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Unmet English Needs of the Non-Engineering Staff: The Case of Algerian Hydrocarbon Industry

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***Abstract*—**The present paper attempts to report on some findings that emerged out of a larger scale doctorate research into English language needs of a renowned Algerian company of Hydrocarbon industry. From a multifaceted English for specific purposes (ESP) research perspective, the paper considers the English needs of the finance/legal department staff in the midst of the conflicting needs perspectives involving both objective needs indicators (i.e., the pressure of globalised business) and the general negative attitudes among the administrative -mainly jurists- staff towards English (favouring a non-adaptation strategy). The researcher's unearthing of the latter's needs is an endeavour to concretise the concepts of unmet, or unconscious needs, among others. This is why, these initially uncovered hidden needs will be detailed questioning educational background, namely previous language of instruction; training experiences and expectations; as well as the actual communicative practices derived from the retrospective interviews and preliminary quantitative data of the questionnaire. Based on these rough clues suggesting real needs, the researcher will tentatively propose some implications for both pre-service and in-service training organisers as well as for educational policy makers in favour of an English course in legal English for the jurists mainly from pre-graduate phases to in-service training.

***Keywords*—**English for specific purposes, ESP, legal and finance staff, needs analysis, unmet/unconscious needs, training implications.

I. Introduction

IN Algeria, the hydrocarbon industry is still the major source of economic income and business transactions across national borders [1]. Hence, it is a conspicuous setting where to investigate from an ESP perspective; the foreign language needs that result from the pressure of the global marketplace on its local workforce. To this end, conducting a multifaceted needs enquiry from a workplace-embedded perspective -in some of its corporate units- essentially aims to inform ESP training. In the above-mentioned business setting, the bulk of the author's Doctorate research has been centred on the needs of the engineering staff as the one who was found to most frequently engage in the target English use. However, a less prominent category of employees within the investigated case plants, i.e., the legal and finance staff has nevertheless emerged as another category in the population with particular English needs. Apart from using their accounts for comparative purposes, the scope of the Doctorate research did not allow for a closer focus on their needs in subsequent research stages. Addressing them in detail represents the impetus that triggered the main topic of the present paper. The present paper therefore proposes a reconsideration of the above emerging findings by adopting a critical perspective towards the finance department -mainly the judicial- staff's nevertheless existing need with the aim to provide ramifications for training, namely as to upgrading their English skills in accordance with the communication exigencies of the global business place.

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II. Theoretical Background

In ESP research, a solid needs enquiry has to cover different types of needs to be able to inform training. The most known types range from objective or target needs (emphasising language needs that are dictated by professional or target situation); to subjective needs or wants; to present needs (lacks and strengths) (see [2]-[4]). For a more comprehensive account, personal information about the informants is also necessary to uncover their previous learning experiences or educational background that would explicate their current needs [3, p.125]. In the present paper, bringing about such ethnographic elements was possible due the author's field research (three months) within the corporate setting in question.

More recently, other needs concepts have been coined for a more complex perspective. A case in point is Vandermeeren's [5] concept of subjective (unmet) or unconscious needs. Whereas, subjective unmet needs emphasise informants' perceptions of unmet foreign language need including their actual negative experiences the target language, subjective needs are about the informant's subjective perceptions of foreign language need. The latter is illustrated by a top manager's ideal about how competent his staff should be in a foreign language. Finally, unconscious needs reflect the contradiction between the informants' subjective need and the objective need; when, for instance, a manager states that his department does not need English while foreign business partners are in contact with them [5, pp.162-163].

Another newly coined concept, *rights analysis*, denotes a critical perspective to needs [6], [7] that gives more voice to the needs of those who are at a disadvantage because of their low proficiency level. Put in Belcher's words, rights analysis signals a certain "motivation to help those especially disadvantaged by their lack of language needed for the situations they find themselves in, hope to enter, or eventually rise above" [7, p.3].

