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Needs Analysis and Language Teaching

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Abstract

Needs analysis is one of the major topics in the field of language acquisition research. Analysis of language learners' needs is seen as the first step towards preparation of language course. Hakuta and Cancino (1977: 294) stressed that “language provides one of the most readily accessible windows into the nature of the human mind. How children acquire this complex system with such apparent ease continues to fascinate the student of human language.”

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Ali Akbar Khansir and Farhad Pakdel
Needs Analysis and Language Teaching

Needs analysis is seen as a device for gathering information about learners and about their needs in language teaching.

This paper attempts to describe the use of needs analysis in language teaching and points out the distinction between objective needs analysis and subjective needs analysis. Richards and Rodgers (1986:156) argued that “need analysis is concerned with identifying general and specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives, and content in a language program”. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) mentioned that learners’ needs should be considered in the process of planning the content of a language program.

Keywords: Needs Analysis, objective needs analysis, subjective need analysis and language teaching.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine needs analysis in language teaching. Khansir (2012:167-8) mentioned that “language is one of the most important characteristic forms of human behavior. It is man’s ability to use language for purpose of communication that distinguishes him from other animals. Accordingly, it has always had a place in human affair”. Breen and Candlin (2001) proposed some purpose in language teaching which must be considered such as communication as a general purpose, the underlying demands on the learner that such a purpose may imply, the initial contributions which learners may bring to the curriculum, the process of teaching and learning, the roles of teacher and learners, the role of content within the teaching and learning, and the place of evaluation of learner progress and evaluation of the curriculum itself from communicative point of view.

The aim of needs analysis regarding language teaching is to determine why a group of language learners needs to learn a language and what methods and devices are needed for them

to develop and improve their target language skills. White (1988) argued that needs analysis procedure in the field of language teaching was first coined by Michael West in a survey report published in 1926. As not much research was done until 1970s by language researchers on the analysis of learners' needs, needs analysis was generally informal (West, 1994). However, needs analysis re-emerged during the 1970s as a result of intensive studies conducted by the Council of Europe team. The Council of Europe team was responsible for developing a new approach towards teaching the major European languages to European adults. The team thought that successful language learning and teaching resulted from what the learners' need did in the second and foreign language, but not from mastering linguistic elements. Another term coined by the Council of Europe team was "Common Core". According to the Common Core, language learners share certain interests despite their different goals in learning foreign and second languages. Johnson (1982:42) argued that the Council of Europe team recognized that there will be areas of interest common to all students, whatever be their particular situation and specialization. Needs analysis plays a crucial role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course, whether it is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or general English course. Iwai, et al. (1999) mentioned that the term needs analysis generally refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students.

Needs analysis is important in terms of students' involvement in every phase of educational process. It is necessary to know about learners' objectives, language attitudes, and expectations from the course and learning habits in order to design an efficient curriculum. Kaur (2007) argued that if English as second language instructors do not know about their students

and their needs, developing a curriculum becomes a challenge causing many problems in learning and teaching the second language.

Lytle (1988) mentioned that assessment of needs from the individual learners' perspective is an important part of any instructional program design and it can benefit both teachers and students alike. Brindley (1989) indicated that the main source of the ambiguity in the concept of language needs is the distinction between various concepts of need, namely, the distinction between necessities or demands, and learners' wants and the methods of bridging the gap between these two. Nunan (1988:13) stated that "techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design are referred to as needs analysis". Aimin and Yan (2012 :23) argued that "*objective needs* refers to all factual information about learners, that is the 'biographical data' such as age, sex, nationality, marital status, education background, previous language courses, current... whereas *subjective needs* refers to the cognitive and effective needs of learners in language learning, such as confidence, attitudes, and expectations."

2. Language Teaching

Language teaching can be traced as far back as Panini's grammar, Latin, Greek translations, and Inter-linear translations, etc. (Eapen, R., 1995). Kelly (1969) and Howatt (1984) "have demonstrated that many current issues in language teaching are not particularly new" (cited in Richards and Rodger, 1986, P. 1). Language is a vital developmental domain throughout the years of schooling, whatever the child's linguistic, cultural, or social background. Littlewood (1981:1) paid attention to both of structural and functional views of language and indicated that "the structural view of language concentrates on the grammatical system, describing ways in which linguistic items can be combined", he added that the structural view of language is not sufficient on its own to account for how language is used as a means of communication, whereas

the structural view of language has not been in any way superseded by the functional view. He believed that we need to pay attention to both the functional view of language and the structural view of language. These may be combined into a more fully communicative view in order to describe the goal of foreign language teaching: communicative ability.

