



ORIGINAL PAPER

Students' Needs and Expectations in ESP Classes: A Case Study

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Abstract:

In the context of our globalised world and people's constant search for high-qualified, well-paid jobs, English teaching and learning are nowadays, maybe more than ever, focused on reaching very specific goals. Based on the characteristics and requirements of the target situation, the English for Specific Purposes course is commonly designed according to students' needs, focusing on developing those skills which will enable them to successfully integrate in future communities of practice. The aim of the present study is to analyse learners' expectations when acquiring English as a foreign language, related to the requirements of their professional careers. The focus group consists of students at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Craiova, Romania. The analysis is based on a survey among students in the first year of studies, and is meant to offer valuable guidance to a course design that meets the highlighted needs. As a method, we resort to a questionnaire that students received at the beginning of the academic year, followed by an interpretation of the data.

Key words: *ESP, needs analysis, productive skills, receptive skills, target situation*

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Introduction

The fall of communism in 1989 was a major turning point in the history of Eastern Europe. One of the first measures taken at the time was the opening of geographical borders with major consequences for Romania and its neighbouring countries. The freedom to travel enabled people to work and/or study abroad, and at the same time attracted foreign investors who were interested in Romania's economic potential. The country soon became part of the globalised world, and since then it has witnessed a great expansion of its economy, education, technology and international relations. All these developments have brought into focus the necessity of speaking English, as the accepted international language of global exchange in business, science, technology, research etc. (Kim, 2008: 5-6; Dudley-Evans & St John, 2012: 19; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 6). Researchers have pointed out that: "The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods." (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 7) Thus, there emerged English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which, unlike General English, is concerned with the language of specific professional communities, that is, "the language of a particular discipline as it is used" (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010:142).

The academic education system in Romania was quick to respond to those new requirements, and in the 1990s introduced in its curricula courses of ESP in order to cater for the needs of future professionals who use the language in particular work-related contexts. ESP has become "a major activity around the world today" (Robinson, 1991: 1) and Romanian universities are well anchored into this activity.

Given the paramount importance of learners' needs in designing ESP courses, this paper focuses on finding and examining learning needs and expectations based on a survey among students registered in the 1st year of studies at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, at the University of Craiova, Romania. It starts by mapping the territory of investigation, that is, by presenting a general theoretical overview of needs analysis with the aim of providing background knowledge on the topic. It then delves into an in-depth analysis of the questionnaire that was given to the students, and its findings, in order to clearly determine and subsequently interpret the specific needs and expectations of the target group. Finally, the conclusions are drawn on the data provided by the survey.

Needs analysis: a literature review

The famous quotation by Hutchinson and Waters – "Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 8) – which became the guiding principle of ESP, emphasises the role of learners' needs in establishing what to teach and how to teach in any ESP course. It is widely agreed that needs analysis is the starting point for designing syllabuses, courses, materials, as well as the most appropriate teaching methods (Higgins, 1966; Strevens, 1977; Coffey, 1984), being linked to "the core mission of preparing students to use English in their target contexts" (Hyon, 2018: 3).

Researchers have emphasised that the concept of needs is a fairly large umbrella (Jordan, 2012: 22; Robinson, 1991: 7), its definition being broadened with experience and practice. Therefore, in order to clarify some of its myriad interpretations, we shall look at the most prominent approaches to needs analysis, namely target-situation analysis,

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present-situation analysis and learning-centred approaches, that address different meanings or types of “needs”, as well as employ various other terms for “needs”.

Target-situation analysis

This type of analysis, devised by Munby in 1978, focuses on what students need to know at the end of a language course. Concerned with a communicative approach to syllabus design, he created a “Communication Needs Processor” which comprised a set of questions about key communication aspects, such as topics, participants, medium etc., in order to collect information of the target language needs. He provided lists of required micro-skills and micro-functions that can be used as checklists for the subsequent syllabus (Munby, 1978: 4). From this perspective, needs refer to learners' ability to understand and produce the linguistic features of the target situation, such as the ability to understand indirect speech.

Munby's work is considered fundamental in the development of ESP; yet, it was later criticised for showing “the ultimate sterility of a language-centred approach to needs analysis” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 54). Another criticism concerned “the language items chosen for practice” which were derived from social English, rather than the real language in use (Jordan, 2012: 24).

Present-situation analysis

This approach, designed by Richterich and Chancerel in 1977, focuses on establishing learners' present situation, that is, the level of their language proficiency at the beginning of the course, and compare it to the target situation. “The gap between what the learners' actual needs are and what should be taught to them” (Brindley, 1989: 56) is commonly referred to as “the training gap” which, once identified, informs future teaching and learning. Presenting this type of needs analysis, Jordan points out that the methods of collecting the data are questionnaires, surveys and interviews, and the information is provided by the students themselves, the teaching institution and the “user institution”, for instance the learners' future place of work (Jordan, 2012: 24). The final outcome is a picture of learners' strengths and weaknesses in terms of language skills and learning experiences.

