English for Specific Purposes Assessment

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Abstract

Most language assessment specialists agree on several principles of measurement, which include evidence for test reliability, validity, and impact. The purpose of ESP assessment is covered by target language needs situations, extremely important and necessary in order to conceive the tests correctly. The current paper is the result of an experiment assessment session at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj, Romania, with special reference to students in Horticulture, Landscape Architecture, Forestry, and Land Survey. The experiment starts from the idea that when students start an ESP course, they already know about 20-25% of the terminology, which they are supposed to acquire by the end of the academic year. Several types of tests and questionnaires are suggested in order to detect this terminology, on the one hand, and to find out information and data concerning students' needs and directions for the course design and syllabus development, on the other. Pre-course tests for reading, writing, speaking, and listening are taken by all the potential course participants before the actual language course begins. They are used to seek information about the students' specialist areas, work experience, personal background, and other relevant details that would play some role in conceiving the course and the following assessment stages. ESP assessment is conceived in such a way as to obtain relevant results for the teaching process.

Keywords: *testing, principle, purpose, needs analysis, language ability, academic context.*

INTRODUCTION

There has always been a debate concerning ESP and "general English", ESP courses and general English courses, ESP assessment and general English assessment. Traditionally there has been a distinction between the two, but after recent publications (Bachman and Palmer, 1996) this contrast became indistinct. Currently most language assessment specialists agree on the same principles of measurement concerning validity and impact (Douglas, 2010).

Generally students have a thorough language background when they proceed to ESP study, which is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students (Bailey, 2007). The current paper is the result of an experiment assessment session, which took place at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Cluj, Romania, with first year students.

Most students included in this experiment studied English for 10 or 11 years in primary, secondary, and high school and others, beyond all these, had some work experience abroad.

During the first course of English the teaching staff is interested in preparing and designing the ESP course, which is usually based on the specific needs of learners (Long, 2005). The course designers conduct needs analyses to ascertain the students' target needs and learning needs and then integrate the required linguistic elements into the syllabus. The pre-course needs analyses are used to obtain information and data concerning, the need

for language skills' (Holliday, 1995) in order to give directions for the course design and syllabus development. The term "needs assessment" is often used with reference to the <<systematic process for determining and addressing needs, or „gaps" between current conditions and desired conditions or „wants". The discrepancy between the current condition and wanted condition must be measured to appropriately identify the need. The need can be a desire to improve current performance or to correct a deficiency>> (Kizlik, 2010).

The main objective of the paper is to present an original assessment method, experimented at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Cluj, Romania between 2011-2013. The paper points to the importance of ESP course designers, who conceive the tests and questionnaires in such a way as to obtain relevant results for the teaching process. ESP assessment instruments reflect a specific area of language use and consequently ESP tests are based on the understanding of several characteristics of specific purpose language, like precision of context and the relationship between specific purpose language and specific purpose background knowledge.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The target group of the experiment consists of first year students in Horticulture, Landscape Architecture, Landsurvey, and Forestry. The students are organized in groups of 20-25, most of them in the first year, aged from 18 to 25. They are preparing for careers in the global economy and are aware of their need of ESP courses. Most students, future specialists, need to become proficient in English, in order to meet a predictable range of communicative abilities. They will be in the process of developing expertise that will enable them to succeed in their future internships and jobs. In order to be successful they have to master several language skills and be able to perform a variety of activities in English.

The ESP course designers conceive the first tests and questionnaires in such a way as to obtain relevant results for the teaching process. They conduct needs analyses in order to find out the students' target needs and learning needs and then include the required linguistic elements and skills into the course.

When students start an ESP course, most of them already know about 20-25% of the terminology, which they are supposed to acquire by the end of the academic year. Students in Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, for instance, can give lists of flowers, fruit-trees, and vegetables. Students in Forestry can name medicinal plants, varieties of trees, and bushes. Students in Land Survey can mention activities performed by a landsurveyor, various instruments for measuring the land, and GPS applications. At the very beginning it usually happens that students do not realize how much of this terminology they know, because all these words have not been part of their active vocabulary. This is why the needs assessment session includes two stages: the first stage, with no preparation, during the first couse, and the second, after a reading session, a listening session, and a long conversation, all with reference to specialty subjects. Both stages of the needs assessment session have the same purposes and the same structure, as described in Tab 1.