Of interest to the present paper, critical perspective to needs or Right Analysis takes the learner perspective into account instead of solely seeking to meet the employer's or institutional interests contributing likewise to the former's empowerment. It may, for instance, deal with the employees'

claiming equal opportunities to training, or complaining from giving training exclusivity to one *'privileged'* category of staff rather than *'the novice'* one [7, p.21]. In the present paper for example, more voice will be given to the novice exemplifying the finance department staff (jurists, accountants, etc.), whereas the privileged represent the engineers whose power originates from more frequent English language use and advanced language skills if compared to the former.

III. Methodology and Research Context

A. Research Setting

The corporate setting where English needs were investigated consists of two corporate units from the Algerian sector of the hydrocarbon industry where the author's field research lasted three month (from 1 March to 7 June 2015). For the maintenance of their production equipment, these two corporate units are often involved in service contracts with foreign suppliers with the result that English is needed as the language of the business transactions. While the local workforce needs to adjust to this business reality, French, the colonial heritage, remains the habitual language of work and the foreign language in which the finance staff mainly (including contractors, accountants and jurists) is most competent. Hence, these industrial plants represent a conspicuous context where its local workforce is the first to experience the impact of globalised business, and hence, express new English using and learning needs that call to be researched.

B. Methods and Participants

For a more systematic and quantitative examination of the target uses and challenges accompanying English use, a questionnaire was first administered to a larger number of informants followed by a qualitative interview. In total, 132 informants answered the questionnaire and 45 of them took the interview. As Fig. 1 and Table I show, their higher majority pertains to the engineering departments (i.e., maintenance and technical). Originally, the responses of the administrative staff served to only cross-check, thus, validate the engineering staff responses. In this paper however, more light will be thrown on the responses of the finance department staff so as to address their own needs perspective in its own right.

The questionnaire results to be discussed in the present paper mainly concern the finance department's frequency of participation in international events; its staff's training expectation as well as attitudes towards the use of English at work, namely in international business communication (presented in the form of Likert scaling technique). That said, reference to responses from other departments is done for comparative purposes only.

In a similar fashion, the interview data to be discussed in the present paper mainly concern the finance department staff's own perspectives of English needs as well as their retrospective accounts and actual experience with English usage. To cross-check their responses, the needs and experiences of the latter are also addressed from the perspective of the engineering staff as it is grounded in professional experience.

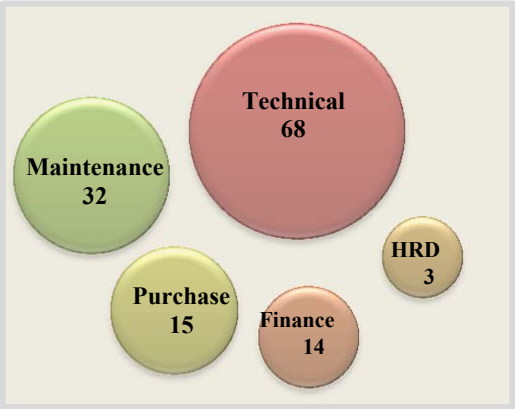

Fig. 1 Questionnaire Participants per Department

TABLE I
Number of Interviewees per Department

		Number of Interviewees
Department	Finance	6
	Human resources	1
	Maintenance	6
	Purchase	2
	Technical	30
Total		45

Essentially, the qualitative interview was semi-structured to allow for more exploration of the questions already dealt with in the questionnaire. While being open to new but relevant information within the theme in question, the interview was nevertheless guided by some working questions enquiring about the role that English plays in the fulfilment of daily work-related activities as well as the English skills required; the difficulties encountered during English language use and the way to handle them; and finally, the interviewees' English training interest and/ or expectations, if any. The main language of the interview was French, the habitual language of internal communication, to allow for more detailed responses. The most representative quotes that are proposed in this paper from are in English. The French-to-English translations of the interview transcript, including any shortcomings are, of course, the author's. Finally, additional elements of ethnography that were necessary in recording supplementary contextual information generated ethnographic field notes. The latter will be used in the analysis of the interview findings mainly.