The theories of language teaching were mainly influenced by behaviorism in 1950s. This theory focused on human behaviors. Behaviorists view language development as a process of habit formation which involves imitation, practice, correct reinforcement (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). This theory led to theories of learning which explained how an external event (a stimulus) caused a change in the behavior of an individual (a response) without using concepts like “mind” or “ideas”, or any kind of mental behavior (Richards et al, 1992). However, this theory has received a lot of criticism.

Chomsky is the most dynamic, influential and revolutionary linguist of today, rejected behaviorism theory. Chomsky (1966) argued that language acquisition cannot be accounted for without positing a linguistically specific system of principles and parameters that every healthy child is genetically endowed with, a system he refers to as universal Grammar or as the Language Acquisition Device. Cognitive approach focused on active mental processes for learning language and not the result of general learning mechanism.

Latin was used as a living language and was learned as a subject in the school curriculum. Methods adopted in teaching and learning became the standard way of studying foreign languages in schools. Latin used in education, commerce, religion, and government in the western world. It was replaced by other languages such as French, Italian, and English (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Today, English language is the most important international language and English language teaching provides many models.

With the increasing number of foreign language classrooms today, the role of needs analysis can be regarded as a ‘device’ the learners use in order to learn. Researches have provided empirical evidences pointing to the emphasis on learners’ needs as an effective means of improving the language learning of students. In the field of language teaching, syllabus designers, researchers, and teachers are responsible for selecting educational materials and activities at the right level and of the right type for all of the learners of language in an education system. In order to teach a foreign or second language effectively, we need to distinguish between imperfect knowledge of the studied language and cognitive obstacles to learning. The syllabus designers, researchers, and teachers need to know which language problems will resolve with time and which need attention and intervention. In other words, they need to know a great deal about language development. In language teaching, it is necessary to follow “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities” (Richards et al, 1992, 242).

Needs analysis has been used as an important initial step in curriculum design for further development of teaching materials, learning activities, tests, program evaluation strategies, and so forth. There is an impressive amount of research on needs analysis in the language teaching field. Recently, considerable research has been undertaken on needs analysis for English for Academic Purposes, English for Business Purposes, and English for Specific Purposes (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002; Brown, et al. 2007; Cowling, 2007; Edwards, 2000; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005).

3. Needs Analysis

West (1994) stated that "the term ‘analysis of needs’ first appeared in India in 1920". Michael West (1926) was the first person to carry out what would now be called “Needs Analysis”. In his report about Bengali pupils, he reflected his belief that the current approach to teaching English

had ‘low surrender value’ because pupils derived little benefit from the amount of teaching they received during an incomplete course of instruction. He advocated developing practical information reading in English, which would enable Bengali students to have access to the technological knowledge needed for economic development of their country. However, “In Europe, during the 1970s, the language needs of a rapidly increasing group of immigrants and guest workers, and a rich British linguistic tradition that included social as well as linguistic context in description of language behavior, led to the Council of Europe development of a syllabus for learners based on functional-notional concepts of language use. Derived from neo-Firthian systemic or functional linguistics that views language as meaning potential and maintains the centrality of context of situation in understanding language systems and how they work, a threshold level of language ability was described for each of the languages of Europe in terms of what learners should be able to do with the language (van Ek, 1975).

Functions were based on assessment of learner needs and specified the end result, the product of an instructional program. The term *communicative* was used to describe programs that used a functional-notional syllabus based on needs assessment, and the language for specific purposes (LSP) movement was launched (Savignon , 1991,263).”

Fatihi (2003) argued that needs analysis in modern language teaching was first made by the Council of Europe Modern Language Projects group. This group intended to promote language learning in Europe and to offer guidance and support to many ‘partners for learning’ whose co-operation is necessary to the creation of a coherent and transparent structure of provision for effective learning, relevant to the needs of the learners as well as of society.

As we previously said, needs analysis refers to the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning

needs of a particular group of students. In the case of language programs, those needs will be language related. Iwai et al (1999) stressed that once identified, needs can be stated in terms of goals and objectives which, in turn, can serve as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies, as well as for reevaluating the precision and accuracy of the original needs assessment. Thus needs assessment is an integral part of systematic curriculum building. Richards (1990:2) stated that needs analysis is fundamental to the planning of general language courses and in language curriculum planning, and needs analysis can be considered as a means to a number of things such as : a) it can serve as a device for gathering an extensive range of input into the content, design, and implementation of language programme by involving all the stakeholders , b) it can help in setting goals, objectives and content for a language programme by determining general and specific language needs, c) needs analysis can be instrumental in providing data which can be used for reviewing and evaluating an existing programme, and finally it can help teachers in understanding the local needs of the students and making decisions in pedagogy and assessment for further improvement. All these uses of needs analysis refer to the fact that needs analysis can be used for a range of purposes. Needs analysis can be helpful in determining whether a programme should be implemented by finding out if it matches the goals and objectives of the learners for learning a language and at the same time when used as part of a programme it can help in improving various components of the programme and making these more oriented to the needs of the learners. Needs analysis can also help in evaluating an existing programme and if found deficient can help in establishing the need for introducing a change and what kind of change may appropriately match the needs of the learners and simultaneously be acceptable to teachers (Ali Khan, 2007).

