

# NEEDS ANALYSIS OF LSP STUDENTS AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CROATIA

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates LSP students' prior experience in language learning, as well as their current and future needs. Also, it examines the students' perceived English language skills and their results on a placement test. To do so, the placement test and the questionnaire were administered to LSP students at different programs at two tertiary education institutions in Croatia. The results reveal that ESP students are a heterogenous group in terms of proficiency regardless of the study program and that they share their plans for the future use of English. On the other hand, some differences between female and male students, full-time and part-time students, as well as students who attend different programs emerge. These differences should be further investigated.

**Key words:** LSP, needs analysis, placement test, students' attitudes

## **1. Introduction**

The education system in Croatia has undergone fundamental changes in the previous two decades, which directly or indirectly affected language learning from primary to tertiary level. Furthermore, the past decade has seen the emergence of career readiness as one of the main goals in education in general (Vulić, 2017), that is, in language teaching in particular. Namely, besides advanced proficiency, students are in need of specialized training (e.g. translation, interpretation) as well (Simonsen, 2021).

Taking into consideration the possible impact of the above-mentioned changes on language teaching at tertiary level institutions, needs assessment emerged as a logical step to determine students' proficiency and attitudes in the Croatian context and provide insights for course development in the future. Namely, LSP courses and programs are defined by "specific needs of a particular group of learners" (Richards

& Schmidt, 2010, p. 198), which puts needs analysis at the heart of LSP and the pace of changes described above demands for its continuous implementation. Given that Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) may be used as an umbrella term with any target language, it is important to emphasize that this paper will focus on English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

## **1.1. Needs analysis**

Needs analysis, which simply put is the “how and what of a course” (Hyland, 2006, p. 73), has been an integral part of ESP for many decades and is considered by many prominent authors as its crucial element (Basturkmen, 2010; Belcher, 2006; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). To quote Belcher (2006, p. 135), “it is probably no exaggeration to say that needs assessment is seen in ESP as the foundation on which all other decisions are, or should be, made.” Furthermore, Simion (2015, p. 55) concludes that “needs analysis is the foundation on which we can develop curriculum content, teaching materials and methods that can lead to increasing the learners’ motivation and success”, thus confirming that curriculum development, materials and student motivation lie in the heart of needs analysis.

Over the years, the concept has transformed from being solely objective to focusing on both objective and subjective needs of learners (Belcher, 2006; Hyland, 2006; Flowerdew, 2013; Simion, 2015; Widodo 2017). Given the complexity of the concept, many authors advise on different sources and methods for collecting data (Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Flowerdew, 2013; Romanowski, 2017) some of which include learners, teachers, employers, and colleagues from other fields as well as building on existing knowledge, i.e. using previous research material. Taking into account different perspectives gives us a more relevant overview, however, it is the students who are considered primary stakeholders (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016) and they should be at the heart of needs analysis (Brown, 2015). The preferred methods include questionnaires, (un)structured interviews or focus groups, observation, proficiency measures, and target discourse samples (Long, 2005).

## **1.2. Research on needs analysis in the Croatian context**

One of the main characteristics of needs analysis is that it should be situation-specific (Purpura et al., 2003). Therefore, the authors have selected some relevant studies that might shed more light on needs analysis in the Croatian context.

Many studies into ESP students' attitudes corroborated the significance of the English language for almost all students regardless of the institution of higher education they attended (Krstinić, 2020; Martinović & Poljaković, 2010; Narančić Kovač & Cindrić, 2007; Omrčen & Mihovec, 2021). Although the majority of students were aware of the value of English, Martinović and Poljaković (2010, p. 158) stated there were differences between genders and claimed that female students were more highly motivated than male students.

In terms of usage, Cindrić and Narančić Kovač (2005, p. 202) asserted that private and professional learners' needs go beyond "the common core of the English language". In terms of professional usage, students use English most frequently when writing seminars, communicating with teachers and in other "traditional situations and contexts connected with university education" (Narančić Kovač & Cindrić, 2007).

In relation to language proficiency, Jelovčić (2010) and Vulić (2017) reported that their ESP courses were mixed-ability classes. A recent study at the Faculty of Economics, University of Rijeka, Croatia (Čakarun & Drljača Margić, 2021) showed that undergraduate students proficiency levels varied from B1 to B2 according to Oxford Quick Placement Test (OPT). As to the self-assessment of their knowledge of the English language, Jelovčić (2010) stated that the majority of students thought their knowledge was very good.

As to the significance of the four skills, speaking was singled out as the most or one of the most important skills (Jelovčić, 2010; Kunda et al., 2021; Vulić, 2021). Surprisingly, Mujić (2003) stressed students thought speaking was taught the least. Interestingly, both Vulić (2017) and Krstinić (2020) found that students considered grammar very important.

