A needs analysis survey: The case of tourism letter writing in Iran

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The aim of ESP courses is to equip the learners with a certain English proficiency
level for a situation where the language is going to be used, i.e., target needs. In the last few years,
needs analysis researches have tended to an increased interest in investigating the most effective
ways of improving the ability of workers in using ESP in the workplace. One of the skills required
in the field of travel and tourism is writing. Accordingly, the current study aims to determine the
letter writing needs of tourism students. To this end, a complete list of sample business letters was
taken to experts in the field of travel and tourism and hotel managers. The long list was truncated
to be more easily handled in the second phase of the study. The newly drawn list of letters was
sent to five hotels and twenty travel agencies in Iran to find the most frequent topics they deal
with in their daily correspondence as their needs. To have confidence in the agency choices, the
researchers also measured the interrater reliability coefficient among different agencies and hotels.

Introduction:

The advancement of business and communication technology in the course of past twenty years has
revolutionized the field of English language teaching and has radically swerved the attention of
course designers from teaching English for Academic purposes to teaching for more specialized
purposes (Al-khatib, 2005).
The aim of ESP courses is to equip the learners with a certain English proficiency level for a situation
where the language is going to be used, i.e., target needs (Sujana, 2005). It is agreed that any decision
made in designing language teaching programs in ESP contexts should hinge on the learners' needs
for learning English (Robinson, 1991, Strevens, 1998; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Sujana,
2005).
However, pinpointing the students needs is a challenging task since needs have been defined from
various perspectives. In this respect, Hutchinson and Waters (1993) have classified needs into
necessities, wants and lacks. According to them necessities or target needs are concerned with the
demand of the target situations (i.e. what the learner needs to know in order to function effectively in
the target situation). Lacks refer to the learner's existing language proficiency in order to help
determination of the starting point of the teaching and learning process. And, wants relate to what the
learner would like to gain from the language course. Therefore, course designers must be well
informed of the workplace culture, the vocational needs of the workers and the constant changes that
are taking place in order to help improve communication in the work place (Leung, 1994).
In the last few years, L1 and L2 acquisition researches have tended to an increased interest in
investigating the most effective ways of improving the ability of workers in using English for specific
purposes in the work place (Li So-mui and Mead, 2000; Al-khatib, 2005). Nowadays English is
necessary to obtain a job, get promoted and perform effectively in the world of work. This demand
has generated the incursion of a new linguistic branch within the field of ESP, namely, English for
occupational purposes. (EOP) (Dominguez & Rokowski 2005)
One of the skills required in workplace is writing which is among the most laborious skills at tertiary
level. The need to develop the skill stems from the rapid change and development of the job market
that requires graduates to acquire certain level of writing skills. Consequently, writing courses offered
at university level should be based on skills related to job needs and job functions to ensure that
learners are provided with the essential writing skills to perform at the workplace (Stapa,
1998).Therefore, in ESP context, the pragmatics and types of texts have to be explicit and narrowed.

This not only helps the learners to realize the importance of acquiring the skill but also leads to a well-structured and organized programme (Stapa, 1998).

Accordingly, the crucial issue to ESP is the necessary starting point in material development and course design. This is considered critical because material developers have to be selective at specific content-based materials and topics to ensure relevance (Stapa, 1998). In this respect, Clarck (1999) has recognized templating as a needs analysis approach to analyze the training content by the careful review and analysis of a template. This technique is used to determine content or developing learning objectives associated with the operation or maintenance of a specific system.

Considering the above mentioned facts and employing templating approach, the researchers aim to analyze the contents required by tourism students for writing letters at work place.

