

On the importance of needs analysis

Read any book on teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and you will find that needs analysis is pretty fundamental. As ESP teachers, a major part of the job is to collect and analyse lots of information in order to make sure that our teaching is as effective and efficient as possible. ESP is not just about teaching English, it's about teaching the specific English the students need to operate successfully in their chosen field. Whether our students are from the oil industry or the construction industry, this principle remains the same.

So we ask questions such as: What lexis and structures will my students need to be able to use to operate effectively in their chosen field? Will they need to know very technical vocabulary, for example, in order to understand procedures and processes? And if they do need this language, what do they already know? Likewise, what genres will they need to be familiar with and which of these are they already proficient at using? What types of contexts and situations will they be using English in? Which of these situations are most critical to the well-being of the organisation? Where will misunderstandings in communication cause problems? What types of activities should we be using to make sure that maximum learning takes place in this particular teaching context?

These sorts of questions are not easy to answer, and we often brush them aside. It's so much easier to depend on a course book to tell us what to do, instead of simply using it as a resource. Yes, the course book can do a lot, but it can only go so far. For example, a large number of people in the oil industry will never go near an oil rig, so pages which focus on oil rigs are probably not the most appropriate if such people are in your class. Likewise, even if your students come from the construction industry, they may never go anywhere near a construction site. I can speak from personal experience – I have spent years working with people like this. However, in both industries it is probably true that health and safety is an important topic which all employees have to be able to deal with. It is our job to get to know our students and find out what their learning priorities are. And this is why the books in Pearson's Vocational English series have been written in such a way that they can be dipped into. It is not necessary to do every page.

Fortunately, ESP practitioners over the years have developed a number of tools and techniques which can help, such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, task-based assessment, target situation analysis, corpus analysis and discourse analysis. Using these tools and techniques requires a certain amount of expertise, which probably explains why so many books and articles have been written about them, and why so many teachers invest so much time and effort in developing the necessary skills. When we get needs analysis right, our teaching is exactly what our students need. When we get needs analysis wrong, we are not doing ESP. This is why needs analysis is probably the single most important professional skill for teachers of ESP.

So here's the challenge: think about your own students and ask yourself the questions in the second paragraph of this article. If you can answer all the questions – well done! You will know which parts of the course books are useful to your students, and which can be left out. And if you can't answer the questions, perhaps it is time to think a little more about needs analysis.