IV. Results

A. Results of the Questionnaire

Concerning the most prominent communicative events where English is used (meetings/ negotiations and emailing), the quantitative data of the questionnaire revealed that though the engineering staff detains the highest frequency means in

terms of participation (2.33, 1.86 and 3.15 for meeting, negotiation and emailing, respectively), the finance department agents happen to be involved in such target communication tasks where English is needed in spite of their lowest frequency scores (1.58, 1.18, and 3 for meeting, negotiation and emailing, respectively). This finding is corroborated by the earlier positive response of 50% of the questionnaire respondents from the finance department as regards their participation in international communication with English-speaking foreign business partners.

Another way of providing information about needs was through the Likert scale data. Though the majority of the finance department members viewed that English was not the only business lingua franca (with allusion to French), the reported general consensus (100%) among the respondents in question about the importance of promoting English learning within the company is also worth considering. This positive attitude is believed to be tied up with the reported positive agreement of 42% of them with the opportunities for job promotion that a good English command may enhance. Apparently, such an interest in English training may translate to a delayed, rather than an immediate need from the part of the finance department staff mainly, including jurists, and to a lesser extent accountants and contractors. It is hoped that this quantitative finding will find echo in further qualitative insight from the interview as to the nature of their need for English.

B. Results of the Interview

According to the interview data, there are employees from the finance department who maintain that they can be professionally efficient without having English language skills. An instance of this attitude is a middle manager who worked as a jurist for eight years purporting that French should be given more priority:

> "French is the first business language to master then comes English. If the jurist does not master the latter, it is not that harmful."

The above category seems to replicate the results of the questionnaire, in which 58% of the jurists stated they can perfectly assume their work-related tasks without English. Seemingly, this perspective reflects unconscious perspective of a need that is not aware of the current contact with foreign business partners that 50% previously acknowledged. Further evidence that is in contrast with the above mentioned unconscious need is based on the real experience of interviewees including jurists, accountants, and financials who report that they are confronted with situations in which English is used. These situations range from e-mail correspondence, to face-to-face negotiations, to dealing with legal and financial English documents.

1. Engineers Assistance in Business Meetings

Meetings and/ or negotiations are the oral events that some of the finance department staff report to attend in the interview data. Be it immediate or delayed, the need for English is expressed in terms of difficulties they experience with English usage. For instance, to the financial lower-level manager quoted below, the need for English is rather remote as it is expressed in terms of lacks or difficulties that may be experienced in case of eventual communication with business partners:

> "The non-mastery of English penalises us, (lower-level) managers. Even in cases there will be negotiations with the Chinese, the Japanese, the British, the French, I could not intervene in such meetings. For an eventual business deal, there will be a great deal of transactions with foreign partners. In this case, we cannot conduct meetings with them."

The above quote seems to suggest that (lower-level) managers are perfectly aware that, throughout their professional career, they may well be confronted with situations that demand a certain competence in English. This is why they prefer to stay alert and be open to this possibility by preparing themselves to the eventual use of English. Apart from the above prospective -seemingly grounded in his surrounding's actual experience with English- the management's difficulties in being wholly and actively involved in English-mediated international meetings also appears in the interview accounts of a high manager of the contracting section:

> "The problem is that we negotiate contracts from a judicial, financial, and fiscal aspect. This is the most important thing. As long as it is in French it is ok."

Through the above quoted accounts, it seems that, during meetings partial understanding in business transactions, such as when negotiating contracts, is not for the benefit of the finance department staff. As they do not want to miss a word, the result is sticking to the French language choice in international transactional operations even when the business partners are English-speaking.

This low English competence seems to suggest a feeling of insecurity during English usage. Most often, managers from the finance department and their fellow staff use the term 'handicap' (interview data) to qualify their limited ability to speak English while they are required to actively show their position or participate in decision-making. Decidedly, the need for English seems to be expressed in terms of a lack.