Background

Broadly defined, needs analysis (NA) is a procedure to collect information about learners' needs (Richards, 2001). The importance of NA is emphasized in English for Specific Purpose (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and English for Academic Purposes (Jordan, 1997), and also in general language courses espousing learner-centered curricula (Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1996), task-based curricula (Long & Crookes, 1992), as well as performance-assessment (Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1988). The teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) falls within the framework of what is generally called English for Specific Purposes (ESP), taking place in essence, and as its name suggests, in an educational environment. The reasons for its increasing relevance is due to the fact that English has changed from simply being another foreign language into having become a universal form of communication in all walks of life. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:95) state that the teaching process of any kind of language for occupational purposes should take as a starting pint the analysis of the four traditional skills within an appropriate context, that being, as far as possible, the conditions given in the workplace. Moreover, they subscribe to the idea that an effective syllabus must attempt to overcome the deficiencies of the educational system under which they are operating. EOP therefore encircles a reaction against the conventional humanistic approach wherein both teachers and students abide by the academic objective of knowing everything about the language being studied instead of concentrating attention on those skills most relevant within the workplace in the time allotted in the educational environment. (Dominguez & Rokowski 2005) EOP can be defined as "the portion of the curriculum which prepares students for gainful employment in occupations ranging from low-skilled to sophisticated jobs in technical fields. (Anthony, 1997, p.56).EOP programs focus on developing communicative competence in a specific field, such as aviation, business, or tourism. EOP is more general compared to ESP because it does not focus on the specific job disciplines but it is more on general basic skills required by students in order to prepare students for the workforce. Examples of basic skills in EOP are reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the context of this study, writing skills required to perform in job functions are for example report writing, letter writing and memo (Anthony 1997).Some courses prepare students for various academic programs such as offering a seminar for graduate teaching assistants to train them in public speaking skills, while others prepare students for work in fields like law, medicine, tourism and graphic design.(Hortas 1995).Among the many vocational areas that make the world of English for specific purposes, that of English for tourism is one of the most attractive because all of us are tourists on countless occasions, bringing our own real experiences to the classrooms. In the field of English for tourism students most of the studies have focused on the analysis of the required skills and needs in work place, adequacy and appropriateness of instructional materials and strategies, and involvement of students in the procedure of syllabus design.

The skills required in the related job were addressed by Martinez (2001),Murphy and Brown(1998), and Sujana (2005).The study conducted by Martinez (2001), indicated that EOP programme mostly incorporate basic job readiness skills such as job search, interviewing, preparing resumes, letters, and filling out work-related forms. Murphy and Brown involved three different groups of adult learners who were doing English courses revealed that it is important to provide tangible evidence to these

learners that the courses would help them to obtain employment and would facilitate a variety of job readiness and employability skills. (1998). Competency based approach in designing English curriculum for tourism students was proposed by Sujana (2005). In establishing needed competencies in a particular workplace, he holds, a course designer can start from target needs, identify the duties of professional workers, translate the needs into competencies, translate the competencies into linguistic and other specifications and develop teaching/ learning activities to develop competencies. Stapa (1998) investigated the needs and expectations of Tourism and Management students with regard to the writing courses offered in three collages in Malaysia, and sought to see if the current writing programmes for hotel management and tourism students reflect the specific writing needs required at the workplace. The need to write formal letters and reports were the two highest skills required performing the jobs. Most respondents also indicated that they are not satisfied with the present syllabus offered at the collages and believed that the syllabus dud not equip them well in order to enter workforce.

Al-Khatib (2005) examined the communicative needs of tourism and banking personnel by shedding lights on their perceptions of needs, wants, lacks, and attitudes toward English in order to include what is needed and exclude what deemed less important to them. It has been observed that the type of work plays a significant role in evaluating and using of English. The most common reasons for communicating as a travel agency worker were found to be offering destination guides, writing and sending email and faxes, making on-line ticketing, browsing the internet, making on-line hotel booking, etc. Travel agency users were found to be heavier users of English than their banking counterparts. The results of the study indicated that the most important skill for tourism personnel is writing.

When instructing an EOP course an issue to take into consideration is that using adequate language learning and professional strategies are required in tourism field. (Laborda 2002). Inclusion of the strategies development in the academic process was found to provide both group and individual improvement.

In designing a course for students of culture and tourism, Barancic (1998) used an integrated approach to get the students involved in the syllabus he wanted to teach. The approach he invented consisted of 8components: knowing the class and their knowledge, determining the goals to achieve, the way we measure the success, making decisions with students involved, creating syllabus, deciding on the real teaching techniques and method and getting feedback during the course. The application of the approach indicated that the teachers are faced with needs which are of a less academic and more realistic nature.

In a study on the contribution made by students with work experience to the development of courses for Hotel management and tourism, Leung (1994) found that: a- student's involvement in syllabus negotiation based on the experience in the industry(Hotel management) help the design of a need-based course, b- students provide valuable information on changes in workplace culture, for instance subservient politeness on the part of Hotel staff is giving way to a more outspoken, decision-making politeness, c-students suggestions as to what has to be learnt to cope with the vocational needs for tourism management can inform both the immediate learning environment and subsequent course planning activities. (Leung-1994)

Rationale for the study:

In the tourism field, English is used widely for inbound and outbound travel as well as in client contact (Leung, 1994). Moreover, tourism is rather a nascent course at the tertiary level; therefore, it is quite a demanding task to write the English syllabus and develop the course (Walker,

As Carson (2000) holds carefully identified needs and appropriate teaching materials for tourism students will produce satisfied customers as well as plenty of professional fulfillments for those committed to doing a good job.

Keeping this in view, it is felt that writing courses offered at university level should target on skills related to job needs and job functions to ensure that the learners are well equipped with the required writing skills in order for them to perform at the workplaces.