Iwai et al (1999: 9-10) indicated the importance of needs analysis for general language courses from various perspectives such as learner-centered curriculum, task-based curriculum, performance assessment, proficiency-oriented curriculum and motivation:

- a) In a learner-centered curriculum, teachers' reconciliation in content selection through extensive consultation with students about their learning needs and interests is critical (Brindley, 1989). Needs analysis helps teachers create in-class activities in which the students can utilize learned skills and knowledge as tools to meet their real-life needs in meaningful ways (Nunan, 1988).
- b) Needs analysis helps teachers understand "local needs" of students or the needs of a particular group of students and make practical decisions in pedagogy and assessment for improvement (Tarone & Yule, 1989).
- c) Needs analysis should be a central component of performance assessments, whose purposes are to test students' ability to perform tasks in real-world situations (Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998).
- d) Needs analysis is an integral component of task-based syllabi; real-life target tasks should be identified by a needs analysis (Long & Crookes, 1992, 1993).
- e) In proficiency-oriented instruction/curricula, needs analysis helps teachers understand the potential differences in learning expectations between themselves and their students (Birckbichler & Corl, 1993).
- f) Obtaining input from the students about a planned or existing program through a needs analysis is fundamental to the design, implementation, evaluation, and revision of the program (Richards, 1990; Savignon, 1997).
- i) A program that attempts to meet students' perceived needs will be more motivating and successful (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991).

However, Nation and Macalister (2010:24) mentioned that "needs analysis is directed mainly at the goals and content of a course. It examines what the learners know already and what they need to know. Needs analysis makes sure that the course will contain relevant and useful things

to learn. Good needs analysis involves asking the right questions and finding the answers in the most effective way.”

3.1. Approaches to Needs Analysis

There are different approaches to needs analysis discussed by many researchers. These include sociolinguistic model, systemic approach, learning-centred approach, learner-centred approaches, and task-based approach. Munby (1978) considered sociolinguistic model for defining the content of purpose-specific language programmes. He provided a detailed profile of the students’ language needs. One of the problems of Munby model was that it collected data about the student not from the students.

Second approach is systemic approach coined by Richterich & Chancerel (1977). They proposed a systemic approach for identifying the needs of adults learning a foreign language. This approach fills the gaps in the sociolinguistic model in terms of flexibility and shows a distinct concern for learners. According to this approach, learner needs are approached by examining information before a course starts as well as during the course by the learners themselves and by ‘teaching establishments’ such as their place of work and sponsoring bodies (Jordan, 1997).

Third approach is a learning-centred approach offered by Hutchinson & Waters (1987). They believed that other approaches give too much attention to language needs, whereas more attention should be given to how learners learn. The needs in this approach divided into three categories such as necessities, lacks, and wants. Necessities are considered to be “what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation” (p. 55). Lacks are defined as the gaps between what the learner knows and the necessities (p. 56). Wants are described as “what the learners think they need” (Nation, 2000, 2).

Fourth approach, the Learner-centred approach, is offered by Berwick (1989) and Brindley (1989). Three ways are used to consider the learners' needs such as perceived vs. felt needs; product vs. process oriented interpretations; and objective vs. subjective needs. Perceived needs are from the perspective of experts while 'felt needs' are from the perspective of learners (Berwick, 1989). In the product-oriented interpretation, learner needs are viewed as the language that learners require in target situations. In the process-oriented interpretation, the focus is on how individuals respond to their learning situation, involving affective and cognitive variables which affect learning (Brindley, 1989).

The last approach to needs analysis is a task-based approach. Long (2005) argued that a task-based approach to needs analysis is used with teaching and learning based on the argument that "structures or other linguistic elements (notions, functions, lexical items, etc.)" should not be a focal point of teaching and learning. "Learners are far more active and cognitive-independent participants in the acquisition process than is assumed by the erroneous belief that what you teach is what they learn, and when you teach it is when they learn it" (p. 3). In this approach, tasks are the units of analysis and "samples of the discourse typically involved in performance of target tasks" (p. 3) are collected.

