**Lesson 7: Needs Analysis in ESP Course Design (Part 3)**

***2.2.2. Qualitative Data***

Alongside quantitative tools like questionnaires and diagnostic tests, qualitative data collection instruments, including interviews, diaries, focus group discussions, and observations, are also essential in Needs Analysis. This section provides a general overview of each instrument.

**2.2.2.1. Focus Group Discussion**

A focus group discussion (FGD) involves a small group, usually eight to twelve participants, gathered by the researcher to **explore attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts** on a specific topic (Denscombe, 1998, p.115). As De Vos (1998, p. 313) describes, focus group discussions collect diverse perspectives without aiming for consensus. Witkin and Alschuld (1995, p.171) emphasize that focus groups are **structured interviews** aimed at exploring participants' viewpoints.

Focus groups can encourage input from individuals who might be reluctant in one-on-one interviews. The **informal, interactive setting** may prompt participants to recall information through hints from others, motivating them to share richer, more detailed responses.

**A) Main Advantages of Focus Group Discussions**

Below are some key advantages of focus group discussions:

* **Facilitates Interaction**
* **Access to Diverse Insight**
* **Cost-Effective and Time-Efficient**
* **Flexible Structure**

Focus group discussions provide a valuable qualitative approach for gathering in-depth information on learner needs, preferences, and perspectives in ESP course design.

**2.2.2.2. Interviews**

An interview is a one-on-one interaction between the data collector and participant, which can be conducted in person, by phone, or via video. Interviews can range from a few minutes to over an hour, depending on the depth required. They are effective for gathering information on attitudes, perceptions, and anticipated actions from stakeholders, including ESP teachers, policymakers, and professionals.

The interview protocol, or question list, aims to gather in-depth responses, allowing the interviewer to probe for more details and clarify responses. Interviews generally follow a funnel approach, starting with broad questions and gradually narrowing to more specific ones. Questions about facts often precede questions about actions or perceptions.

There are three main types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured.

* **Structured Interviews**: These are similar to face-to-face surveys, where closed questions are posed to the respondent, often with coded responses. This type of interview can be conducted in person, over the phone, or online.
* **Unstructured Interviews**: These are more flexible, with the researcher allowing conversations to develop naturally without a fixed set of questions.
* **Semi-Structured Interviews**: Semi-structured interviews, as described by Cousin (2008, p. 71-72), follow a set of topics that act as a guide. The interviewer can modify, adapt, and add questions based on the conversation flow, making it a balanced approach between structured and unstructured formats.

According to Best and Kahn (1986, p.186), interviews are like **spoken questionnaires,** where respondents share information verbally rather than in writing. They suggest that interviews often yield richer data because people are generally more willing to speak than write.

Denscombe (1998, p.109) highlights that interviews are purposeful and **structured around a specific topic,** unlike casual conversations. Interviews allow for **deeper exploration**, giving the researcher control over the discussion. As Slavin (1992, p.86) points out, the interviewer can ask respondents to clarify or expand on their answers, resulting in richer and more detailed data than that gathered from a questionnaire.

**2.2.2.3. Diaries**

Diaries are often **personal records**, primarily intended to document private thoughts and reflections (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.76). In research, diaries are used not to collect existing narratives but to generate new data, capturing participants' thoughts and experiences analytically. A common approach in diary research involves asking participants to maintain diaries that record specific events or processes.

Diary research, like other forms of primary data collection, can be either structured or unstructured. In its structured format, researchers pre-define data categories of interest. For instance, patients undergoing treatment might be asked to keep diaries about their daily lives, recording both practical support and the emotional role of family during their treatment (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.77).

According to Thomas (2003), diaries in research can be classified into two main types:

**A) Structured Diaries:** Structured diaries are specifically designed to gather data on predefined themes and topics, allowing researchers to collect information that is directly relevant to the research objectives.

**B) Unstructured Diaries:** Unstructured diaries give participants more freedom to document their thoughts and experiences, allowing researchers to uncover unique insights that may not emerge from rigidly structured data collection methods. In this format, themes and patterns are identified iteratively, arising naturally from the content participants provide, rather than being pre-imposed.

