

# DESIGNING A SYLLABUS FOR A COURSE OF ENGLISH FOR SECRETARY BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONAL SECRETARIES: A CASE STUDY

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*Abstract: The job of a secretary is probably one of the most popular vacancies advertised in Indonesian mass-media. Many profit and non-profit organizations seek for professional secretaries because of the central role the profession holds. A secretary is an assistant to her employer, and oftentimes she becomes not only “the hands” but also “the eyes” of her employer, indicating the wide range of work a secretary carries out. Despite of the heavy workload of the profession, there are still many female undergraduates who do not hesitate to begin or make a career as a secretary. Perhaps that is because basically the job requires administrative skills, which can be simply acquired through a lot of practices. Responding to the phenomenon, universities that run English Department have offered an English for Secretary (hereinafter referred to as EFS) course. Unfortunately, to date there have not been many books on EFS available in Indonesia. As a result, EFS teachers have to create the syllabus and prepare the materials themselves or use the old version of any EFS book available. Factually, the EFS syllabus should be created based on an actual and careful needs analysis so that the students taking the course would enjoy maximum benefit. This article focuses on*

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<sup>1</sup> This article was presented to the Fifth Conference on English Studies (Conest 5), December 1-2, 2008, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, Jakarta

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*designing a syllabus based on interviews with professional secretaries. Hence this article will discuss the importance of needs analysis, the structured interviews, the result of the interviews, and the proposed syllabus. There were 20 professional secretaries interviewed about the secretarial job description, skills, and behaviour and attitudes. The result is hitherto a secretary still goes to the following routine: handling callers, corresponding, filling, organizing meeting, and scheduling, which are relevant to the essential skills such as communication, computer and language skills; and pertinent to the behavior and attitudes a secretary should have: reliability, fast working, honesty, and autonomous learning. Thus, the planned EFS syllabus will accommodate what the interviewees have noted.*

**Keywords:** *EFS, ESP, needs analysis, syllabus, skill-centered approach*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ESP courses in universities have prevailed for more than one decade in Indonesia. ESP courses are seen as one of the efforts to provide the undergraduates-to-be with skills beneficial for their future career to meet the growing demand of young professionals especially in big cities in Indonesia and its supporting cities where companies and industries are located. Thus, the appropriate developed ESP materials will enrich the students not only with knowledge but also with specific skills needed for certain jobs they desire to take after the accomplishment of their study (Dovey 388). Having equipped with practical skill such as English, Business, Secretarial, or Communication, for instance, these students will hold certain qualifications required by the competitive world of work they are about to enter. In so doing, the higher learning institutions have made an attempt to adapt to the dynamicity of the labor world today (Usher, cited in Dovey 2006: 388).

One of the many ESP courses offered by universities in Indonesia, especially in the English Faculty is English for Secretary (EFS). EFS is considered to be the exemplification of English for Occupational Purposes, and aimed at preparing students with necessary qualifications to make a career as secretary (Jordan 1997:3), (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998:6). So, students taking the EFS Course are presumed to have an expectation of learning English and secretarial skills needed for doing the secretarial work (Dovey 2006:397). Therefore, care must be taken so that the EFS materials are not designed only based on the assumption or common knowledge of the course designer, or the teacher. I am not saying that the method is totally incorrect, but it is imperative for the EFS teachers to match what they have presumed or known to the actual circumstances of secretaries' duties and responsibilities. In this paper I give results of the interviews I conducted to a number of professional secretaries, the results of which is a base to develop a syllabus for an EFS course.

## **CONDUCTING THE NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR EFS STUDENTS**

In order to have an appropriate syllabus for the EFS course, a proper needs analysis should be carried out. The needs analysis cannot be separated from any ESP courses because after all an ESP Course innately reflects the needs analysis (Hutchinson and Waters 19), revealing the importance of the needs analysis prior to any ESP courses. In addition, Jordan asserts that needs analysis reflects “. . . fact-finding or the collection of data . . .” upon which an ESP course establishes its purpose, creates its syllabuses, prepares its material and chooses the suitable teaching methods and techniques (22). The three mostly used approaches for conducting a needs analysis are the Present Situation Analysis (PSA), Target Situation Analysis (TSA) and Strategy Analysis. PSA focuses on the learners' strength and weaknesses in at the beginning of the course (Richterich and

