course.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This research was intended to analyse the perceptions of three specific groups of stakeholders in foreign language learning at Polytechnic in Požega. The participants were: the first-year Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study students taking ESP as a mandatory course, the first year employed part-time Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study students taking ESP as a mandatory course and graduates with a degree in Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study. The main objective of the research was to ascertain learning needs of three groups of participants of ESP courses with respect to content and language, as well as to determine differences between the groups. Preferences in teaching approaches, the motivation for studying ESP and satisfaction with the course were also checked. The obtained results should be used in developing a tailor-made ESP syllabus.

The research survey was comprised of four different questionnaires aimed at three groups of respondents. The

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
Vol:11, No:6, 2017

questionnaires were distributed and collected in electronic form via the Moodle 3.1 online platform, and they were administered between September 20, 2015, and February 29, 2016. The needs analysis carried out among the three research groups provided quantitative and qualitative data. Two of the questionnaires were designed to check the participants' needs regarding areas of law and language skills to be taught in ESP course. Two post-course questionnaires aimed at checking participants' satisfaction with the current course and their motivation for studying ESP. The respondents answered the questionnaire, then, the collected data were interpreted. The post-course questionnaire, in which participants commented on the course, was both quantitative and qualitative in nature.

V. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

There were 98 participants in total: 47 first-year Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study students taking ESP as a mandatory course, 21 first-year employed part-time Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study student taking ESP as a mandatory course and 30 graduates with a degree in Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study with various amount of work experience.

Foreign languages taught at a tertiary level in Croatia basically present the continuation of language instruction at around the B2 level of the Common European Framework of References for Languages. The language program at the Social Department of the Polytechnic in Požega consists of 90 hours, distributed in the first three semesters of studies. The language groups range in size and ability from 30 to almost 50 students.

Part-time students are those attending the academic programme part-time. Most of them are employed and of different age groups. The tuition for the part-time study programme is met completely by the students themselves. They can attend the courses in regular hours with full-time students; however, most of them attend courses in the late afternoon and evenings or weekends.

Graduates with a degree in Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study are most frequently employed in local or regional self-government, public services, notary offices, private sector businesses or are self-employed.

VI. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this section provide insights into participants' perceptions on particular areas of law, language skills and the way they should be taught in the ESP course as well as their satisfaction with the course and motivation for studying ESP. The research study focused on comparing the perceptions of first-year students and the experience of the employed graduates in order to adjust and improve ESP course syllabus.

A. Questionnaire on Areas of Law

There were 25 questions in the needs analysis questionnaire on areas of law, regarding different areas of law as classified in the Croatian legal system. The particular areas of law are in line with the content of some of the textbooks on ESP currently available in the market. Six groups of fields of law

have been analysed.

The first group of questions encompassed the theory of law and the organization of the system. All students and graduates think it is important to study the legal profession and the system of courts, however, they think it is not important to study constitutional law. The majority of first-year part-time students and graduates find studying sources of law unimportant (71%), while 60% of the first-year students find studying it important and additional 15% very important.

The second group consisting of EU law, international law and environmental law, EU law was considered as very important by 84% and important by 15% of all participants. High importance is given to environmental law – 47% of participants find it important and 18% find it very important. In both cases, the importance is in correlation with the existing political and economic situation.

In the group of questions consisting of international and human rights law, both groups of students see these fields of law as more important than graduates (65% and 31%, respectively). Human rights law was regarded as important by first-year students and first-year part-time students (67%), while 61% of the graduates find it unimportant.

In the group consisting of civil and criminal law, they were similarly important for all groups (84% and 70%, respectively), while the law of tort was considered as the most important by first-year students (81% in comparison with graduates – 43%). However, the graduates regarded contract law as the most important (73%).

Regarding areas of law related to business activities (employment, financial, real property, IP and competition law) all participants considered them important (46%). The importance of financial law is growing with graduates due to gaining experience and knowledge at work. The area of law which was regarded by all participants as unimportant was IP law (41%).

The last group of areas of law consisted of commercial law, contract law and company law. Graduates see these areas of law as either important (12%) or very important (88%). The majority of the first-year students and first-year part-time students find them either important (24%) or very important (63%), but there is a group of 13% of students who find them unimportant.

