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Needs Reflected in Learning Goals:

An Exploratory Study of Language for Specific Purposes

Courses in a Higher Education Context

DISSERTATION SUMMARY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	4
2	Research Gap and Research Questions	7
3	Research Method.....	9
4	Results.....	12
5	Implications.....	18
	References.....	21

1 INTRODUCTION

The title of the dissertation mentions four concepts that require some clarification: needs, learning goals, language for specific courses, and higher education context. The blanket term *needs* cover several, interrelated concepts within the field of English for specific purposes (ESP). Needs encompass the linguistic needs and skills a language learner must know in order to be able to communicate in a target situation (target needs or necessities). Needs also cover a language learner's learning needs in the process of mastering a language for specific purposes. The most classic categorization (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) includes what a language learner is expected to know in a target situation (necessities), and what a language learner wants to learn (wants) or has to learn according to the language instructor (lacks). Apart from this three-partite classification, there are other typologies, distinguishing between learners' objective and subjective needs (Brindley, 1989) or perceived and felt needs (Berwick, 1989). A comprehensive definition can help us to navigate across different needs:

Needs is actually an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners' goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations they will need to communicate. (Hyland, 2006, p. 73)

However, for practical purposes, ESP courses must translate the various identified needs into *learning goals* (Anthony, 2018). The theoretical works mention five main learning goals within ESP instruction (Basturkmen, 2006): to teach subject-specific language use (the

genres), to develop target performance competencies (skills and competencies), to teach underlying knowledge (relevant background knowledge), to develop strategic competence (means of using knowledge), to foster critical awareness (challenging conformity). Empirical studies, however, formulate more smaller scale goals, objectives adapted to the local needs, or specific target situations.

The design of *language for specific purposes* (LSP) courses must be based on the results of needs analysis (Brown, 2016; Long, 2005). The awareness of needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and the imperative of needs analysis make LSP courses different from general language courses. After needs being analyzed and learning goals being set, appropriate course materials and teaching methods must be selected (Anthony, 2018). The end of an LSP course is marked by evaluating the effectiveness of the course (Anthony, 2018; Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Woodrow, 2018). The evaluation will set the foundation of the next LSP course, or, if it is done in the interim, it can help fine-tune or adjust the course in the right direction (Basturkmen, 2010). All stakeholders, learners, language instructors, field experts should be involved in the process of needs analysis determining which needs must be or can be translated into learning goals for the LSP course, and in the process of evaluating the effectiveness of the course.

The *higher education context* is important because it is the arena where LSP is dominantly taught. LSP courses are either integrated into university programs, quite typical in case of English medium instruction programs, or taught as add-on courses (mandatory or elective). Although no one would question the usefulness of learning LSP, studies revealed that compared to other subjects, they have lower prestige than content subjects (Räisänen & Fortanet-Gomez, 2008). The feature that distinguishes higher education LSP courses from

in-company courses is students' pre-experience status (Brown, 2016), that is, most of them lack relevant professional experience. It makes students more dependent on their language instructors for identifying their target situation communication needs and competences.

Unless sufficient data about needs are not collected and analyzed, or the results of the needs analysis is not implemented in the LSP courses, there is a high probability that important needs remain unmet. The discrepancy between students' actual needs and their perceived needs (Berwick, 1989) can result in student demotivation (Liu et al., 2011). This is the reason why the primary aim of this study is to identify the needs language instructors and students articulate when setting goals. The secondary aim of this research is to explore students' motivational patterns as they can reveal both fulfilled and unfulfilled needs. The significance of the study is in exploring a situation where, against all theory-based recommendations, no systematic and regular needs analyses are carried out.

2 RESEARCH GAP AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The roles learning goals play in LSP course design make them a suitable diagnostic tool to investigate both met and unmet needs. Considering how goals in general can reveal the underlying needs (Locke & Latham, 2013), a systematic analysis of learning goals and goal-directed behavior can give insights into LSP needs. If identified needs can be transformed into learning goals and objectives (Anthony, 2018; Basturkmen, 2006; Hyland, 2006), then needs can be revealed by investigating learning goals and objectives. Although goals were investigated in ESP context (Kormos et. al, 2011), but so far, no studies have investigated LSP related learning goals to explore the underlying felt and perceived needs (Berwick, 1989).

If needs are not analyzed within an institution, language instructors have limited access to information of target needs, and pre-experience students cannot help them either. However, the explicitly formulated goals, both by language instructors and students, can reveal which needs are fulfilled or remain unfulfilled. The investigation of goals can help to map other, goal-related concepts: students' motivation, attitude, self-efficacy, and causal attributions. When these concepts are examined from both language instructors' and students' angles, further information can be gained about students' needs.