Structured and unstructured approaches are not mutually exclusive; researchers often blend both to capture rich, relevant data while maintaining analytical coherence.

* **The Benefits and Drawbacks of Diaries**
* **Benefits**:
  + Enable the collection of in-depth data over time, often yielding insights that are not possible in a single interview session.
  + Allow ESP learners to express their thoughts more freely in writing, fostering authentic responses.
* **Drawbacks**:
  + Depend on participants’ comfort and proficiency with writing.
  + May not appeal to all ESP practitioners, some of whom might prefer audio or video formats for capturing richer, more nuanced data.

**2.2.2.4. Observation**

Observation as a data collection method involves **systematically watching and recording events**, **behaviours, and interactions within a specific environment.** This method is particularly valuable in ESP research for understanding how language is used in authentic settings. Observation encompasses two key roles: the observer (typically the ESP practitioner) and the observed (such as the learner or learning environment). It can be conducted with or without instruments, relying on either data collection tools or sensory awareness.

Observation is especially useful when participants are unable or unwilling to provide data through questionnaires or interviews. For instance, if an ESP practitioner wants to understand factors that increase or decrease a medical doctor’s anxiety during meetings, observing facial expressions and non-verbal cues in real-time interactions can yield crucial insights.

There are **two primary types** of observational research: systematic (structured) and ethnographic (unstructured) observation.

* **Structured Observation**

Structured observation involves planning the objectives, behaviour categories, and data categorization processes prior to data collection (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.62).

* **Less Structured Observation**

Unlike structured observation, it is more flexible and emphasizes qualitative descriptions. This approach allows for deep insights into participants' perspectives, attitudes, and motivations, often combined with data from interviews and documents to paint a fuller picture of the group’s social reality. Less-structured observation emphasizes adaptability and minimizes preconceived categories, although the observer usually has a general focus area to guide observation (Robson, 2002).

Often, researchers may blend structured and unstructured observation, beginning with a less-structured approach and later incorporating more structured elements as specific behaviours require quantitative analysis (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.63).

* **Advantages of Observation**

Observation as a research method has distinct advantages over other methods like interviews and questionnaires:

* **Direct Data Capture**
* **Unseen Insights**
* **Access to Non-Communicative Behaviours**
* **Supplementary Data**

In ESP needs analysis, observation is instrumental in **identifying learners’ linguistic and communicative challenges in their fields**. This method enables researchers and educators to gain insights into learners’ language deficiencies, preferences, and the specialized skills necessary for effective communication in their fields. Observation provides context-rich data that complements other data collection methods, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of learners’ language needs.

**Practice**

**Task 1:**

* **Task:** Work with a partner. One of you will be the ESP practitioner, the other a stakeholder (choose a role: learner, employer, or subject expert). Conduct a 10-minute mock interview to gather information about needs for an ESP course in (specific field). The ESP practitioner should use a mix of question types.

**Task 2:**

1. Conduct a small-scale research project to investigate how English is taught as part of another department’s program, focusing on its alignment with ESP principles and methodologies.

* **Form Groups:** (3-4 members).
* **Select a Target Department** where English is integrated into the curriculum (e.g., Engineering, Business, Medicine, Law, …).
* **Develop Research Questions**:
  + How is English integrated into the department's curriculum?
  + What are the specific objectives of the English course(s) offered?
  + What methods and materials are used in teaching English in this department?
  + Does the course content align with the **professional or academic needs** of the students?

1. **Choose Data Collection Methods:**
   * **Interviews:** Conduct interviews with teachers (if possible), or students from the target department.
   * **Observation:** Observe an English class (if permitted) to see the teaching methodologies in action.
   * **Questionnaires:** Distribute a short survey to students in the target department to understand their needs and experiences.
   * **Document Analysis:** Review course syllabi, materials, or any published program (Moodle) descriptions.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. How is English taught in various departments?
2. How well do the current practices align with ESP principles?
3. What changes would you suggest to design a better ESP course?