3.2. Objective Needs and Subjective Needs

Different kinds of language learners' needs are distinguished by many scholars. These include situation needs and language needs. According to Brown (1995) situation needs include information of the "program's human aspects, that is, physical, social, and psychological contexts in which learning takes place" (p.40), and language needs as "the target linguistic behaviors that the learners must ultimately acquire" (p.40). Another way of determining learners' needs is objective needs and subjective needs. Objective needs are observable factual

information about the learners but do not involve the learners' view such as personal background, learners' proficiency, and where or how often students use the target language in real life. On the other hand, a subjective need refers to learners' perspectives of language learning. Learners' views on goal, priorities, wants, expectations, preference for learning strategies and participation styles are some components of subjective needs. Both situation needs and language needs can be objective information or subjective information.

Richterich (1984) argued that "objective needs analysis form the broad parameters of the program, but when learning starts, this language related needs would be altered, and some sort of learning needs which were not specified pre-course will appear. Therefore, at this step "subjective needs" analysis is essential to collect information from learners so as to guide the learning process.

Nunan (1988) classified needs analysis under two headings: "Objective" needs and "Subjective" needs. He added that objective needs may be diagnosed by the teacher on the basis of the personal data of the learners. In the light of this data, the teacher can select or plan a suitable syllabus. Subjective needs are derived from the learners themselves and influence the teaching methodology of the syllabus. With the perimeter of this discussion, Nunan (1988:18) defined that "Objective data is that factual information which does not require the attitudes and views of the learners to be taken into account. Thus, biographical information on age, nationality, home language, etc. is said to be objective. Subjective information, on the other hand, reflects the perceptions, goals, and priorities of the learner. It will include, among other things, information on why the learner has undertaken to learn a second language, and the classroom tasks and activities which the learner prefers. Such information often reveals learning –style preferences by the learner. " Nunan (1988:79) mentioned that "one of the purposes of

subjective needs analysis is to involve learners and teachers in exchanging information so that the agendas` of the teacher and the learner may be more closely aligned. This can happen in two ways. In the first place, information provided by learners can be used to guide the selection of content and learning activities. Secondly, by providing learners with detailed information about goals, objectives, and learning activities, learners may come to have a greater appreciation and acceptance of the learning experience they are undertaking or about to undertake. It may be that learners have different goals from those of the teacher simply because they have not been informed in any meaningful way what the teacher's goals are". According Nation and Macalister (2010) information about objective needs can be gathered by questionnaires, personal interviews, data collection (for example, gathering exam papers, textbooks, and analyzing them), observation (for example, following a learner through a typical day), informal consultation with teachers and learners, and tests. Subjective needs are discovered through learner self-assessment using lists and scales, and questionnaires and interviews.

One of the most powerful influences on learning of language, motivation is used in different ways by different scholars in the field of needs analysis as theory of psychology. Gardner and Lambert (1972) indicated the difference between two kinds of motivations, integrative and instrumental motivations. According to them, integrative motivated learner learns foreign language because she/he finds the language pleasant and interesting and because she /he wishes to enter into an active interaction with the target language speakers whereas, instrumental motivation is characterized by utilitarian objectives such as obtaining admission in a particular course or getting a better job. Gardner (1985) stated that the success in learning a foreign language will be influenced particularly by attitudes towards the community of speakers of that language.

4. Conclusion

The term “Needs Analysis” gained prominence during 1970s and developed alongside the formulation of a Communicative Approach to language teaching. It has been particularly associated with the field of ESP (English for Specific Purpose). Johns (1991) pointed out that one of the greatest contributions of ESP to language teaching has been its emphasis on careful and extensive needs analysis for course design. Negal (1961: 116) argued that “a good language teaching theory will strive to provide a conceptual framework devised for identifying all factors relevant in the teaching of language and the relationship between them and for giving effective direction to the practice of language teaching, supported by the necessary research and inquiry”. Crystal (1980) indicated that needs analysis expressed generally as the identification of language needs, consists primarily in compiling information both on the individuals or groups of individuals who are to learn a language and on the use which they are expected to make of it when they have learnt it. In other words, the procedures associated with the analysis of needs offers the course designer a framework for the selection of language content according to the goals of particular learners and therefore, the possibility of tailor-made programs, rather than starting with ready-made syllabus that does not by itself discriminate between different objectives. Finney (1996) suggested that needs analysis is now seen as the logical starting point for the development of a language program which is responsive to the learner and learning needs, but there has been some disagreement as to what is entailed. Brindley (1989: 64) argued “that two orientations are now generally recognized: 1. A narrow, product-oriented view of needs which focuses on the language necessary for particular future purposes and is carried out by the experts. 2. A broad, process-oriented view of needs which takes into account factors such as learner motivation and learning style as well as learner-defined target language. He suggested

that both types of needs analysis are necessary: one aimed at collecting factual information for the purposes of setting broad goals related to language content, the other aimed at gathering information about learners which can be used to guide the learning process once it is underway”. However, needs analysis takes place not only at the pre-course planning stage, but also during the course, contributing to the development of teacher-learner negotiated learning objectives.

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