Learning-centred approaches

The advocates of the learning-centred approach were Hutchinson and Waters (1987). They reconsidered target needs, sub-dividing them into *necessities*, *lacks* and *wants*. The necessities, also called “objective needs”, are determined by the target situation; they represent “what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 55). “Lacks” point to the gap between the target proficiency and the learners' existing proficiency. According to Jordan, “the necessities that the learner lacks can form the basis of the language syllabus: this is often referred to as *deficiency analysis*” (Jordan, 2012: 26).

The sub-division of “wants” brings into focus the subjective dimension of needs analysis. In spite of the objective indications of what the necessities and the lacks are, learners may have different views which “will conflict with the perception of other interested parties: course designers, sponsors, teachers” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 56). As it is often the case, such personal needs are “devalued”, as they are considered “wants or desires” (Berwick, 1989: 55), in other words, somehow “flimsy” or “whimsical”. Jo McDonough speaks of *wants*, *demands*, or *expectations*, all subjective factors related to

the individual learner which appear to cloud the goal-oriented profile of needs analysis. From this perspective, teachers may find that “their target specification seems to break down with a group of students who **want** to learn a variety of English [...], **demand** that their programme be set up in a particular way because they have certain expectations of the whole teaching-learning process that they bring with them, and they **estimate** their own strengths and weaknesses according to certain criteria” (McDonough, 1984: 35).

Considering that the ESP journey is not so much about the starting point (lacks) and the initial destination (targets), but about the route, Hutchinson and Waters argue for a *learning-centred approach* which emphasises “what the learner needs to do in order to study” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 54). It is a step forward in needs analysis, as it stresses the importance of finding the way to get learners from the starting point to the destination.

The Case Study

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study is to offer valuable insights into both teaching and designing a successful ESP course which meets participants’ needs and expectations. Its goal is to determine learners’ actual needs when it comes to the acquisition of English as a foreign language and its use in specific situations. The study was undertaken at the beginning of the academic year 2024-2025, so that the respondents’ answers become relevant to the design of the ESP course, in terms of topics, materials and teaching techniques.

Participants

The focus group of the present study consists of 1st year students, majoring in Business Administration and Electrical Engineering at the University of Craiova, Romania. From the total of 125 participants, 46 students study Business English, and 79 English for Engineering, all of them attending full-time programmes at the university.

Concerning the age of the respondents, 106 students are between 18 and 22 years old (84.8%), 8 students (6.4%) are aged 23 to 27, while 11 students (8.8%) are older than 27. The majority of students are attending university for the first time, while the others either follow a second academic specialisation, or already work for local or national companies, and need an academic degree to get promoted in their careers.

Description of the questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of ten structured and unstructured questions which target both the objective and subjective needs of learners. The beginning of the questionnaire gathers personal information of respondents: name, age, gender and field of study. The main part includes questions related to students’ background information, as well as their needs and expectations in terms of skills to improve, activities useful to their training, the importance of developing communication skills, preferred learning styles and topics they are mostly interested in. According to Herdnon, “instruction lacks personal relevance” (Herdnon, 1987:11) so, at the end of the questionnaire, respondents are asked to offer their perspective on how an ESP course should be designed so as to be better shaped on their expectations.

The majority of questions are closed-ended, offering limited response options, including multiple-choice, or rating scales questions for the teacher to be able to gather

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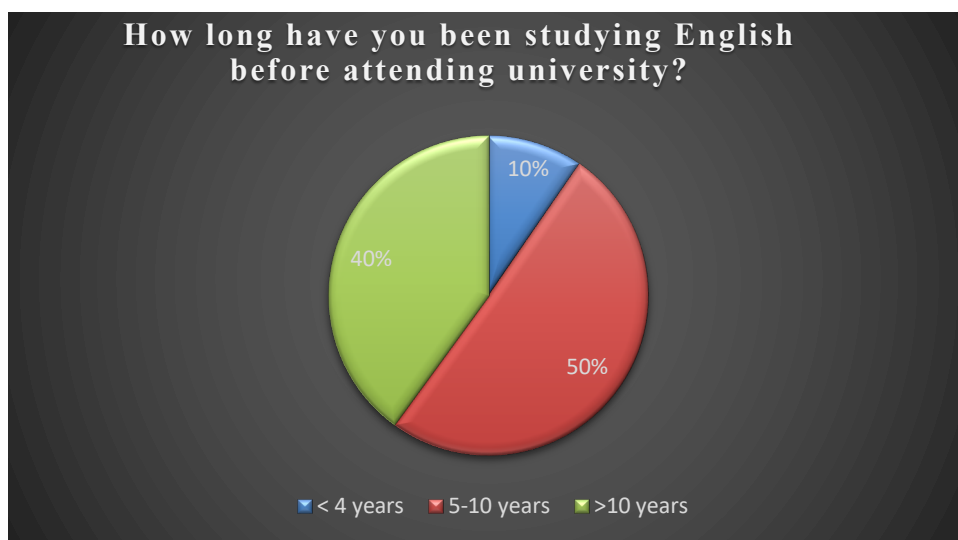
valuable quantitative data in a clear and easy way to interpret. Such questions are of help in pinpointing specific language skills or tasks that learners need or expect to improve while attending the course. Even if they lack the depth of open-ended questions, they represent an efficient and clear tool to guide curriculum development based on concrete learner needs.