Chancerel cited in Robinson (b) 9, Jordan 24, and Dudley-Evans and St. John 123–124). However, Richterich and Chanceler (Robinson (a) 28) confirm that the needs analysis should not always be conducted merely at the beginning of the course because it is considered as an ongoing process. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:124) emphasizes that the strength and weaknesses are especially concerning the learners' language, skills, and learning experiences. The most well-known approach is the one suggested by Munby (Robinson 1991:8, Jordan 1997:22, Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998:123–124, Flowerdew and Peacock 2001:178), i.e. the target situation analysis (TSA), that centers on the lacks, or what the learners do not know, and wants, or what the learners wish to learn from the course. The strategy analysis was proposed by Allwright (Jordan 1997: 27), who suggests a differentiation between “. . . needs (the skills which a student sees as being relevant to him/herself), wants (those needs on which the student puts a high priority in the available, limited time), and lacks (the difference between the student's present competence and the desired competence). Suggesting almost similar idea to Allwright's, Robinson argues that some of the needs that encourage learners to take an ESP program is their study or the job requirements they wish to pursue; the learners' objectives in joining the course, and the lacks, or “what the students do not know or cannot do in English” (1991: 7–8).

Data for the needs analysis can be collected through questionnaires, detailed interview, participating observation including a case study (Robinson 1991:12) (cf. Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998:134), and press ads or advertisements of job vacancies which indicate the language needs of the jobs. Previously Robinson mentions that the information provider for the needs analysis might be potential students, language-teaching institution (teachers and administrators), those who are or will be concerned with the students' specific job or study situation, students' sponsors, and past students (1991:11). Jordan suggests fourteen methods of fact finding for needs

analysis: language test at home, language test on entry, self assessment, observation and monitoring, class progress tests, surveys, structured interview, learner diaries, case-studies, final tests, evaluation/feedback, follow-up investigations, and previous research (1998:30–37). Dudley-Evans and St. John note six major data collection methods for needs analysis in ESP: questionnaires, analysis of authentic spoken and written texts, discussions, structured interviews, observations, and assessments (1998:132). Schroder, Jordan, and Dudley-Evans and St. John include questionnaires, interview, and observation in the needs analysis techniques. It is not impossible to combine several techniques simultaneously, depending upon several factors such as the depth of the information required, and time and financial constraints. However, gathering information by different techniques from various methods and sources may result in different views which potentially lead to conflict (Robinson 1991:11).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses structured interviews with the specialists in conducting the needs analysis. Structured interviews are those “consist of questions which have been carefully thought or selected in advance” (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998:134). In the case of collecting comprehensive data about the job of secretaries, the interview should be conducted to professionals, i.e. those people doing the secretarial tasks. The questions of the interview include the job description, the general qualifications and English qualifications of a secretary. As the ESP teacher seeks for information about the secretarial duties from the professional secretaries, she is in collaboration with the subject specialists (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998:15–16). The interview with the specialists was held for the following reasons: the job requirement, and the context at work. The former indicates that students take the EFS course because they want

to be familiar with and skilful at the requirement of the job they will apply for after they finish their study (Robinson 1991:7–8), while the latter suggests that actually classrooms and work places have their own contexts and purposes, which is “dynamic, subject to variation and change” (Widdowson 2003: 113). Therefore, factual and actual data showing the work of secretaries, which can be considered as the lacks as well as the wants of the students, need to be obtained from the specialists, or the professional secretaries.

There were twenty professional secretaries interviewed either face-to-face, by telephone or by email and telephone. All of the secretaries work in Jakarta. However, not all interviews were conducted face-to-face due to limitation of time. The interviewees have worked as secretaries from one until fifteen years in various companies, and served different users within the range of time. Of the twenty secretaries, 65% of them, or thirteen graduated from secretarial academies, 15% or three held undergraduate degrees, 10% or two graduated from a secretarial academy, and afterwards got her undergraduate degree, 5% or one graduated from an English academy, and 5% or one had a graduate degree. They were asked about the job description, the general qualifications, and the English qualifications of a secretary.

## **RESULTS**

With regard to the interview on job description (see Table 1), all interviewees informed that there were eight secretarial tasks that were routinely done, i.e. making and receiving telephone calls, corresponding, filling documents, preparing meetings, taking minutes, scheduling, welcoming visitors, and arranging travels. The first and seventh tasks: handling callers shows that it is imperative for a secretary to present a positive image of their employers through indirect and direct communication. The second role, i.e. corresponding requires an ability to grasp or formulate a concept of ideas in a written communication, thus language is the medium. The

third function, or filling documents highlights regularity and carefulness to documents because letters are not just letters: they function as a proof of communication between employers and other parties, v.v., which should be able to be traced historically. The fourth duty: preparing meetings implies an ability to organize an event effectively, and the fifth one, i.e. taking minutes, which is relevant to the previous task, signifies good listening skills and a quick but exact note taking during a meeting. The sixth and eighth roles: scheduling and arranging travels require management skills including priority scaling, an awareness of the employers' preferences and good communication skills.