Further evidence of problematic use of English for the non-engineering workforce appears through the accounts of a middle manager of the judicial service who states in this strain that during meetings, it is the technical engineers who are actively involved,

> "In meetings, we do not understand and answer to everything… we have the engineers who mainly speak in English."

Nevertheless, face-to-face international events like meetings or negotiations seem to be less problematic as long as the administrative staff reverts to the language assistance of the most proficient colleagues, i.e., the engineering staff.

> "When colleagues are present (technicians, engineers) they can help. The international meetings we participate in are multi-disciplinary, including engineers, us (jurists, accountants, and financials), even if we do not understand, (proficient colleagues can help)."

Decidedly, with their limited English competence, active involvement in face-to-face encounters is limited to active listenership only. In order to be informed of the meeting main points, jurists and financials seem to handle the situation with help, i.e., as long as their engineering colleagues are present to give them assistance in the form of collective word search, explanation or reformulation. Notwithstanding, their limited ability to speak English makes them feel '*handicapped'* as a higher manager from the contracting department literally qualified. Worse, the latter's assistance cannot be extended to other tasks as shown in the future sections.

2. Restrictive Email Communication

It appears from the interview data that e-mail correspondence is a written medium through which the finance department happens to communicate with their foreign business partners. While some employees rely on colleagues' assistance or machine translation to comply with the language preference of their English-speaking correspondents, it seems that French use is the norm than the exception with the finance department. In corollary, the interviewees' retrospective accounts on previous situations of failed e-mail exchanges are various. A case in point is the administrative staff's tendency, as reported by middle manager from the contracting section, to stick to the French language choice mainly during the preliminary e-mails and foreign tender enquiries that precede any eventual service contract. *'As soon as our correspondent realises our French language choice'*, she maintains, *'there is no reply from his part'*. Decidedly, this is suggestive of limited offers. This non-flexible language choice seems to be debilitating in the sense of reducing many trade opportunities with potential suppliers. Certainly, being flexible and politely complying with the enquirer's international language of communication during the first phases of the transaction could have led to more interactions, thus, more business opportunities. Whether it is low competence of most of them, thus, their feeling of insecurity with English usage made the French language choice safer

3. Legal English, Official Documents and the Trap of Mis-Translation

While dealing with official documents, a seemingly non-restrictive corporate strategy obliges the local legal and financial staff not to reject documents in English. This is formulated in the words of a former jurist and further confirmed with judicial middle management,

> "We have been instructed to accept the documents sent by foreign tenders in English."
>
> "We can ask for the translation but we do not reject English documents."

The English language skills of jurists are not so advanced to enable them handle documents in English. With their 'school-level English', Algerian jurists seem to be at a disadvantage as they cannot afford to treat/ process legal documents in English. In corollary, sticking to French means that the foreign partners must adapt to this language choice and translate their contracts into French. Besides, they know that their business partners forcibly comply with their linguistic exigencies as long as they remain the client.

However, the foreign partners' translating official documents, including tender specifications, the trade register and the contract itself, takes time and money. Not only does the client, in this case, the Algerian company, pay these high translation costs, but also the long time span that translation takes hinders the process of the business transaction [8]. This is explained in the words of middle manager from the finance department:

> "Unfortunately, we lose a lot of money because of French. …because the language of industry and world leaders are Anglophone…Our tender specifications are produced in French. …according to a US company, translation is very expensive. We pay these translation costs indirectly..."

Worse, when dealing with influential partners, who are renowned and unique suppliers, the latter happen not to adapt to the Algerian clients as regards providing them with a contract translated in French. This mainly occurs when the French version of the contract does not conform to the English one; the latter becomes the more valid. A financial middle manager raises this point:

> "Some (companies that are the leaders in terms of equipment supply) demand that their contract remains in English. We demand a French version. So they prepare it. But their jurists are clever. There is a clause stating that in case the French contract contradicts with the English one, the English contract prevails. So we are caught. Using English is no more a choice, but an obligation."

