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A Closer Look at Different Dimensions of Needs Analysis in the Field of ELT

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Abstract

Language needs analysis (language needs assessment) is the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities. Needs analysis is a device to know the learners' necessities, needs, and lacks in order to develop courses that have a reasonable content for exploitation in the classroom. Needs analysis is also a part of curriculum development and is normally required before syllabus can be developed for language teaching. The present paper tries to have a critical view at the concept of needs analysis. It further takes into account the different aspects of needs analysis in the realm of ELT and curriculum development. The discussion here could be of important value to teachers and students of English language. Both high-stake and low-stake holders can avail from the discussions of the study.

Introduction

Language needs analysis (language needs assessment) is the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities. According to Richards and Schmidt (1985), needs assessment makes use of both objective and subjective information (e.g. data from questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation) and seeks to obtain information on:

- 1- The situation in which a language will be used.
- 2- The objectives and purposes for which the language is needed.
- 3- The types of communication that will be used.
- 4- The level of proficiency that will be required.

Needs analysis is part of curriculum development and is normally required before syllabus can be developed for language teaching.

Needs analysis is a device to know the learners' necessities, needs, and lacks in order to develop courses that have a reasonable content for exploitation in the classroom. According to Fatihi (2003), needs Analysis is therefore a process for identification and defining valid curriculum and instructional and management objectives in order to facilitate learning in an environment that is closely related to the real life situations of the student. It brings into sharp focus the settings and roles that learner is likely to face after he finishes his formal education. Actually, the switch of attention communication highlighted the role of the learner and his needs in modern educational system.

What the research on needs analysis involves

The research on learner needs, known as needs analysis or needs assessment, based on Benesch (1996), involves surveying students about their backgrounds and goals; consulting faculty about course requirement; collecting and classifying assignments; observing students in naturalistic settings , such as lecture classes, and noting the linguistic and behavioral demands; or combining these techniques to obtain a description of assignments, discourse, and classroom behavior.

The importance of needs analysis in course design and communicative syllabus design

According to Maftoon (2001) the first step in the construction of a language course is defining objectives which have been specified by the analysis of needs of learners. Maftoon (2001) further maintains that being involved in a communicative syllabus design without identifying and analyzing the language needs of learners appears to be impossible the reason being that if language is a system for expressing meaning and if language learners have different communicative purposes, these materials are to be reflected in the materials the learners should be taught and to be included in the activities expected of learners to later engage in the target language.

The questions asked regarding students' needs analysis based on Hedge (2000) are:

- a. What were the students' priority needs?
- b. To what extent has the course fulfilled students' needs?
- c. Have students become aware of further needs?

Two major orientations to needs analysis

According to Maftoon (2001), the disagreement over the meaning of needs and what needs analysis should entail has triggered two main orientations to needs analysis: Product-oriented and Process-oriented interpretations of needs.

Product-oriented approach: This approach to needs analysis refers to the objective data which are collected about learners based on factual information pertaining to their needs in the use of language in real life communicative situation. It also refers to language learners' current language proficiency and language deficiency.

Process-oriented approach to needs analysis: This approach towards needs analysis refers to those subjective data collected from learners concerning their cognitive and affective needs in the learning situation, variables such as attitude, wants and wishes, personality type, in addition to their expectations regarding learning a foreign language.

What researchers do in needs analysis for EAP?

Researchers identify and describe existing elements of the target situation to provide the basis for curriculum development. According to Benesch (1996), critical needs analysis, on the other hand, considers the target situation as the locus of possible reform. It takes the

hierarchical nature of social institutions into account and treats inequality, both inside and outside the institution, as a central concern.

The cause for lack of attention in needs analysis to sociopolitical issues and their effects in curriculum.

According to Benesch (1996), the lack of attention in needs analysis to sociopolitical issues and their effects on curriculum is due, in part, to the way social context is delineated in the EAP literature. Social context is what takes place outside our own classrooms but not very far outside. It consists of the discourse, classroom interactions, and assignment courses across the disciplines but exclude the political and economic forces that influence life inside and outside academic institutions. Benesch (1996) mentions that needs analysis has not considered social issues having a bearing on students' current academic lives, such as ambivalence towards learning English or budget cuts, and those that are likely to impact on their future professional lives, such as deteriorating job opportunities. However, students may need to examine these issues to understand the difficulties of pursuing a degree or getting a job.