Our hypothesis was that first-year students will have difficulties in recognizing their needs by considering some areas of law as unimportant and not being able to justify and explain their answers. On the other hand, first-year part-time students and graduates will express their needs more clearly because of their greater knowledge of various areas of law and work experience. From the obtained results it can be concluded that when explaining the answers on the importance of various areas of law, all groups agreed on the general importance of various fields and their practical application. Furthermore, when commenting the answers, graduates and first-year part-time students made a reference to their job experience, whereas first-year students mostly did not provide any comment, and if they did, they tended to generalize. This shows that they lack the knowledge on a given subject and are

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
Vol:11, No:6, 2017

not aware of its practicality. Nevertheless, they were fully aware of the importance of areas of general importance, legal profession, international law, and human rights law as well as EU law. Graduates, due to their greater knowledge of the field and work experience expressed their needs more clearly. They recognized the importance of business law and related areas of law. In the areas which were not of their importance for the job, they were inclined to mark them as unimportant (e.g. IP, human rights).

B. Questionnaire on Language Skills

In this part of the survey, we aimed to establish which language skills and what language knowledge the participants find most important. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, which covered reading and listening comprehension, writing and speaking skills and grammar. A number of other skills were added because of their importance for the legal profession: presentation skills, public speaking, interpretation of legal texts, translation, the usage of Latin terms, defining and explaining legal terminology, drafting contracts and business letters.

The item which is the most important for all three groups is conversation practice. Graduates and first-year part-time students find listening comprehension exercises very important (50%). Both graduates and first-year part-time students connect it with conversation practice and conducting interviews. However, only 25% of first-year students agree on this and an equal percentage find this skill unnecessary. Not surprisingly, all three groups point out the importance of presentation skills and the need to practice them. Their explanations are quite precise: "We will definitely need this at work." Furthermore, some of them think that a course on presentation and communication skills should be introduced.

Reliance on grammar is another point of agreement. More than 60% of participants find grammar practice very important. Less than 20% find studying grammar rules unimportant, naming them "basic language knowledge". Questions on legal terminology and the usage of Latin terms, which constitutes the biggest part of the ESP course, are for almost 60% of first-year part- time students very important: "It is very important to be able to explain legal and Latin terms in your own words rather than memorize their definitions" (25%). The percentage is reversed with graduate students, likely due to the requirements and experience with passing most of their exams by memorizing the laws. First-year students agree with first-year part-time students and the percentage is even more significant (75%). They consider definitions of legal terms and Latin expressions very useful because they provide the correct meaning of certain terms and "precision is of the greatest importance in law". All three groups agree on the need for translating English terms into the Croatian language. More than 40% find it very important. The importance of legal terminology and translation is related to reading and interpreting legal texts. Not surprisingly the need for the skill of interpreting legal texts is connected with work experience (from 35% of first-year students labelling it unimportant, to only 11% of graduates and 4% of first-year

part-time students).

The biggest gap between first-year students and graduates exists in the fact that 82% of graduates find business correspondence and drafting of various legal documents as the most needed, while around 40% of first-year students believe these skills are important, but they are rather general in answers. It is surprising that a number of them say: "I will have an assistant to do it". First-year part-time students realize the importance of these skills and they are precise in their explanations: "We will definitely need this at work".

Writing skills are considered to be of a low importance with first-year students. Around 35% think there is no need for them to learn how to write summaries or essays in English, the percentage is below 20% with first-year part-time students and 11% of graduates. The presented data have shown that graduates and first-year part-time students stress the importance of language knowledge and skills which are necessary for their work. This importance has not been recognized by first-year students due to the lack of awareness of the legal profession. The hypothesis that the awareness increases with work experience is evident with graduate students giving higher importance to these skills.

Therefore, the course for first-year students should focus on further development of the general language skills with special emphasis on writing skills (which they consider unimportant, but which serve as the basis for more specific skills they will need). Conversation practice should be done in smaller groups, and if possible, students should be grouped according to the level of language knowledge, the topics should be interesting, interactive and relevant. Grammar could be introduced to the extent needed at various levels.