The open-ended questions help teachers capture new ideas and insights which might not have been anticipated. They target real-life situations students face and help teachers identify unanticipated behaviours or needs.

Presentation of main results

The first item of the questionnaire refers to the length of time students previously learned the foreign language. Such question is relevant to the teacher since he/she might grasp an idea of how long the students have been familiar to the language, thus estimating their potential level of proficiency. From the total number of respondents, 63 students (50.4%) have been learning English between 5 and 10 years, followed by 50 students (40%) who have been studying it for more than 10 years and only 12 learners (9.6%) who attended English language classes for less than 4 years. Thus, it is expected that most students have a level of proficiency higher than pre-intermediate. The results are predictable to the common situation of the Romanian education system, where most pupils and students start learning English from the secondary school at the latest.

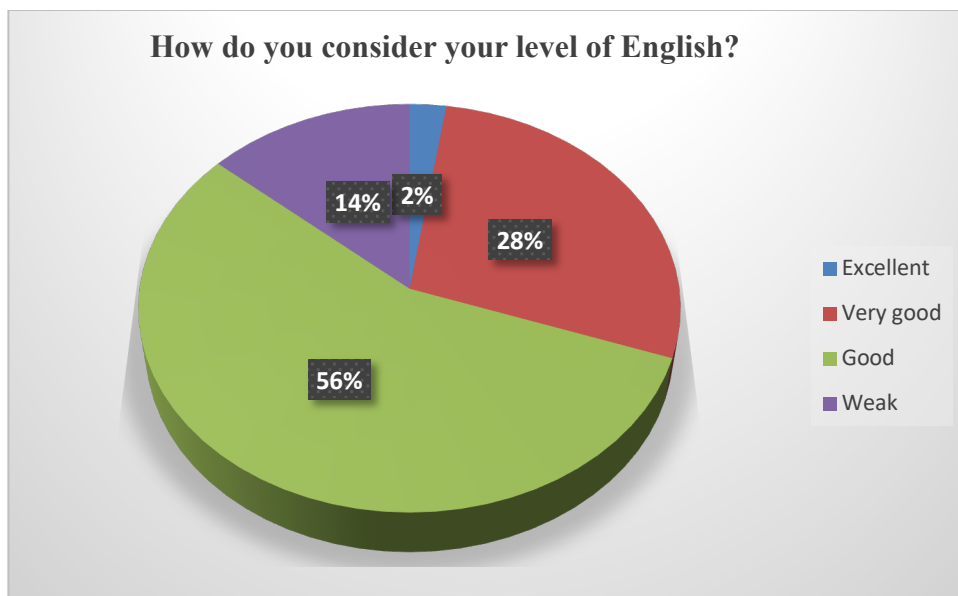
Figure 1. Percentage results for question 1



The second item asks respondents to self-assess their level of knowledge of the foreign language. By doing this, besides the awareness of their level of proficiency in English, students can set achievable goals and become encouraged to take control over their learning journey. It also helps teachers to foster a student-centred course, assign tasks related to learners' level, therefore, supporting differentiated learning. Figure 2 shows that 56% of respondents graded their level as good, 28% as very good, 13.6% as weak and a

minority of 2.4% as excellent. The majority of students tend to be unsure about their language abilities due to various factors, such as their desire to be perfectionists or the lack of a formal test result. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to give students standardized level tests so that, together with the self-assessment, to have a clear picture of the situation.