Meanwhile, there were sixteen non-routine work the secretaries carried out, but not all secretaries share the same work (see Table 2). As many as 45% of the interviewees deal with petty cash and payment, and 40% also take care of the employers' personal errands. Around 35% of the secretaries interviewed have to do financial budgeting and reporting, and dealing with vendors. Another 25% have to compile and make reports, and only 20% have to translate texts. As many as 10% of the interviewees make proposal and database their companies' clients. Only 5% respectively deal with paying tax, handling personal account, maintaining good relationship with clients, analyzing business trends, prepare invoice, and general affair. Most of the non-routine tasks are connected with financial matters, which indicates that secretaries-to-be needs to prepare themselves to deal with finance.

As of the general qualifications of a secretary, the interviewees referred to skills, and attitude, or behavior (see Table 3). With regard to skills, 75% of the interviewees noted that communication is the most important skill, while 55% considered that computer skills is a must, and 50% noted that business correspondence, and good command of both Indonesian and English are momentous. Only 25% of the interviewees stated that typing and filling skills is

necessary, perhaps because those skills are practical, thus they can be learned by habit. Moreover, merely 20% and 10% of the interviewees informed that management and simple financial reporting skills are necessary, respectively. That's probably because the management and financial skills needed for the post of a secretary tend to be applicable compared to the ones required for the post of managers. Hence, the skills can be acquired through day-to-day work. Interestingly only 10% stated that the secretarial education is a must, while factually 65% of them graduated from secretarial academy.

Concerning behavior and attitudes, 85% of the interviewees regarded that reliability is the most important attitude, which is followed by ability to work fast (65%), then honesty, and autonomous learning (55%), and flexibility and politeness (50%). Meanwhile, less than 50% of the secretaries viewed that dedication, initiative, tactfulness, and smartness are a must. Finally, less than 40% of the interviewees considered that punctuality, friendliness, toughness, smartness, accuracy, care for personal appearance, self confidence, carefulness, helpfulness, independence, maturity, diplomatic, commitment, and patience to be significant. I think because the behavior and attitudes incline to be personal, there is a wide interpretation as is shown by the interviewees' responses.

Pertaining to English qualifications, 75% of the interviewees considered that conversation is the most needed ability, and 70% stated that business correspondence was also important, which is followed by telephoning skills (55%). Grammar rules and business vocabulary were seen to be less important than the previous capabilities. Finally, making presentation, pronunciation and public speaking were even much less important (see Table 4).

## **DISCUSSION**

The interviews show that until recently there have not been many changes in the primary day-to-day work of a secretary. The jobs



a secretary has to do routinely are still around administrative and communication affairs, such as making and receiving telephone calls, corresponding, filling documents, preparing meetings, taking minutes, scheduling, arranging travels and welcoming visitors (see Table 1), which are in line with the practical skills required: communication, computer, business correspondence and languages, esp. Indonesian and English (see Table 3), and the English basic qualifications expected: conversation, including telephone conversation, and business correspondence (see Table 4). In addition, all secretaries agreed that behavior and attitudes, especially reliability, fast working, honesty, autonomous learning, flexibility and politeness performed crucial roles in accomplishing their tasks.

I propose the following syllabus (see Table 5) to facilitate students with the most important secretarial qualifications they need using the skill centered approach (Hutchinson and Waters 91-92). Adopting the approach I have analyzed the target needs, i.e. basic knowledge and skills a secretary should have, then I have to select interesting and representative texts as well as the functional activities or techniques to teach and to enable the students to practice the skills. Of course finally I also have to evaluate whether or not the students have mastered the skills. Thus, being the basic skills, the communication skills are given first, which is followed by telephone and face-to-face communication in the second and third meetings, and correspondence including filling system in the fourth and fifth meetings. Handling meetings and scheduling are given in the sixth and seventh meetings, respectively. Knowledge on behaviour and attitudes is given after the mid-term examination, or in the ninth meeting, and business knowledge and ethics is delivered in the two meetings afterwards. Basic computer skills and simple financial reporting are presented in the twelfth to thirteenth meetings. Applying for a job is given in the fourteenth to fifteenth meetings. In the end students have to either take the final test, or do a project work in which there will be an assessment of their acquisition of the skills.