The study attempts to address two research gaps; first to map and analyze LSP needs from the two stakeholder groups' viewpoints. The second gap is to explore students' motivational patterns, both from language instructors' and students' perspectives. The significance of the study is to provide a comprehensive view of a higher education institute

operating without conducting regular and systematic research analyses. The purpose of my study is to map needs and their interrelationship as they are revealed in LSP instructors' and students' goals. The two stakeholder groups perspectives can reflect on each other and shed light on needs that are painfully neglected. In order to explore the LSP needs as they are reflected in learning goals formulated by the institution, teachers, and students I formulated the following research questions:

- 1 What needs are reflected in the goals language instructors formulate?
 - a. What sources do language instructors rely on when defining needs?
 - b. What conflicts do language instructors perceive between needs?
- 2 What motivational patterns can language instructors identify?
- 3 How do language instructors evaluate the effectiveness of courses?
- 4 What characterizes students' language learning experience?
- 5 What relationships exist between the scales measuring aspects of learning a language for specific purposes?
- 6 What are the roles of background variables?
- 7 What influences students' intended effort, self-assessment, self-set and course goals?
- 8 What student profiles can be identified concerning motivation?
- 9 Which unmet needs cause dissatisfaction?

3 RESEARCH METHOD

In order to have a comprehensive view on the complex phenomenon of students' LSP-related needs, I opted for the mixed methods research design. The complexity of the research questions aiming to address two perspectives justifies the choice of this method (Ivankova & Geer, 2018). The two perspectives, those of LSP instructors' and students' can be presented by using two methodologies, qualitative and quantitative, respectively. Within mixed methods research the two paradigms have complementary roles (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Riazi, 2016).

The instructors' perspective examined by applying qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen first, because of its exploratory nature, second, the size of the population would not make it possible to carry out a questionnaire study. The in-person, oral interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed by using the constant comparison method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1982). The analysis was done with the RQDA software (Huang, 2016). The number of participants and the languages they were teaching are in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants of the Interview Study

Language for specific purposes	Number of interviewees
English	16
German	3
French	1
Italian	1
Spanish	1
Total	22

In order to collect data about LSP students' perspective, quantitative

research method was used. The questionnaire collected information from students of all faculties, and courses where LSP was taught. The research tool was created by the researcher based on the literature. The paper and pencil questionnaires were administered to 490 students learning LSP. The quantitative phase aimed to test how salient the emerging themes of the interviews were for the students. The multi-item scales proved reliable measures as the values of the Cronbach alphas signify (Table 2).

Table 2*The Reliability of Scales*

Scale (number of items)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α	Omega
Target skills (4)	4.41	.61	.74	.744
Attributions (6)	4.31	.48	.64	.518
Teacher roles (9)	4.24	.45	.74	.737
Attitude (6)	4.22	.64	.82	.824
Evaluation (4)	4.16	.89	.91	.905
Student goals (10)	3.77	.67	.84	.836
Course goals (13)	3.70	.56	.85	.846
Classroom practice (13)	3.54	.58	.80	.799
Self-assessment (8)	3.19	.86	.92	.92
Intended effort (6)	2.91	.70	.71	.718

For the data analyses SPSS (Version 28) was used. The following statistical procedures were done in order to answer the research questions: students' language learning experience (RQ 4) was analyzed by descriptive statistics; the relationship between the scales (RQ 5) was identified by computing the correlation coefficients; the roles of background variables (RQ 6) were calculated by doing ANOVA and t-tests; the effects on certain scales (RQ 7) were computed with regression analyses; students' motivational profiles were determined by doing a hierarchical cluster analysis (RQ 8); and finally, the unmet needs (RQ 9) were identified by content analysis.

4 RESULTS

In this section I would like to provide a brief summary of the results of both the qualitative and quantitative parts by giving answers to each research questions.

RQ 1 What needs are reflected in the course goals language instructors formulate?

The goals language instructors formulated reflect four types of needs: linguistic needs, field-related knowledge, learning needs, and the need for a motivating environment. The linguistic needs include the perceived target situation communication needs, proficiency, and the need to pass the language exam. Teaching field related knowledge is a need language teachers perceived they had to address in order to be able to teach LSP effectively. Within learning needs the most salient goal is to teach language learning strategies. The fourth type of needs is that of a motivating learning environment.