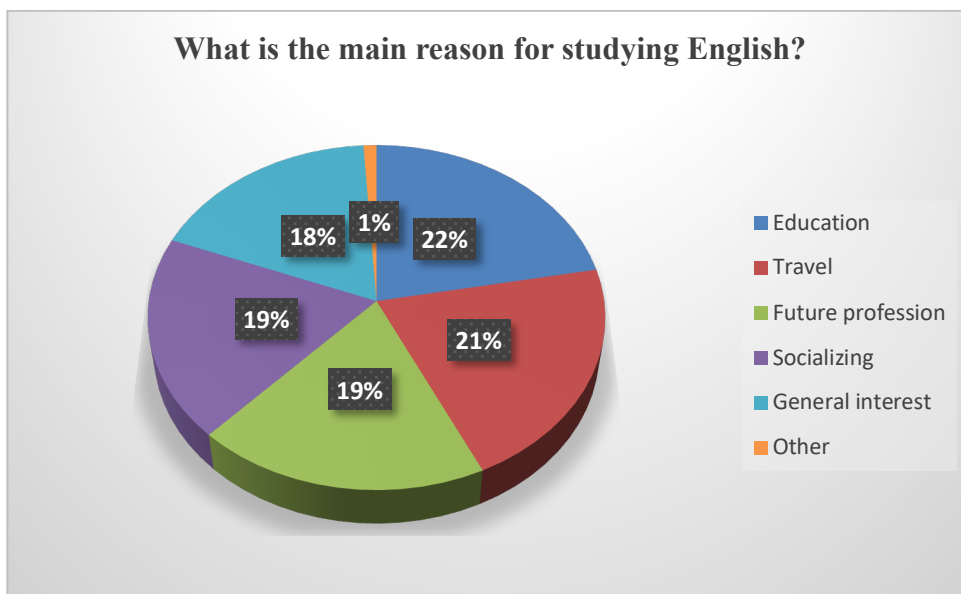
Figure 2. Percentage results for question 2



The third question refers to the main reason for studying English. Respondents are asked to choose from a series of possibilities, like learning English for educational purposes, out of general interest for the language, as a necessity in their future professions, for travelling reasons so that they can conduct conversations with people abroad, for socializing as well as to give other reasons besides those already stated. According to their answers, as presented in Figure 3 below, education is ranked first in their motives for learning the language with a percentage of approximately 22%, closely followed by travel (approximately 21%), future profession and socialising, each with 19%, and general interest 18%. Only 4 students (approximately 1%) stated other reasons, like being passionate about this particular language. As seen from the chart below, there is no prevailing reason in learners' desire to acquire the foreign language, their motivations being almost equally split, all being of importance in their quest to study the language.

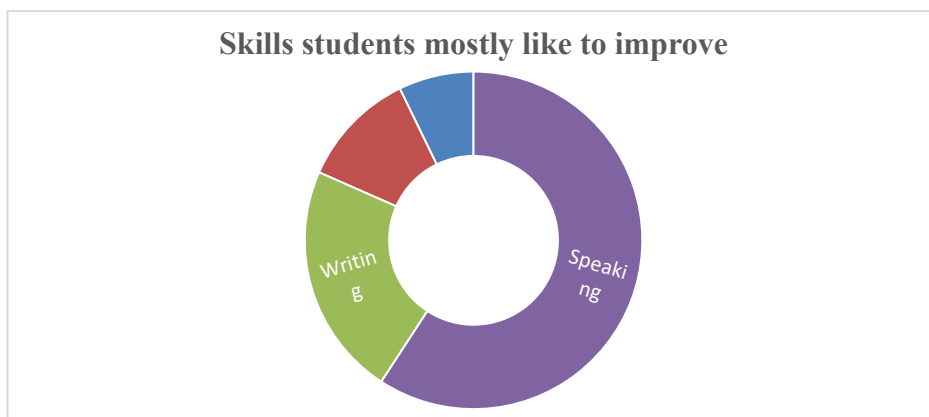
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Figure 3. Percentage results for question 3



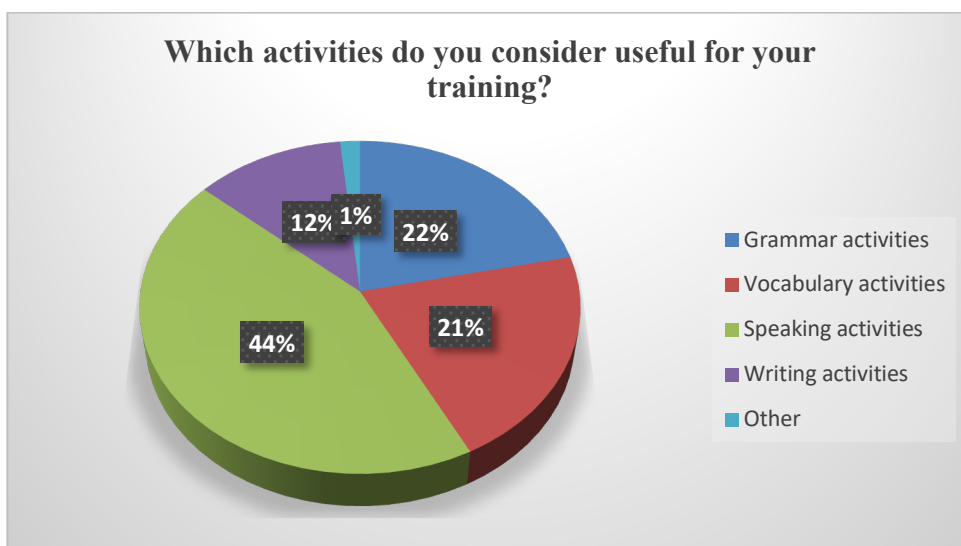
The next question targets the skills students are mostly interested to improve. The respondents are asked to rank both receptive and productive skills in the order they consider important to develop during the English course. Reading, writing, listening and speaking skills are to be numbered from 1 to 4, 1 representing the least and 4 the most important. As a result, 74 students (59.2%) are mostly interested in developing their speaking skills, 28 learners (22.4%) ranked the writing skills as the most important to develop, 14 respondents (11.2%) are drawn to developing their listening skills, while only 9 students (7.2%) are keen on improving reading skills. As it can be seen from Figure 4 below, speaking skills are perceived as being the most important to be improved probably because most learners understand the need for fluent communication nowadays; thus, the desire to become better so that they can function successfully in both their private and professional lives. According to Rao, “among the four key language skills, speaking is deemed to be the most important skill in learning a foreign or second language” (Rao, 2019:8). The fact that writing skills rank second on respondents’ areas to be improved is also explained by their awareness of the fact that, in their future professional lives, they will have to transmit their messages in writing such as in e-mails, reports, portfolios etc. Thus, it can be inferred from the answers that the focus should be on the productive skills due to learners’ need to actively and accurately generate language.