Apparently, adaptation to the client does not always apply, especially when the supplier is renowned and the only one to provide such service. Here, the client company has to show more flexibility to conclude the service contract. This flexibility also deals with the business language choices to adopt.

Even the English proficient engineers whose help is valuable during face-to-face interactions cannot venture to translate legal documents. This is explained in the informative insider accounts provided by a technical middle manager:

> "When it comes to the legal aspect, we do not translate. We do not take risks… In legal communication, the impact (of a misused word) is so major that you cannot venture to use legal English when you don't master it to 100%."

When English communication departs from technical topics, the engineers do not want to take any risks because of their limited English competence. That is, the type of English they master, including specific terminology, is technical rather than legal. More elaborate account of the difference between technical and legal English is proposed from a managerial engineering perspective:

> "…The impact of the error of a word concerning time penalties, and the like, we cannot assume it. In the more technical side it (communicating) is somehow feasible because the (technical) word has a range of meanings but the legal word has a meaning that is very limited."

Whereas legal English apparently demands a good command of legal terms and expressions, neither the legal department staff nor the engineering staff who sometimes communicates in the latter's name seem to possess those specific language skills necessary for passing a contract in English. In this case, French is the safest choice. Still, this language requirement, which is a sign of non-flexibility according to many experienced employees from different departments, often leads to the cancelling of many contracts. One of the company jurists, who has 13 years of work experience, backs up this claim by revealing that she has not learned English again from the time she was in secondary school. She reports her personal experience with a contract written in English that she could not read nor translate, which led her to cancel it.

An enlightening comment that qualifies this controversial situation is made by a purchase manager who views that behaving alike with foreign partners was synonymous to 'talking past each other' (field note data). His postulating that better English skills would solve the communicative challenge reflects what [5, pp.162-163] hints as *'subjective need'*:

> "If our jurists were fluent in English, each part could be able to clearly explain what is feasible, and exploit all the possibilities to arrive to an agreement and so avoid cancelling contracts."

In complementarity with the above managerial allusion to English subjective need or want, particularly stopping at the finance department staff's training interest will throw more light on such implicit need for English.

4. Training Expectations

Explicit training expectations are many. A case in point is a financial lower-level manager's reporting on the difficulty he encounters when receiving English documents like financial dispatch notes or other similar documents

> "We need training in English in order not to ask for a translation in the case we receive documents in English."

In order to avoid asking for the French translation of documents and so to comply with the English language choice of their partners, the financial lower-level manager quoted above states that the solution is English training.

Of equal importance, the researcher's questioning some critical needs perspective is worth considering due to the finance agents' complaining from reduced training opportunities devoted to the engineering category for which the researcher found controversial research-based explanations. The latter seem to range from the training organisers' comments about the absence of a self-sufficient training centre from one pole; to managers' referring to the time constraints caused by employees' tight work schedules; or else, to an intentional training strategy from the part of the employer -to reduce employees' leaving the company for better employment opportunities abroad- from the other pole.

It is of note that the jurists and the financial accountants are apparently not given priority when it comes to English training. According to a middle manager from the contracting department, English training priority is given to engineering staff in spite of their' incessant call for training' from their higher manager. Managerial staff claims that this is due to the absence of a self-sufficient training centre.

5. Employees' Feedback from the English Training Situation

According to the employees' feedback from the English course they are enrolled in, the groups they belong to is heterogeneous in that they contain learners from different departments, thus, different professions. As a result, a jurist from the finance department is presented a specific content that is relevant to the technical profession as a middle manager from the finance department explains:

> "When we move to the tasks, the latter are purely technical. We have raised this point because they are the domain of engineers. When giving illustrations, the example is technical in content, such as turbo-machinery, installations… it would be better if the programme also contains the judicial and the financial aspect."

Providing training opportunities to the managerial share of the judicial staff seems to reflect a certain awareness from the part of the employer of the needs of staff.