After the first assessment stage the students prove to be familiar with only 5-10% of the terminology. The second assessment stage, preceded by the above mentioned listening, reading , and writing activities, proves that their knowledge of terminology goes up to 25%. The explanation is that the words, representing the terms neccesary to their new domain, have been learned in the past, but have not frequently been used; it was only after the "refreshing button" was pushed that many terms were remembered.

Tests and questionnaires are given to students in order to gain insight into their perceived needs,

Tab. 1 Test description: the skills tested, types and number of tasks and time allowed

Skill	Task type	Number of tasks	Time allowed
1. Listening	Question answer session	10	10 mins
2. Reading	Reading session; Questions-answers	Two texts 10 questions	20 mins
3. Writing	Prompt involving an extended written answer	One prompt	15 mins

preferences and gaps. From the results of the tests, the language level of students, which is helpful in the design of the course, can be established. Tests scores are very important to test designers and course designers, but they are equally important to students. As McNamara and

Roever have remarked: "...through the con-cern for the rationality and consistency of the interpretations made on the basis of test scores, validity theory is addressing issues of fairness, which have social implications" (McNamara and Roever, 2006).

Both tests and questionnaires are used to seek information about the students' specialist areas, personal background, work experience, and other relevant details that would play some role in conceiving the course and the following assessment stages. From the results of the tests and questionnaires, we can ascertain the language level of the learners, which is helpful in the materials selection, course design (McNamara, 2009), and especially in the placement of students in groups, according to their level. Although most students started studying English in primary school, many groups of lower intermediate and upper intermadiate level are necessary.

Tests for speaking skills are conceived with the language input from general to specific, so that to check the students' knowledge of both general and technical English. Topics are sequenced in three stages. In the first stage, general topics are used, such as personal data, easy conversation, story telling, and nature description - for Horticulture, Landscape Architecture, and Forestry, and land description and measurement units for Land Survey. The second stage progresses towards covering general technical topics, such as talking about European and home agriculture, old and modern methods of cultivating plants - for Horticulture and Forestry, and map reading for Land Survey. The third stage of topic selection includes subjects connected with the European Union, from agriculture and trade to human rights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The experiment needs assessment session covers the purposes of testing, the educational background of students and their knowledge characteristics on the one hand, and the context of specific language situation on the other. The results of the assessment are important because

they give students the opportunity to show what they have learned and they help teachers make decisions concerning the students' further needs. At the same time, the results of the tests represent a good   opportunity for students to compare with each other and to increase the competitive attitude.
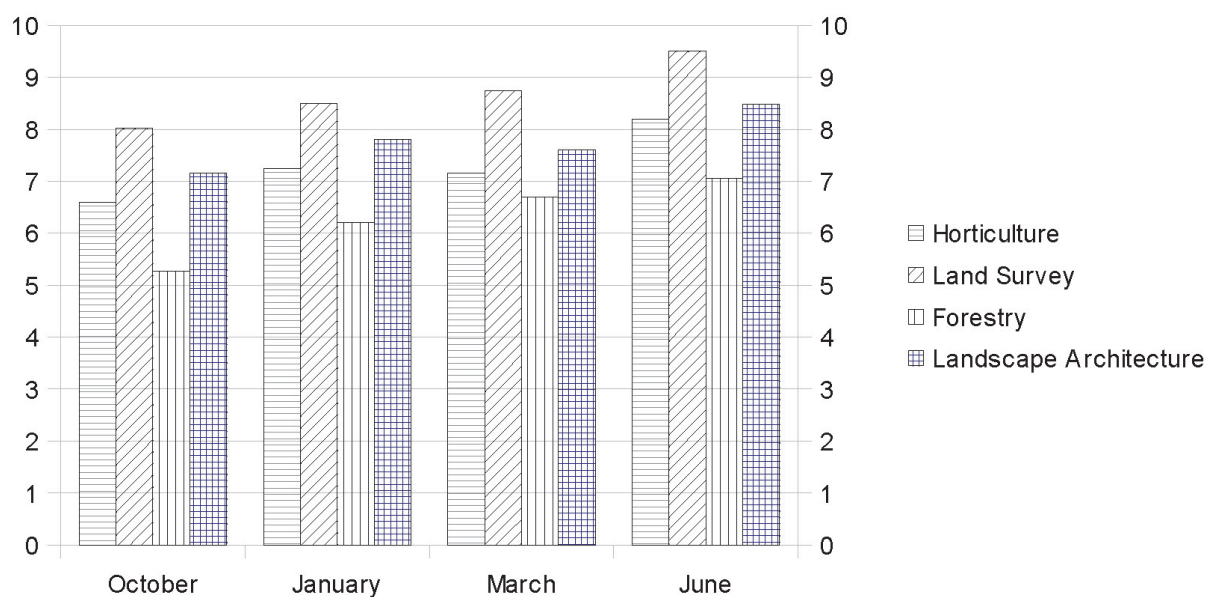
The results of the first tests are the key to the structure and content of the teaching process, which, according tp the students' level, is conceived so that at the end of the language course the following abilities are absolutely necessary: reading and writing instructions; reading professional literature, academic journals; writing technical and academic articles; attending conferences and taking part in professional discussions; per-forming technical or business negotiation in English; visiting and receiving foreign peers. Some of these abilities are compulsory; thus, all the students in the group have to acquire them, others are optional, consequently, approaching the respective activities depends on the students' choice, as shown in Tab 2. Optional activities offer students the opportunity to undertake activities and work additional to their compulsory tasks in order to gain additional credit that would boost their grades. Extra credit may be employed for a variety of reasons. For example, it may be felt that students who are highly capable can benefit from additional challenge that might not be suitable as required work for all students. Extra credit may also be used as a way to allow a student to improve his or her grade after weak performance earlier in a course. In both of these cases, it can promote diferentiated instruction by factoring in optional work in the assessment of student performance.