Figure 4. Results for question 4



Based on students' past experiences when it comes to the acquisition of English as a foreign language, question 5 refers to the course activities learners find useful for their training. It is a question relevant to the teacher in the sense of choosing the activities students consider of utter importance in the process of studying the language successfully. Students are asked to rank grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing activities from 1 as being the least useful to 4 which is considered as being the most purposeful to their education. Thus, speaking activities are perceived as being the most useful, with a percentage of 44%, followed by grammar (21.6%) and vocabulary (20.8%) activities, while writing tasks are useful for only 12% of the respondents. A minority of 1.6% chooses other activities as important.

Figure 5. Percentage results for question 5

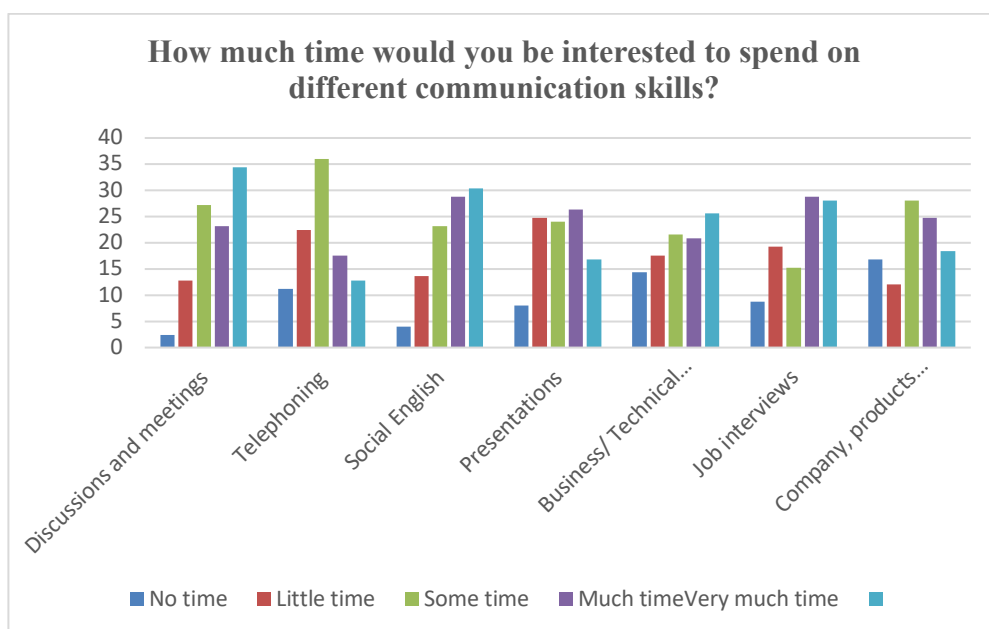


In the area of ESP, communication skills represent the core of language competence. Learners use English in specific contexts, such as business meetings or

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technical presentations, so they need to be able to express themselves clearly and adapt vocabulary, tone and register to the situation involved. Their future career promotions highly depend on their ability to participate in discussions, presentations or interviews in the foreign language. At the same time, they should be able to switch the register from formality to informality depending on the context. Question 6 in the questionnaire addresses the area of communication ability and how interested students are to improve specific skills in given contexts, such as discussions and meetings, telephoning someone in English, social interactions, formal presentations, business and technical reports, job interviews, or providing information about companies and their products.