Based on the results of the research on language knowledge and skills using the mother tongue in the ESP classroom is fully justified. Comparison of the Croatian legal system and related terminology with English legal terminology will help students to understand the relevant topics better and motivate them to acquire necessary skills.

C. Questionnaire on Satisfaction with the Course

This was a Likert-type questionnaire consisting of 15 items checking satisfaction with the organization and content of the course, teaching materials, teaching methods and students' attitudes towards assessment. The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

In general, all participants are content with the course they attended (M = 3.73): first-year students were most pleased and graduates the least. All three groups are pleased with the teacher and the teaching methods. First-year part-time students show the greatest satisfaction with regards to the size of the group (M = 4.0) which is comparable to graduate students (M = 3.9). At the same time, the mean for first-year students is significantly lower (M = 2.9), indicating that students would like to work in a smaller group. Additionally, first-year students object to the lack of conversation practice in the classroom and the number of lessons per week.

First-year students are in favour of a blended learning approach which combines a face-to-face environment and

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
Vol:11, No:6, 2017

online learning. Online study support material is graded as excellent support in acquiring the necessary language skills by all participants, particularly by first-year part-time students, because it gives them an opportunity to study when and where they want.

The final section of the questionnaire covered students' views on assessment/evaluation. Generally, all students seem to prefer taking a series of small quizzes rather than one test (M = 3.74). They show their interest in learning test-taking strategies (M = 3.96) and would like their teacher to teach them how to do well on check-up tests (M = 3.65). Most of the students prefer computer-based tests (M = 4.1)

The results of this part of the research are in line with our hypothesis. The ESP course is organized at an adequate level. However, the dissatisfaction of first-year students with the lack of conversation practice, the number of lessons per week and the size of the group is a call for change.

D. Questionnaire on Motivation

The questionnaire on the motivation for studying ESP was made up of 15 questions (yes-no questions, open-ended questions, and multiple choice questions) and for most of the questions, the participants had to explain their answers. Various elements of motivation were covered by the questions: the student as an individual, student's attitudes towards language learning, ability to communicate in English language, classroom environment and the materials used for teaching ESP.

Graduate students feel most confident to use ESP, since their perceived competence is higher than that of first-year students and first-year part-time students. Most of the first-year part-time students agree that a positive, secure and motivating learning environment was created (87%), while 71% of the first-year students agree with that. For 85% of first-year part-time students, the working atmosphere within the group was motivating, whereas only 35% of first-year students agree with this.

With regards to the language level, all participants stressed the usefulness for either their present or future job as the most important reason for studying ESP (78%), followed by the importance for graduates to learn ESP as opposed to general English (11%), and the importance for first-year part-time students as their future profession to know foreign languages (8%). The remaining 3% opted for integrative motivation seeing the study of ESP as a personal challenge.

All three groups of students agreed that course-specific motivational components are the most relevant at the learning situation level (91%). This leads us to the conclusion that ESP teachers should pay special attention that the material they choose for the course combined with the appropriate teaching methods form an attractive teaching course that could satisfy the students' needs.

VII. Conclusion

The results of our survey clearly confirm our hypothesis that knowledge and experience, to a great extent, influence the awareness of learning needs. Graduates and first-year part-

time students prove that there has been a positive correlation between acquiring knowledge and recognizing learning needs by giving more elaborate explanations to their answers. Furthermore, the strong influence of work experience has become obvious in an increase of needs correlated with specific areas of ESP corresponding to particular tasks that graduates and first-year part-time students came across at work. Areas of law and language skills of general importance have also been recognized by graduates and first-year part-time students. This conclusion should be kept in mind when deciding how to design an ESP course and how to group the students. First-year students have a very limited knowledge on different areas of law in their own language, and consequently, do not recognize the need for learning about them in English.

Moreover, first-year students differ from graduates and first-year part-time students in that they attribute greater importance to general language skills in a general context. Nevertheless, apart from developing general language skills with first-year students, they should be gradually taught job-related language skills important for their future profession. On the other hand, for first-year part-time students, the ESP course should include more demanding work-related content. Hence, it is the role of ESP teachers to provide enough opportunities for their students to develop skills and competences necessary for their future careers.

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