Method:

Since EOP (English for occupational purposes) is more concerned with the content and format, initially a complete list of sample business letters containing 591 letter topics was downloaded from 4hb.com letters and forms website. Due to the length of the list, it was speculated that checking such an exhaustive list might not be manageable, hence time-consuming. Consequently, a pilot study was arranged to firstly, truncate the original long list into a more relevant one and secondly, to become familiar with likely hurdles that one may face in dealing with travel agents and hoteliers.

To this end, the tourism students were given instructions to take the complete list to the travel agencies and hotels. They were required to ask a concerned travel agent to tick the titles they mostly deal with in their foreign correspondence.

As Bhatia (1993:35) has predicted it was "difficult to find a truly resourceful specialist informant". Furthermore, it took effort and time to explain the purpose of enquiry to both travel agents and hoteliers. To cope with these problems, the letter writing list was translated into Farsi and the attempt was made to explain the goal of the research to the travel agents and hoteliers.

Based on this pilot study, out of the 591 topics, 103 topics were sieved to be included in the final truncated version to be taken to the agencies. The rationale behind selecting these 103 topics was the number of the topics most frequently ticked by hotels and agencies in the pilot study. The newly drawn list was predicted to be more manageable and relevant to the job.

To specify the corresponding writing needs of tourism students, the newly drawn letter writing topics list was handed to 74 tourism students to take to 14 travel agencies and 4 hotels in Isfahan and 6 travel agencies in Tehran. Finally, the frequency of selected topics by agencies and hotels was counted and the interrater reliability coefficient was computed.

Data Analysis & Conclusion

For the present study the tourism students' letter writing needs are defined as the most frequent letter subject marked by experts in travel agencies and hotels. Those letters the frequencies of which were higher than 10 i.e. marked by more than 40% of experts were selected as their writing needs. (Table1)

The frequency count of letters revealed that "Reservation" is regarded unanimously as a pressing need for tourism students by all the agencies and hotels. (Frequency= 224, 100%)

The second and third commonly marked letters were, as the table shows, "Thank you for tour" and "Announcement of special discount offer" with frequencies of 20 and 18 respectively.

Out of 24 agencies and hotels which received the letters list 17 marked 'Complimentary letter to hotel ", 16 marked "Announcement of price reduction" and 15 considered equally "Announcement of price increase", "Apology after cancellation of order" and "Bill of sale as important, i.e. as the forth, fifth and sixth frequently marked subjects.

"Complaint letter", "Congratulation for increased sale", "follow-up letter to travel agency" and "Apology for delay of refund" all were similarly regarded as significant by 13 experts (54%).

The next predominant letters were "Announcement of new discount" (frequency=12), "Guarantee" (frequency = 11) and "Reply to complaint", "Reply to inquiry ", "Employment agreement", "Announcement of change of address "and " Inquiry letter"(frequency=10). (Table 1)

To answer the second research question as to the degree of consistency between the answers from receivers of the list as well as the reliability of the instrument correlation was calculated for total agencies in Esfahan and Tehran and hotels and separately for Esfahan agencies, Tehran agencies and hotels.

The correlation value for all 24 participants was 0.83, demonstrating a considerable degree of consistency in experts' decision on the significance of letter subjects for tourism students. The Cronbach's Alpha for 14 Esfahan agencies amounted to 0.79 and is considered high enough in terms of consistency. Among 6 Tehran agencies the calculated value of was 0.49. The widely-accepted humanities and social science cut-off is that correlation value should be 0.7 or higher. The low degree of consistency among Tehran agencies compared to those in Esfahan **_can_** be attributed to the accessibility of larger number of agencies in Esfahas, for the research was conducted in Esfahan, so much so that if we had doubled the number of Tehran agencies, the coefficient alpha **_might have been_** higher and hence the result would has shown more homogeneity.

The lowest correlation value was obtained from the calculation of consistency among 4 hotels (0.39).Similarly the limited number of hotels referred for data collection **_may_** be for the low value.

The findings of the current research can have two major implementations for teaching English for tourism. Firstly, this can provide English for tourism (EFT) teachers with a list of letter writing genres they are mostly in need of. Since according to Cubo (2006) whenever a teacher of EFT encounters with creating or adapting materials, the first drawback s/he faces is to obtain accurate and reliable information on the genres and discourse patterns used in the targeted professional settings. To remove this problem Cubo (2006) proposes that we can bridge the gap between the teacher of English for tourism and corporations in the tourism industry by knowing about the genres (both oral and written) used by a particular discourse community in a particular professional setting.