Some other studies informed on the influence of experience on recognizing learner needs (Lukica & Kaldonek, 2011; Vulić, 2017). Namely, these studies concluded that knowledge and experience affect the awareness of learning needs to a large extent.

### **1.3. Aim of the study**

This study investigates ESP students' prior knowledge of the English language, as well as their current and future needs in this respect. To gain a better insight into the aforementioned needs, the study also examines students' perceived language skills and their results obtained from taking a standardized placement test, as well as differences among student groups attending different institutions and study programs.

## 2. Research design

### 2.1. Research questions

The research questions which guided the study are as follows:

RQ1: What is students' (perceived) linguistic competence?

RQ2: What are students' current needs?

RQ3: How do students plan to use English in the future?

### 2.2. Methods

The sample in this study is a convenience sample comprising ESP students from the Polytechnic of Rijeka and the Faculty of Maritime Studies, University of Rijeka, that is, three study programs (Agriculture, Entrepreneurship and Technology of Transport – TOT). The study was carried out in the academic year 2020/2021. A total of 114 ESP students completed the placement test and the questionnaire (male=49.1%, female=50.1%). According to the study program, the sample comprised 41.2% TOT students, 30.7% agriculture students and 28% entrepreneurship students. Most students were full-time students (FTS) (81.6%) and 18.4% of them were part-time students (PTS).

The first set of data was obtained from the standardized Oxford Placement Test (OPT) by Allan (2004), which was used to gain insight into their current linguistic competence and help us bridge “the gap between needs and present abilities” (Long, 2005, p. 34). The test consisted of the listening and grammar multiple-choice tests, which provided data on proficiency levels in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The second set of data was collected using the adapted version of the English Needs Assessment Questionnaire by Fisher (2004) to suit the Croatian context and the purpose of the study. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: biodata, self-assessment of linguistic knowledge, current needs, and future use of English. The questionnaire was designed and answered in Croatian.

The first part of the adapted questionnaire by Fisher (2004) enquired into students' demographic information: gender, type and name of the study progra, and the number of years they had spent learning English as a foreign language. The second part of the questionnaire investigated students' self-assessment of their background knowledge of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). More precisely, the students rated their perceived knowledge on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (beginner) to 4 (fluent). The third part of the questionnaire investigated students' perceptions of

what they considered to be important for their study program. The students rated the importance of the four skills in different contexts, the importance of using English in different situations, and the learning activities that suited them the most on a Likert-type scale from 1 (unnecessary) to 4 (very important). Lastly, three open-ended questions elicited students' best learning activities, attitudes towards learning General English (GE) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and their plans to use English in the future.

Descriptive statistics of variables were utilized to describe data from the questionnaire and the test. The statistical significance of differences in self-assessment and preferences between male and female participants, but also of full-time and part-time students was determined with the help of independent two sample t-tests, where a p-value smaller than 0.05 indicates the statistical significance of the results. Also, the one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between the means of the three study programs.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. (Perceived) linguistic competence

Concerning the levels achieved in the OPT, the highest number of students (27.93%) was at B2 level. The lowest number of students was at C2 level (8.11%). Students at A2 (13.51%) and A1 (11.71%) level were also identified in the sample.

With regard to the self-assessment of students' knowledge of the four skills, the mean for listening (2.97) was the highest rated of the four skills, and the mean for writing was the lowest (2.47). When comparing FTS and PTS, FTS rated all their skills higher than PTS (e.g. reading: FTS=2.80, PTS=2.48; listening: FTS=3.04, PTS=2.67). The results of the t-test indicated a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the self-assessment of writing (FTS=2.55, PTS=2.14) and the self-assessment of speaking (FTS=2.59, PTS=2.19). Thus, FTS rated writing and speaking significantly higher than PTS. Furthermore, a comparison was made between male and female students in relation to their self-assessment. Both female and male students rated their English language skills as intermediate (reading, writing, speaking) and advanced (listening). However, the male participants rated their skills higher than the female participants (e.g. self-assessment of speaking: male students=2.66, female students=2.38). The self-assessment of reading (male students=2.91, female students=2.57) was the only item where a statistically significant difference occurred. Therefore, male students' rated their reading skills significantly higher than female students.

### 3.2. Current needs

The findings in relation to students' current reading needs are presented in Table 1. The items *Internet sources* (3.11) and *e-mails* (3.95) were rated the highest, whereas the means for *magazines* (2.18) and *literature* (2.09) were the lowest. As for the listening skill, the mean for *lectures* (3.25) was the highest, followed by *instructions* (3.16), *TV, movies, radio* (3.11), and *presentations* (3.04). In terms of the difference between FTS and PTS, the item *literature* was the only one where the difference was statistically significant, namely, FTS rated literature significantly higher than PTS.