Figure 6. Percentage results for question 6



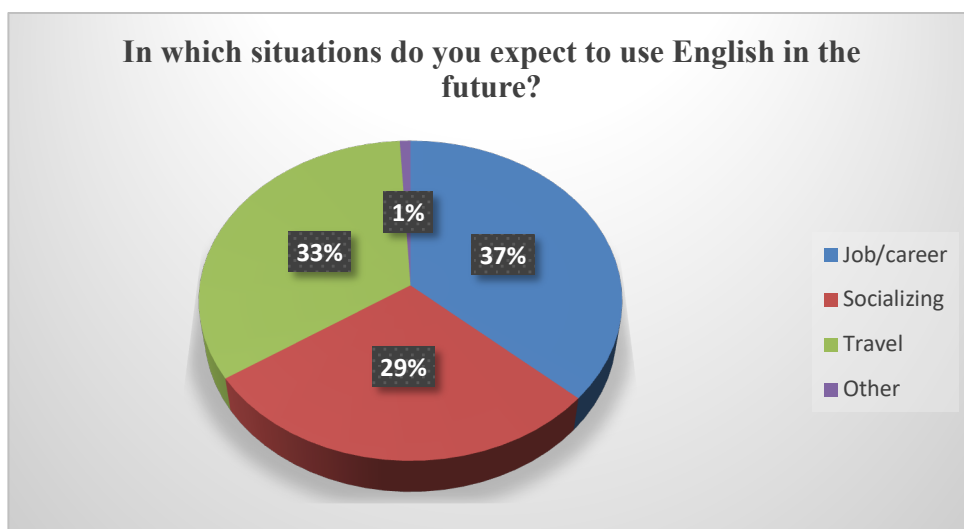
As it can be seen from the figure above, learners would spend a lot of time to improve their communication skills in discussions and meetings, social English, business and technical reports and job interviews. At the other end, they do not seem much interested in improving their skills when it comes to how to offer information on companies and products, or practising speaking on the phone in English.

The next question of the survey is especially important to the teacher in terms of the topics to be chosen throughout the academic year, topics which are of particular interest to students. By finding out their preferences, teachers can add or remove certain themes in their course design to meet the wants of learners. Question 7 addresses the issue, by asking respondents to choose from a pre-defined list the topics they would be interested in, even add their own themes if necessary. As for the learners studying Business English, management was ranked first in their preferences with approximately 54.35% of the whole, closely followed by sales and marketing (50% of the whole) and international trade (43.48% of the whole). Finance was ranked fourth (39.13% of a total of 100%), while recent business news seemed of lower importance to them, only 26.09%. Students also added the theme of accounting as interesting for them in a very low percentage. Students

studying engineering, ranked first the topic of new and future technology (68.35% out of a total of 100%), followed by current technology with a proportion of 54.43% of the whole and electrical circuits with 53.16% of the whole. The topic of information technology is also preferred in a percentage of 40.51% out of 100%. Of lower interest, there is the theme of materials and products, preferred by only 34.18% out of a total of 100%.

Question 8 refers to the expectations of students regarding the use of English language in the future. It covers contexts such as using the foreign language to socialise with various people, for their careers or for travelling purposes. At the same time, respondents can add further situations when they expect to use the knowledge of the language.

Figure 7. Percentage results for question 8



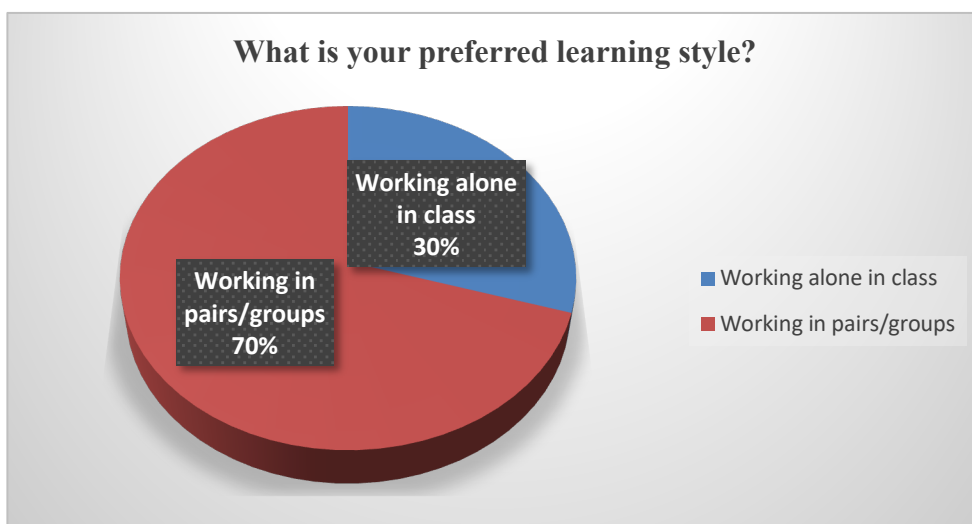
According to Figure 7 above, all contexts seem to meet respondents' expectations for the future. 37% of students predict the future use of English in their professions, 33% will use it for travelling purposes, and 29% expect to use the language in order to socialise. A lower percentage anticipates the use of English in other situations, such as for Erasmus exchange programmes at the university, a short-term plan.