The results of speaking skills 1,4,5,6,7 from Table 2 reflect the students' ability to express themselves and perform various activities in English. Fluency and language competence are related and significant when language proficiency is judged (Powers, 2010). Proficient speakers demonstrate both accuracy and fluency, and use a variety of discourse strategies for their targets.

The results of reading skills are also significant. The students learn how to preview their readings first, how to select those readings or sections of a reading, relevant to their needs. They learn a range of strategies in order to make the task less overwhelming (Douglas, 2000). They need to be able to identify their purpose or specific purposes

Tab. 2 Results of skills assessment

No	Abilities required	Type	Percentage of students involved	No of tests	Results (Average)
1	Reading and writing instructions	compulsory	100%	3	6.81
					7.25
					8.53
2	Reading professional literature	ompulsory	100%	6	6.25
					7.12
					8.23
3	Writing technical and academic articles	optional	25%	3	7.03
					7.75
					8.65
4	Performing business negotiation	optional	35%	3	7.12
					8.01
					9.25
5	Preparation for attending conferences	optional	20%	3	7.61
					8.25
					9.12
6	Communication with foreign peers	compulsory	100%	6	7.31
					8.15
					9.12
7	Preparation for visiting and receiving foreign peers	compulsory	100%	6	7.51
					8.27
					9.32

Fig. 1 Progress in the acquisition of terminology

for reading because **why** they read will determine **how** they read.

The results of writing skills prove that students are able to convey a body of information about a professional subject and are used to formal academic rhetoric. They learn that typically scholarly writing has an objective stance, clearly states the significance of the topic, and is organized with adequate detail.

Along the academic year the skills assessment sessions showed the students' progress . The best target group segment proved to be the students in Landsurvey, followed by students in Landscape Architecture, Horticulture, and Forestry, as shown in Fig 1.

According to the scale in figure 1, the best progress in the acquisition of terminology belonged to the students in Land Survey, followed by students in Landscape Architecture and Horticulture. The weakest results belonged to the students in Forestry.

CONCLUSION

The importance of this paper is manifold. Firstly, it presents an assessment method which saves time along the academic year, taking into consideration the limited number of language courses - one hour per week. The method squeezes from the student's mind all the lexical knowledge, which the student had acquired along his years of studying English, fit for the new domain.

Secondly, the paper points to the importance of ESP course designers, who conceive the tests and questionnaires in such a way as to obtain relevant results for the teaching process. They conduct needs analyses so that to find out the students' target needs and learning needs and then integrate the required linguistic elements and skills into the course. Since ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and methodology are based on the learner's rationale for learning, the role of the ESP teaching staff is essential to the success of the ESP program.

Thirdly, ESP assessment instruments reflect a specific area of language use and consequently ESP tests are based on the understanding of several characteristics of specific purpose language, like precision of context and the relationship between specific purpose language and specific purpose background knowledge. ESP assessment should be focused on assessing ability to use language precisely in order to perform relevant tasks in various contexts while integrating aspects of field-specific background knowledge.

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