V. Discussion and Suggestions

The findings that emerged out of the author's broader exploratory phase of the Doctorate research revealed controversial issues as regards to the English needs of an Algerian Hydrocarbon Company's financial and judicial staff, which provides a rationale for the present paper. The latter's needs seemed to concretise the concepts of unmet needs, or unconscious needs [5]. They came to the fore out of the questionnaire objective needs indicators which were in contrast to the general negative attitudes among the administrative -mainly jurist- staff towards English. This is why; the initial clues obtained suggesting hidden needs will be recapitulated below.

French here appears as the language that the legal and finance departments staff pragmatically and realistically opt for when involved in international communication. It is the default language through which the jurist's ensure 'efficiency' at work. To formulate it in the words of [8, p.52], French is "*the language for which the product of their competences is highest"* if compared to English. This is especially true when dealing with official documents. Ethnographic elements suggest that for the legal and finance staff, tolerating English documents without their French translation is like losing agency [8].

To comply with the local corporate strategy, the foreign companies involved in business should provide official documents (like trade/ commercial registers with the necessary information about the company for legal certainty) in French. However, sticking to this language does not always ensure professional efficiency; it means limited offers or even lost business.

Apart from the financial costs apparently caused by such a non-flexibility with or non-adaptation to foreign business partners, the problem of translated contracts into French

further seems to entail risks of misinterpretation. As the author of this paper maintained elsewhere [9], the engineers' good English communication skills make of them one of the company's main resources; however, they are not specialized in legal communication, particularly, when dealing with legal contracting documents. Hence, translations are unsafe here seeing that specific competence in technical English prevents the senior engineers from bringing any remedial language assistance in dealing with machine translation weaknesses. This is especially true for legal communication with foreign partners for which the engineers, with their specific competence in technical English, are not able to bring any linguistic assistance. In short, the high costs that the French choice entailed has to be reconsidered in view of the communicative pressures that developments in the global economy seem to insert.

With all these controversial issues in mind, the legal staff's statement that they can do their work without English seems to be in contradiction with their interest in English training. This suggests that investing in human resources via English training would be more worthwhile than the high costs of -eventually low quality- translations. In this regard, suggestions for training ought to be made, too. In this vein, there is a strong case for giving this non-engineering workforce more access to training by first and foremost grouping the learners into homogeneous groups according to *their* specific purposes rather than according to their levels [3] to cater for their well-founded training expectations. Hereafter, more ample pedagogical suggestions are proposed.

On the premise that the legal and finance departments' staff show serious shortfalls in English that prevent them from responding to the workplace requirements, pedagogically addressing these shortfalls are deemed necessary. This is why gradual immersion into legal English in the early undergraduate stages seems to be a *sine qua non* to students of law and economics, in order to be prepared for international business/ marketplace. It is even believed that training in legal English needs be extended to undergraduate academic contexts so as to familiarise future jurists to legal English.

To take it one step further, and in a way to take benefit from the insight gained from the broader work context under research, previous findings have revealed that the technical engineers have acquired an acceptable competence in technical English due to high exposure technical documentation [10]. Henceforth, it would be feasible to pedagogically adopt the same principle in the English classroom with jurists by exposing them to different genres they are likely to encounter (i.e., negotiation as an oral genre and business/ service contracts or emails as written genres). On the other hand, supplementary pedagogical interest into the properties of legal English in the typical genre of 'contracts' for example is worth considering; this suggests a pedagogical consideration of the properties of legal English that established engineers already described as totally different from technical English. This warrants a supplementary research effort under the form of research-based evidence or a further survey of the existing ESP literature that tackles research into legal English. Supplementary data gatherings exemplifying different types of language needs (including authentic exemplars of target situations like business negotiation, etc.) would be required along with examining– already in the researcher's possession– the online doings of contracts negotiation.

To conclude, in a country where the hydrocarbon industry is still the major source of national economic income and a conspicuous place for international business transaction with different partners [1], this paper has argued that giving exclusive consideration to the primary needs of the engineering workforce at the expense of the nascent existing needs of the non-engineering -here legal- staff is to be reconsidered in view of the so far reported findings embedded in actual work experience.

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