**Table 1.** The comparison of mean values, standard deviations and results of the t-test regarding the importance of reading different types of texts in relation to the students' status

Reading	FTS		PTS		t-test	p-value
	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)		
Literature	2.16	0.825	1.76	0.625	2.085	0.039
Magazines	2.16	0.798	2.29	0.717	-0.657	0.513
Manuals	2.76	0.925	2.90	0.700	-0.783	0.413
Textbooks	2.87	0.863	2.95	0.669	-0.405	0.686
Academic papers	2.67	0.925	2.81	0.814	-0.653	0.515
Technical Reports	2.70	0.930	2.71	0.902	-0.069	0.945
Internet Sources	3.11	0.744	3.10	0.700	0.069	0.945
E-mails	3.04	0.820	3.10	0.700	-0.270	0.787

In terms of speaking activities, the highest mean was obtained for *comprehensible pronunciation* (3.26), but mean scores for all the four given items (*comprehensible pronunciation*, *discussing*, *asking questions* and *presenting*) ranged from 3.02 to 3.04. The findings in relation to writing are provided in Table 2. The highest mean score was given to *emails* (3.04), followed by *presentations* (2.96). On the other hand, our participants gave the lowest mean scores to academic papers (2.40) and essays (2.55). A statistically significant difference was found between the entrepreneurship students and the agriculture students in relation to the item writing an essay. Namely, writing essays seemed to be more important for students of entrepreneurship than for students of agriculture.

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations and the ANOVA results for the differences in the assessment of the level of importance for being skilled in producing various writing forms

Writing	Study program	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	F	p-value
Reports	TOT	2.66	0.984	0.483	0.618
	Entrepreneurship	2.84	0.884		
	Agriculture	2.66	0.802		
Academic Papers	TOT	2.49	0.930	0.464	0.630
	Entrepreneurship	2.28	1.023		
	Agriculture	2.40	0.881		
Essays	TOT	2.55	0.855	4.508	0.013
	Entrepreneurship	2.91	0.893		
	Agriculture	2.23	1.031		
Presentations	TOT	2.87	0.824	0.540	0.584
	Entrepreneurship	3.06	0.759		
	Agriculture	3.00	0.907		
Notes	TOT	2.66	0.841	0.845	0.432
	Entrepreneurship	2.81	0.859		
	Agriculture	2.54	0.852		
E-mails	TOT	3.09	0.905	0.175	0.840
	Entrepreneurship	2.97	0.933		
	Agriculture	3.06	0.765		

As to the importance of English language use, the items *transport* ( $M=3.21$ ) and *at work* ( $M=3.18$ ) had the highest mean scores, whereas the mean scores for other activities (namely, *shopping*, *academic activities*, and *phone*) ranged from 2.93 to 2.98. The comparison of FTS ( $M=3.18$ ) and PTS ( $M=2.67$ ) yielded a statistically significant difference in relation to the item *at work* ( $p<0.001$ ). Hence, FTS rated the importance of English at work significantly higher than PTS.

With regard to learning activities, *pair work* ( $M=3.22$ ) and *group work* ( $M=3.06$ ) were the learning activities that had the highest mean scores. On the other hand, *individual work* ( $M=2.81$ ) and *whole-class* ( $M=2.70$ ) were rated the lowest. When asked to name the best learning activities, the students most frequently named the following: *in-class discussions*, *quizzes*, *presentations*, *problem-based learning*, *translation*, *group work*, and *listening*.

Different types of communicative activities (e.g. discussion, presentation, group work, etc.) seem to be popular among the participants. However, some students deemed translation or problem-based learning the best way in which they could improve their language:

*"Given that I am in my first year of learning English at an educational institution, I would say that the best way of learning is the dialogue with the teacher or just listening to the teacher and then repeating that on my own."* (TOT, FTS, 12)

*"I learn English best when translating the text."* (Agriculture, FTS, 6)

In relation to the question whether GE or ESP should be taught at tertiary level, the majority supported teaching a combination of both GE and ESP. Most comments argued that there are differences in students' background knowledge, so that teaching GE would be beneficial for some students who lack background knowledge:

*"I believe it is extremely important because not everybody studied English previously and those students who have studied English before also make pronunciation mistakes."* (Entrepreneurship, FTS, 13)

*"I believe so because in order to understand the English language for specific purposes, we need to have some background knowledge of General English, that is general English should be taught in our courses as well."* (Entrepreneurship, PTS, 4)

Those students who said that GE should not be taught were a minority and they emphasized ESP to be important for their profession, whereas GE should have been learnt during their primary and secondary education.