Needs analysis and ESP

ESP is understood to be about preparing learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments, and a key feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on analysis of the needs of students (Basturkman, 2006). Therefore, as Basturkman (2006) asserts, in ESP, language is not learned for its own sake and for the sake of gaining a general eructation, but to pave the way for obtaining a better linguistic efficiency in these environments. As the syllabus is based on needs, learners are likely to be motivated. Furthermore, the majority of ESP courses ar5e subject to time constrains, hence making an efficient use of time obligatory. Since learners in ESP have a restricted amount of time, there appears to be the necessity to teach them only bits of English they need. Hence the task of ESP course developer is to identify the needs of learners and design a course around them.

According to Salmani-Nodoushan (2002), in EAP, before beginning a needs analysis, one must first answer the question whether students will use English at university or in their job after graduation. If the answer is no, then ESP is not a reasonable option for the university's language program. The university will have to improve the program through other means. If

the answer is yes, then ESP is probably the most intelligent option for the university's curriculum program.

Criticisms and issues around needs analysis in ESP.

Basturkman (2006) list some of the criticisms and issues around needs analysis in ESP. Below are some of the problems.

- The information often comes from the institutions themselves, already having definite expectations of what the students should be able to do, and hence making needs analysis serve the interests of institutions at the expense of the learners
- Language training for specific purposes can be a covert means to channel immigrants into marginal occupations, ensuring that they only have sufficient English to perform specific low-wage jobs and do not have good enough English to be able to move out of these jobs.
- The learners are often asked for their perceptions of needs. However, they may not be reliable sources of information about their own needs, especially when they are relatively unfamiliar with the job they are to perform or subject they are to study.
- Objective needs are not necessarily the same as the subjective ones. For instance, engineering students may objectively need to deal with written texts pertaining to technical matter but may want to read topics in general English on other general interests.
- Language needs are not learning needs. Although learners will need to use certain language structures in the target environment, this does not mean they are ready to acquire them.

The position of needs analysis in a testing project

In constructing a performance test, based on Wu and Stansfield (2001), a need analysis is conducted in order to provide a detailed description of the specific context and tasks which learners will need to perform the specific conditions under which these tasks will be performed, and the criteria against which performance can be judged. Then, the learners' performance can be judged over a range of tasks that need to be sampled. Thereafter, needs analysis will specify the context of the second language use, the type of interaction, the roles,

discourse types, and language functions to be performed, and the basis on which the successful fulfillment of the second language tasks is to be judged.

According to Salmani-Nodoushan (2002), in constructing a performance test, a need analysis is conducted in order to provide a detailed description of the specific context and tasks which learners will need to perform the specific conditions under which these tasks will be performed, and the criteria against which performance can be judged. Fulfillment of the second language tasks is to be judged.

Assessment of test content begins, based on Robinson and Ross (1996), with a needs analysis, using information gathered by teacher surveys of class needs, and a content analysis of text in relevant content area domain. Following this, a target performance analysis of the activities the students are likely to encounter outside EAP classroom is performed and the target task criteria are drafted based on these observations

Final remarks

Long (1985, cited in Maftoon, 2001) regarding the complexity of needs maintains that different kinds of suggestions have been proposed for the evaluation of the learners needs by applied linguists and syllabus designers. Regarding the question whether it is possible to turn to simpler techniques and procedures regarding language needs identification Long (1985, cited in Maftoon, 2001) proposes a very simple, cost-effective procedure made by specialists in their respected fields. Long maintains that job descriptions which are lists of activities people are to perform in real-life situation provide syllabus designers with abundant prepared objective needs people are normally expected to perform in authentic situations. As he suggests, the dictionary of occupational titles, for example, that gives adequate descriptions of thousands of occupations and are prepared by reliable sources can be employed in the construction of language instructional materials for those jobs. “ if we agree with this definition of needs assessment that refers to the identification of standard situations in which language learners will later have to function, then job descriptions are of immense value in materials preparation” (Maftoon, 2001, p. 23). As Maftoon (2001) further explains, they are of paramount value in a sense that they refer to activities that people must be able to perform so as to function in a particular field.

All in all, needs analysis is a device to know the learners' necessities, needs, and lacks in order to develop courses that have a reasonable content for exploitation in the classroom. Therefore, it is of high importance to carry out a needs analysis before, in the middle, and at the end of a specific course of instruction.

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