## CONCLUSION

So far I have explained about the purpose of giving ESP courses, one of which is the English for Secretary that is usually offered by the English Departments in universities in Indonesia. I have also elucidated the importance of conducting the needs analysis prior to an ESP course, particularly the EFS course. One method to conduct the needs analysis is through interviews with specialist, which I have carried out to 20 professional secretaries. The result of the interviews gives a clear picture of the tasks a secretary nowadays has to do. Thus, based on the interview I developed a syllabus to cover the needs of the students-secretaries-to-be: basic skills and knowledge of secretarial duties.

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No.	Job description	Interviewees																				%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
1	Making and receiving telephone calls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
2	Corresponding Filing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
3	documents Preparing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
4	meetings Taking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
5	minutes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
6	Scheduling Welcoming	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
7	visitors Arranging	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
8	travels	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	95%

**Table 1:**  
Routine job of a secretary

No.	Job description	Interviewees																				%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
1	Handling petty cash	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓							✓			45%
2	Paying bills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓											✓		45%
3	Taking care of personal errands				✓					✓									✓	✓		40%
4	Budgeting and reporting expenses			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓								✓				35%
5	Dealing with vendors	✓	✓					✓		✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓		35%
6	Compiling reports	✓					✓			✓	✓							✓	✓			25%
7	Making reports	✓						✓		✓	✓	✓							✓			25%
8	Translating texts						✓			✓			✓						✓			20%
9	Making proposal								✓	✓												10%
10	Data basing client information & performing related administrative duties																					
	Handling personal account				✓							✓										10%
11	Paying tax								✓													5%
12	Maintaining good relationship																					5%
13																						

Table 2:  
Non-routine job of a secretary

No.	General qualifications	Interviewees																				%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
	<i>Skills</i>																					
1	Good communication skills	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓						✓	✓			
2	Computer skills	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓						✓	✓			
3	Business correspondence	✓	✓				✓			✓												
4	Good command of Indonesian & English				✓					✓	✓	✓						✓	✓			
5	Typing fast	✓					✓			✓	✓	✓										
6	Filing system		✓				✓			✓	✓	✓										
7	Management skills						✓			✓	✓	✓										
8	Simple financial report						✓			✓	✓	✓										
9	Secretarial education									✓	✓	✓										
	<i>Behaviour and attitudes</i>																					
1	Reliable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Fast working	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Honest	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Self-learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Flexible	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Polite	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Dedicated	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Initiative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Tactful	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Smart	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Punctual	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Friendly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Tough	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Accurate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Care for personal appearance		✓							✓												
16	Self-confident	✓	✓							✓												
17	Careful				✓					✓												
18	Helpful	✓								✓												
19	Independent				✓					✓												
20	Mature				✓					✓												
21	Committed to work				✓					✓												
22	Patient														✓							

**Table 3:**  
General qualifications of a secretary

No.	General qualifications	Interviewees																				%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
1	Conversation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	75%
2	Business correspondence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓						✓			✓	70%
3	Telephoning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								✓			✓	55%
4	Good grammar				✓	✓				✓											✓	35%
5	Business vocabulary					✓			✓	✓								✓		✓	✓	35%
6	Making presentation	✓							✓									✓				15%
7	Pronunciation												✓									10%
8	Public speaking									✓												5%

Table 4:  
English qualifications of a secretary

Meeting	Skill/language	Main activities
1	Communication skills of a secretary	- Case study - Discussion/evaluation
2 - 3	Greeting callers: - Making and receiving telephone calls - Making, accepting, and declining an appointment - Taking and leaving telephone messages - Welcoming visitors	- Listening tasks - Role play - Discussion/evaluation
4 - 5	Business correspondence, including filling system	- Reading - Writing - Filling - Discussion/evaluation
6	Taking minutes of meetings and reporting minutes of meetings	- Listening tasks - Note taking - Role play - Discussion/evaluation
7	Scheduling and arranging travels	- Case study - Problem solving - Discussion/evaluation
8	Mid-term examination	
9	Behavior and attitudes	- Role play - Discussion/evaluation
10 - 11	Business knowledge and business ethics	- Critical reading - Writing reports - Discussion/evaluation
12 - 13	Basic computer skills and simple financial report	- Listening - Reading - Writing
14 - 15	Applying for a job - Making an application letter - Preparing a good curriculum vitae - Coming to an interview	- Reading - Writing - Role play - Discussion/evaluation
16	Final-term examination	

**Table 5**  
The proposed tentative syllabus