*"I think that what really matters is specialized vocabulary."* (TOT, FTS, 18)

*"Only ESP. I believe that we should have learnt GE in elementary school and in high school."* (Agriculture, PTS, 3)

*"Universities should teach ESP exclusively."* (TOT, FTS, 20)

Surprisingly, one participant thought that GE was more important than ESP and that it should be the only focus of language teaching at tertiary level:

*"General English should be taught. Certain professional vocabulary is best learnt while doing one's job. In my opinion the most important thing is to achieve high quality communication, and therefore I believe general English is a base for everything else."* (Entrepreneurship, PTS, 15)



### 3.3. Future use of English

Regarding the students' future use of English, their reasons could be divided into work-related and leisure activities. In addition to that, some answers corroborated the position of English as a true lingua franca pervading students' professional and private lives:

*"I use it every day and I plan to continue using English. I communicate with people from other countries and the only language in common is English."* (Agriculture, FTS, 4)

Work-related activities cover possibilities of moving abroad and working there, but also finding information that are not at disposal in their mother tongue. On the other hand, leisure activities mentioned by the participants include: travel, movies and online shopping, which underlined the everyday use of the English language in different aspects of students' private lives.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

### 4.1. Linguistic competence

The findings suggest that ESP students' linguistic background at tertiary level is heterogeneous, which is what Jelovčić (2010) and Vulić (2017) suggested in their papers as well. More precisely, our participants belong to all six levels of the CEFR scale. The students' average results (namely, B2 for two study programs, that is B1 for one study program) are in line with the study conducted by Čakarun and Drljača Margić (2021). A significant portion of the participants from our study are still at A1 level which is quite concerning given that they have been learning English for 12 years on average. In relation to one of the absolute characteristics of ESP, that is, that ESP meets specific needs of the learner (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), burning questions emerge based on the results of our research: Is it possible to meet specific needs of learners who are at six different levels of the CEFR scale and how? What is more, based on the results of national high school exit exams in Croatia, it is estimated that the lowest level of high school exit exams matches an A2 level of the CEFR (*Nacionalni centar za vanjsko vrednovanje obrazovanja*, 2021). Namely, if "ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students" (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 4), it is uncertain what the end result for the teaching and learning process is. Therefore, institutions of higher education might consider offering remedial classes to help the students who are still struggling.

## 4.2. Current and future needs

Although the three study programs (Technology of Transport from the Faculty of Maritime Studies, and Entrepreneurship and Agriculture from the Polytechnic of Rijeka) are quite different in terms of content, this study reveals students' similar background knowledge, but also their future plans to use English both privately and professionally, which is in accordance with other studies (Krstinić, 2020, Martinović & Poljaković, 2010; Vulić, 2017). Also, the majority stresses the importance of teaching both General English and ESP at tertiary level, aware of the significance of General English for acquiring ESP. On the other hand, our study also indicates some differences between female and male students, full-time and part-time students, as well as students of different study programs. The dichotomy between FTS and PTS in relation to the self-assessment of writing and speaking might be explained in line with other studies (Lukica & Kaldonek, 2011; Vulić, 2017) which claim that knowledge and experience affect how we perceive current needs and abilities. In addition, students of different study programs prioritize different forms of writing probably due to different professional demands. Therefore, the curriculum should be tailored to meet the needs of different students and potential job vacancies accordingly.

This study has several limitations in terms of the number of participants in general, or students of different years of study programs in particular. Also, other study programs should be included. Furthermore, students should be tested in more detail to see what kind of background knowledge they bring to their tertiary level education. Further research should include other stakeholders (e.g. teachers, administrators), but also a more detailed investigation into students' differences (gender, student status, study program).

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## ANALIZA POTREBA STUDENATA JEZIKA STRUKE NA VISOKOŠKOLSKIM INSTITUCIJAMA U HRVATSKOJ

Ovo istraživanje ispituje prethodno iskustvo u učenju jezika, kao i trenutne te buduće potrebe. Također se istražuje kako studenti percipiraju svoje jezične vještine na engleskome jeziku i analiziraju se njihovi rezultati na ispitu jezičnoga predznanja. U istraživanju su sudjelovali studenti jezika struke dviju visokoškolskih ustanova u Hrvatskoj koji pohađaju različite programe i koji su ispunili dijagnostički test ovladanosti engleskim jezikom i upitnik. Rezultati pokazuju da su studenti engleskoga kao jezika struke heterogena grupa glede predznanja bez obzira na to o kojem je studijskom programu riječ te da imaju slične planove u vezi s korištenjem engleskoga jezika u budućnosti. S druge strane, istraživanje je ukazalo da postoje razlike između studenata i studentica, redovitih i izvanrednih studenata, kao i da postoje razlike među studentima različitih studijskih programa. Te bi razlike trebale biti dalje istražene.

**Ključne riječi:** analiza potreba, ispit jezičnoga predznanja, jezik struke, predznanje, stavovi studenata