Item 9 is an open-ended question which asks the respondents to enumerate sources of information they find useful in their field of interest. Students' answers help teachers become aware of the means students resort to when they need to find further information on a given subject, and which sources they usually find reliable. Most answers are connected to the World Wide Web, be it specific platforms, programmes or sites they regularly access to find out specific information, or as a further helpful tool in their education. Respondents mentioned Wikipedia and ChatGPT frequently, alongside social media as tools they resort to. At the same time, more traditional means were added, such as books, dictionaries and scientific articles. Some of them even mentioned mass media, particularly TV news and documentaries, which they find helpful in further adding knowledge to their field of interest.

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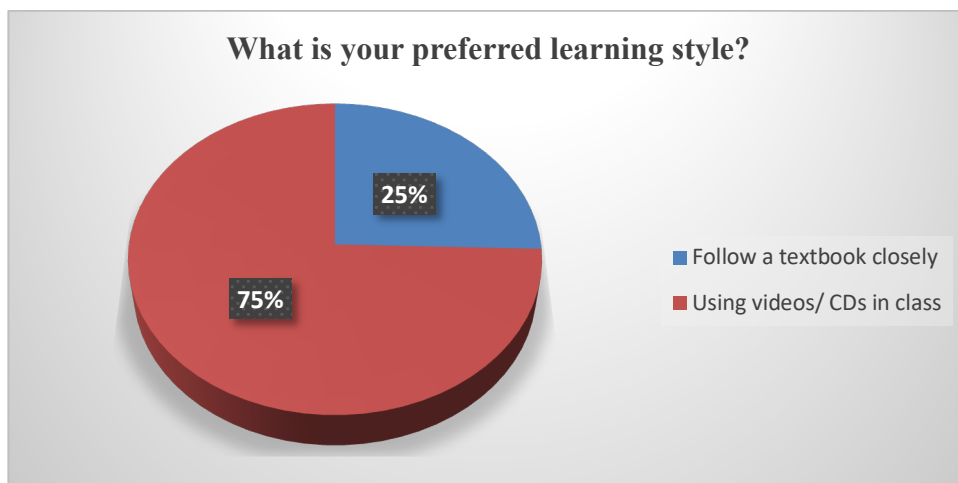
The goal of our respondents is to improve their English language knowledge in order to perform successfully in their future careers, business and engineering in this case. The goal of the teacher is to meet their expectations, to help them achieve goals, therefore tailoring courses to match their preferences. Being aware of the preferred learning style of students helps teachers choose appropriate tasks that suit different learning styles (visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic), so that students remain motivated and engaged throughout the classes. The entire learning process thus becomes more personalised and efficient. Question 10 investigates different learning styles and approaches which respondents find useful in better retaining terminology and communication protocols. Respondents are asked to tick the option which they find useful in three different situations: working alone in class versus working in pairs and groups, follow a textbook closely versus the use of videos and CDs in class, explanations in English versus explanations in the native language. As presented in Figure 8 below, a majority of 70% of students consider working in pairs or groups more useful than doing tasks alone in class (30%). The result highlights the need of active, collaborative learning, students feeling more comfortable working together and even helping their peers, transforming the process into a more enjoyable one. Pair and group activities generally encourage all students to be involved and not feel uncomfortable when making mistakes, or not knowing how to solve a particular task. It is a more relaxed means of learning which involves professional interactions as well as improvement of knowledge and fluency.

Figure 8. Percentage results for question 10, part 1



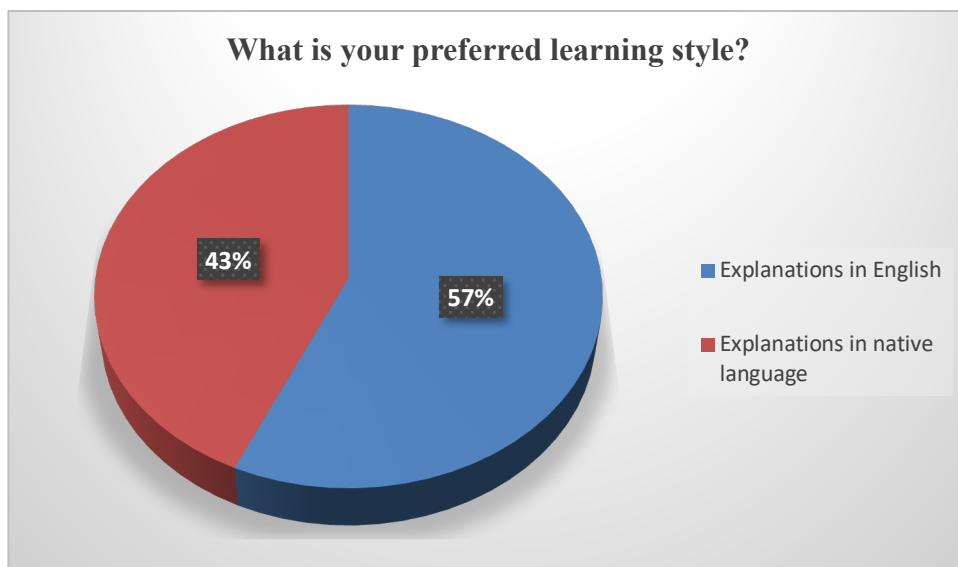
The majority of respondents (75%) prefer the use of multimedia to support the teaching and learning process versus the more traditional materials like textbooks (25%), as shown in Figure 9 below. This is not a surprising result since it has been known that visuals and sounds generally capture attention better than a text alone. In a world dominated by AI or video games, the use of such materials breaks the monotony of a traditional approach, making learning more relevant and practical.