The sub-question concerning the sources of needs (What sources do language instructors rely on when defining needs?) found that LSP teachers relied on their work experience (to the smallest extent), digital and printed media, and coursebooks. In the face of missing field-related experience, LSP instructors relied on their own personal values, work experience (as teachers) to teach perceived target situation competencies, showcasing authenticity.

The findings regarding the second sub-question (What conflicts do language instructors perceive between needs?) indicate that LSP instructors could identify three

areas. There are conflicts within themselves: they felt they could not teach the language without compromising their perceived responsibility to prepare students for exams. There are conflicts within students as well: they have to balance their LSP studies and other academic (and work) commitments. The third area of conflict arises from the situation that several students have already met the degree requirement and still have to attend obligatory LSP classes.

RQ 2 What motivational patterns can language instructors identify?

According to the language instructors, students' motivation can take four paths. It can remain constantly high throughout their LSP studies especially among students who already have clear career plans and can see the instrumental value of LSP. Due to lack of challenging goals beyond language exams, motivation can palpably decrease over the three terms students attend the university language courses. There are students whose motivation is consistently low either because they were not interested in the first place, or too complacent to learn, or whose motivation is directed to languages for generic and not specific purposes. The fourth motivational pattern is the increasing one, indicating that LSP can have an inevitable role in remotivating language learners.

RQ 3 How do language instructors evaluate the effectiveness of courses?

Effectiveness of an LSP course should be measured by objective, formative tests, interviews with teachers and students. The results indicate, however, that in this research context, only students' progress is measured. The measurement tool is a successful language exam. When

it comes to assessing their own effectiveness, LSP instructors can merely rely on students' success stories or failures. This situation makes teachers' motivation vulnerable, too much dependent on their students' achievements. The effectiveness of LSP courses is hampered by several institutional decisions, circumstances

RQ 4 What characterizes students' language learning experience?

Most students learn ESP, a quite understandable choice in a sense that English is considered the lingua franca of the business world. Many students have been studying (mainly) English for eight or more years and have already passed one or more B2 or C1 level exams. The outcome of the research indicates that despite learning for eight or more years there was a cohort of students who did not have any tangible proof of speaking an L2. Another alarming finding is that a comparable gap exists between the large number of successful language exams and the requirements for the degree.

RQ 5 What relationships exist between scales measuring aspects of learning a language for specific purposes?

The results highlight that students perceive a high consistency between the course goals and the classroom activities. As for their own intended effort, it is closely linked to their own goals and to their attitude. It suggests that students are more willing to exert effort to reach their own goals than to achieve the goals LSP courses set. There is also a close connection between their own goals and target skills and attitude. The results indicate that students do not perceive that their own goals and course goals overlap. These two goals run parallel, inferring that there are needs not aimed to be fulfilled by LSP courses. The nature of these needs are discussed at the last research question.

RQ 6 What are the roles of background variables?

The effects of seven background variables were examined (age, gender, fulfilling the degree requirement, work experience, workplace L2 use, courses, language choice), but I will highlight two pivotal variables. Age. Although the age range of the participants was not particularly wide, the results indicate that older students have less positive attitude to learning LSP and are less willing to make effort. The starting point and the reason for the decreased intensity of attitude and intended effort cannot be inferred from the data, since a questionnaire can only give a cross-sectional view. Workplace L2 use. It must be noted that experience with using L2 in a workplace had more impact on students than the length of work experience. Those who have used L2 while working had more tangible goals than those who have worked but did not use L2. Undertaking a job where one did not use L2 had a more negative effect on target skills and self-assessment than not having any work experience.

RQ 7 What influences students' intended effort, self-assessment, self-set and course goals?

The results indicate that student goals can be best explained by the importance students attribute to the target skills and the amount of effort they intend to exert. Intended effort is dependent on the attitude students have towards learning LSP. Course goals can be regarded the most tangible through classroom activities. Students' level of self-assessment largely based on course goals, and to a lesser extent, on their own goals. This last finding indicates that students' primary reference point is the academic environment.

RQ 8 What student profiles can be identified concerning motivation?

The results suggest that in the sample there are three distinguishable student profiles: the Highly motivated, the Moderately motivated, and the Least Motivated. These profiles are significantly different from each other in other scales as well. Moreover, the comparison of groups based on their positions of fulfilling the degree requirements proves that being half-way meeting the requirements puts students more likely to the Highly motivated group. On the other hand, the lack of experience with using L2 in workplace situations will probably rank students among the Least motivated group members. These two findings exemplify that language learning experience can have a positive or a negative effect on motivation.