Secondly, the present findings can serve a useful reference for syllabus design in general and designing an appropriate writing syllabus in particular. As Munby (1979) and Donna (2000) state to adjust the course material to particular needs in working environment, we have to follow real demands and interests from the academic and professional worlds. In ESP courses this relies on detailed information taken from questionnaires, interviews and tests for the evaluation and measurement of interests, demands and needs in the target context, i.e., agencies and hotels in the present study, as the future work place.

In a nutshell, due to budget limitation, the number of English courses currently offered to tourism students is quite limited. Therefore, using a template-based approach to letter writing needs analysis may be helpful in optimizing and economizing the course.

Letter title	Frequency	Percentage
reservation	24	100
thank-you for tour	20	83
announcement of special discount offer	18	75
complimentary letter to hotel	17	70
announcement of price reduction	16	66
announcement of price increase	15	62
apology after cancellation of order	15	62
bill of sale	15	62
complaint letter	13	54
congratulation for increased sale	13	54
follow-up letter to travel agency	13	54
apology for delay of refund	13	54
announcement of new discount	12	50
guarantee	11	45
reply to complaint	10	41
reply to inquiry	10	41
employment agreement	10	41
announcement of change of address	10	41
inquiry letter	10	41

Table 1. Frequency count and Percentage of letters marked by experts

	correlation
Esfahan+ Tehran+ Hotel	0.83
Esfahan agencies	0.79
Tehran agencies	0.49
Esfahan hotels	0.39

Table 2- Total Correlation between Esfahan Agencies, Tehran Agencies, and Hotels and Correlation among Agencies in Esfahan, Tehran and Hotels separately

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APENDIX

Simple Business Letters (Letters and Forms)

1- Acceptance of order with delivery in lots
2- Acceptance of resignation
3- Acknowledged receipt of goods
4- Acknowledgement and Acceptance of Order
5- Acknowledgement of application
6- Acknowledgement of cancellation of backorder
7- Acknowledgement of change in meeting date
8- Acknowledgement of customer praise of employee
9- Agreement to extend Debt Payment
10- Announcement of Additional location
11- Announcement of catalog price reduction
12- Announcement of change of address
13- Announcement of change of address for billing
14- Announcement of new area representative
15- Announcement of new discount
16- Announcement of price increase
17- Announcement of price reduction
18- Announcement of special discount offer
19-Apology after cancellation of order
20- Apology for delay of refund
21- Application for license
22- Appointment for employment interview and testing
23- Assignment of contract
24- Bill of sale
25- Business credit application
26- Commercial account analysis form
27- Complaint letter
28- Complimentary letter to hotel
29- Confirmation
30- Confirmation of acceptance of employee Suggestion
31- Confirmation of interview appointment
32- Confirmation of purchase agreement

33- Confirmation of telephone report of problem
34- Congratulations on a job well done
35- Congratulations on increased sales
36- Congratulations on outstanding achievements
37- Customer service request form
38- Demand for delivery
39- Demand that future payments be by certified check
40- Employee suggestion for company meeting
41- Employee agreement
42- Employee information form
43- Employment letter
44- Financing statement
45- Five-day demand for payment
46- Follow-up letter, Travel agency
47- Guarantee
48- Inquiry letter
49- Negative response to job application
50- Negative response to job candidate interview
51- New employee welcome
52- Notice of change of address
53- Notice of inability to ship
54- Notice of promotion
55- Notice to employee of new vacation policy
56- Offer of 2% discount for speedy payment
57- Part arrival notice, Request to schedule service
58- Payment on specific accounts
59- Photo and recording release
60- Pre-employment checklist
61- Pre-employment checklist form
62- Promotional letter, accountants
63- Promotional letter, bank
64- Promotional letter, catalog sales
65- Promotional letter, corporate security
66- Promotional letter, direct mail service
67- Promotional letter, domestic service
68- Promotional letter, insurance
69- Promotional letter, office space
70- Promotional letter, public relations
71- Promotional letter, service business
72- Reply to complaint
73- Reply to inquiry
74- Request for advertising rate information
75- Request for advice
76- Request for attendance at meeting
77- Request for clarification on applying payment
78- Request for employment interview
79- Request for full refund
80- Request for information from credit reporting agency
81- Request for listing of employee to be tested
82- Request to locate former employee
83- Retirement party invitation
84- Retirement party invitation and gift (internal)

85- Return of check missing signature
86- Reservation
87- Termination of employment
88- Thank you for hiring
89- Thank you for interview
90- Thank you for offer to help, Accepted
91- Thank you for payment after phone call
92- Thank you for support during illness
93- Thank you for tour
94- Thank you for uniform design
95- Thank you for your inquiry (price list enclosed)
96- Thank you for your kind comments
97- Thank you from restaurant following luncheon
98- Thank you to applicants for testing
99- Time note
100- Verification of employment and letter of recommendation
101- Welcome new customer
103- Welcome to our family of customers and friends