Figure 9. Percentage results for question 10, part 2



The last part of question 10 discusses if learners prefer the explanations to be offered in English or in their native language. As presented in Figure 10 below, 57% of respondents prefer the explanations to be conducted in the foreign language, while 43% resort to the use of native language when it comes to clarifications. If we take into consideration the fact that the respondents are all students in the 1st year of their academic studies and they are at the beginning of their journey into somehow a new field for them, that of ESP, it seems natural for quite a lot of them to feel scared of the unknown, thus preferring the teacher to use their native language when needed.

Figure 10. Percentage results for question 10, part 3.



The study ends with an optional, open-answer question “Is there anything else you would like to share with your teacher to help him/her plan your course?” where students are encouraged to express their views on how a successful course should be

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tailored to meet their wants and keep them motivated. Besides the focus on specialised vocabulary, most students expect the use of interactive activities, games, videos, embedded in real-life situations. At the same time, students visualise a close relationship with the teacher, which is of importance not only in achieving academic success, but also in building confidence and self-esteem.

Conclusions

Based on the results of the study, a number of important facts could be found:

- According to the Romanian educational system, most students in the 1st year of their academic studies acquired English in schools for approximately ten years;
- The self-assessment level of the learners is equal to, or higher than pre-intermediate;
- There is no main reason for studying English, but a variety of motives of almost equal importance such as future careers, educational purposes, or socialising and travelling in their free time;
- Students mostly want to improve their productive skills due to the need to actively and accurately generate language;
- Speaking activities are highly important in the process of studying the language successfully;
- Students are mostly interested in improving vocabulary, tone and register for discussions and meetings, social English and job interviews;
- Of a variety of topics, students majoring in Business are mostly interested in topics such as management and marketing, while those studying engineering are drawn to themes like future and current technology;
- Students expect to use English in the future in a variety of contexts, such as careers, socialising and travelling;
- When they need further information on a specific subject, most learners nowadays resort to the use of the Internet, rather than the traditional approach of libraries or books;
- In terms of preferred learning styles, most students are in favour of interactive activities, working in pairs or groups, as well as being given explanations in the target language.

Any ESP course should be based on needs analysis which represents a crucial tool to tailor content, set proper learning objectives, choose materials, activities and tasks which meet students' wants, and last but not least, offers teachers the possibility to know their students' aspirations and desires.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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Appendix

Needs Analysis Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Field of study:

1. How long have you been studying English before attending university?

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2. Do you consider your level of English as:

Excellent

Good

Very good

Weak

3. What is the main reason for studying English?

Education	Travel
General interest	Socializing
Future profession	Other:

4. Which skills would you mostly like to improve? (Number from 1 to 4; from 1 – the least to 4 – the most)

Reading	Writing
Listening	Speaking

5. Which activities do you consider useful for your training? (Rank from 1- the least to 4 – the most)

Grammar activities	
Vocabulary activities	
Speaking activities	
Writing activities	
Other:	

6. How much time would you be interested to spend on different communication skills? (Tick a number from 0 – no time; 1- little time; 2- some time; 3-much time to 4 – very much time)

	0	1	2	3	4
Discussions and meetings					
Telephoning					
Social English					
Presentations					
Business/ Technical reports					
Job interviews					
Company, products information					

7. Which topics are you interested in? Choose from the list below. You can add topics of your own at the end.

<i>Business Topics</i>		<i>Technical Topics</i>	
Management		Current technology	
Sales & Marketing		New/ Future technology	
Recent business news		Materials & products	
Finance		Electrical circuits	
International Trade		Information Technology	
Other:		Other:	

8. In which situations do you expect to use English in the future?

Job/ career	Travel
Socializing	Other:

9. Which sources of information do you find useful in your field of interest?

.....

10. What is your preferred learning style? Tick the option which suits you best in each situation.

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1a	Working alone in class	
1b	Working in pairs or groups	
2a	Follow a textbook closely	
2b	Using videos/ CDs in class	
3a	With explanations in English	
3b	With explanations in native language	

Is there anything else you would like to share with your teacher to help him/her plan your course?

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