RQ 9 Which unmet needs cause dissatisfaction?

From the students' point of view, four unfulfilled needs can make them dissatisfied. The need for personalized environment involves many things: from group size to tailor-made evaluation. This need is students' desire to be seen as individuals. When students express their need for relevance, they expect language inspectors to step beyond coursebooks preparing them for actual target situations. The need for a higher-level culture of learning is an appeal for a more egalitarian treatment, a detachment from the over-regularized secondary school teaching practice. The last need is related to autonomy: there is an explicit want for more autonomy among those who consider themselves capable of regulating their own learning; and a similarly explicit desire to less autonomy, expecting more help from language instructors.

The research gaps this study attempted to address was to investigate university students' LSP needs and motivational patterns as they are reflected in students' and

language instructors' goals. The results of the research indicate that students' motivation to learn LSP in a university setting is influenced by positive and negative language learning experience, which can be counterbalanced by learning LSP itself. Placing this result in the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009), it raises the issue that a newly found professional identity (ideal self) can outweigh the effect of language learning experience, a component of the three-partite model. The stronger motivating power of LSP-focused courses over general language courses has already been established, but the remotivating potential has not been discussed so far.

Another contribution of the study, in terms of practice, is to show how teachers' own work experience is used to compensate for the lack of information about target situation competences. In face of the sometimes sharp criticism made against LSP instructors (Einhorn, 2021; Jármai, 2008; Kırkgöz & Dikilitaş, 2018), recognizing that teachers can be authentic sources of certain competences or skills is imperative. If a complex needs analysis, including present situation analysis, means analysis, learning situation analysis, and target situation analysis, was conducted, teachers should not rely on their own resources to determine students' need in an LSP course. Apart from making LSP courses more effective, implementing the results of a needs analysis would remove an unnecessary burden from language instructors.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Most research findings in ESP/LSP are local, idiosyncratic, temporal, and situational, depending on learning contexts, disciplines, student groups, and societal expectations (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). Identifying the neuralgic points of an LSP educational context also makes these findings valuable, and effective, provided they can inform the existing practice. Hereby, I would like to formulate some pedagogical implication of my research.

Uneven proficiency. Unless an institution sets a requirement for the entry level of proficiency, it should cater for the differences between students. The research has highlighted that it is not merely an issue of being at a different level but has a powerful impact on learning needs and goals. Although target needs are the same, students have different needs regarding material, method, teacher roles, classroom activities, assessment etc. Students' need for differentiation is valid both in secondary education (Öveges & Csizér, 2018), and in a higher education context as well. An institution should carry out a thorough means analysis to determine if it has all the necessary resources (human, time, facilities) to handle this situation. If a higher education institute accepts students with uneven proficiency, then it should provide a flexible framework that would offer students different paths to improve.

LSP is a game changer in motivation. Language instructors should know that the most effective tool to remotivate students with lost motivation, and low self-beliefs is LSP itself. Its practicality, usefulness and relevance should be capitalized on, and emphasized in LSP

courses. Choosing suitable teaching methods, classroom tasks, materials, and forms of assessment reflecting the very nature of LSP can create a motivating learning environment.

On-the-job needs analysis. What cannot be done by the university can be achieved by students. First of all, students have to be encouraged to apply for positions to companies where L2 is used. Then, during their internship or in their jobs, students can be asked to collect information about L2 use. They would receive a template (preferably digitalized), or an application they could enter the information that would be immediately available for LSP instructors. The template or application would contain questions typical in needs analysis, for instance:

- What is your job now?
- What are your responsibilities?
- Give a list of situations when you are in contact with foreign clients or colleagues.
- What are you discussing when you meet?
- What skills do you need to improve?
- What new words, phrases have you learned this week?

These questions would serve two purposes. First, they would help to make LSP education more specific and relevant by narrowing down the vast number of companies where students find employment, and it could give relevant and up-to-date information about the LSP and LSP related skills companies expect from students (Chan, 2021). Second, the questions would raise awareness of language learning strategy use. Reflecting on workplace language use, seeing it as another area of learning, students could master lifelong language

learning skills. I think it could mitigate the stress at workplace by transforming it into a learning environment.

LSP simulation. Business and Tourism students have the opportunity to participate in high-stake international simulations annually. Assessing language skills can have a similar format could fulfill students' need for relevance. With all the information students have collected during the on-the-job needs analysis, LSP instructors can organize language assessment simulations.

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