

AWARENESS OF STUDENTS' NEEDS

Teaching at various faculties and institutions, English teachers have come to realize that materials they use are not appropriate in all their classes. This is only too evident because our learners have different needs. How can we find out what these needs are, analyse and prioritise them? The aim of this paper is to raise teachers' awareness of how important needs analysis is in nowadays teaching.

Needs analysis is defined as techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design. In our country the course design in general, and needs analysis in particular used to play a very small part in the life of practical teachers. The courses used to be completely determined by the Ministry of education, which would hire some experts to do the job for all the institutions teaching the same level. The courses were determined by tradition and were seldom modernised; they were also determined by the choice of available textbooks.

Later on, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the new sovereign states appeared there appeared new posts requiring knowledge of some international lingua franca. Joint ventures went mushrooming throughout the post-Soviet space and their staff felt the need to communicate in a common language with their counterparts overseas. The students received new opportunities to study abroad or to swap with foreign students for holidays. Many people could afford travelling and having a rest in a foreign country. They no longer needed "standard courses" for everyone and for no purpose. Their needs became evidently different. Moreover, many of them did not have enough time to study English (which was perceived to be the most handy language in most of the situations) to perfection. Thus, the demand had to be satisfied, and thus the teachers started to get interested in how to better their job in these conditions.

All this caused the emergence of a long-lasting interest in syllabus design and needs analysis. Even in the educational institutions where they used to teach in the same way for years, both the authorities and the teaching staff felt the urgent need to open the new possibilities for their students as many of them wanted to minor in English. The teachers in such institutions were also engaged in designing new courses.

Teachers and course designers are not the only people who are currently interested in needs analysis. All the parties involved in teaching-learning process nowadays cannot do without it. The training organisations are interested not only they have to determine the content of the course, they need to set up realistic goals to be achieved by the students in the time available. It means that they have to clearly determine the starting (entry) level and the finishing (exit) level, to see whether the training was effective. This connects needs analysis with testing. Many organisations develop their own entry and exit test, which they use to differentiate the types of the learners who attended their courses, and to form homogeneous groups. The sponsors (including parents) are another interested party, as they would like to definitely know that their money is not wasted. Sending their children or

employees to study at this or that language school, they would doubtlessly like to have the results related to the norms of the population at large.

The learners themselves are interested in needs analysis because they need to know what they will be taught and how the course will meet their demands. They need to know (if they are not complete beginners) what their present-day capabilities are, and how their English compares to that of the non-native users worldwide; how long and how much they need to study. The learners are always interested to be assessed by some common performance scale.

But, of course, the course designers remain the main users of needs analysis. In our situation very often they are the teachers who have to design the course. The main question they want to find out is — what exactly do my students need to know? Basically, this question can be split into the following core issues:

What level of proficiency must be achieved?

What topic areas need to be covered?

How will the learning be achieved?

What methods will be employed?

In the professional course design process these issues are considered in their interdependence. Some scholars believe that the language description and the theories of learning should also be taken into account while designing a course.

What are the needs that the learners have? There exists a confusing plethora of terms. Needs are described as *objective* and *subjective* [Brindley, 1989]; *perceived* or *felt* [Berwick, 1989]; *target situation needs* (or *goal-oriented*), *learning situation needs* and *present situation needs*; *process-oriented* and *product-oriented needs* [Brindley, *ibid*]; *instant* and *long-termed needs*; *necessities*, *wants* and *lacks* [Hutchinson, Waters, 1987]. These terms have been introduced to describe different factors and perspectives, which have helped the concepts of needs to grow. At the same time each represents a different philosophy and different educational value. For one example, *necessities* are supposed to be determined by the demands of the target situation, e.g.: a businessman might need to understand business letters, get information from catalogues, communicate with partners over the phone and at sales conferences, etc. Meanwhile a diplomat might need to understand notes, get information from press releases, make speeches, and communicate with counterparts at round tables and official parties, etc. The tour guides might need to understand books on historical heritage and art, get information from travel agencies' booklets, communicate with foreign tourists, and be able to guide tours. Presumably, these different groups of people need to know the linguistic features commonly used in all these different situations, i.e. discoursal, functional, structural, and lexical features. The information about them can be gathered in a relatively easy way — by observation in what situations the learner will need to function, and by analysing the constituent parts of such communication situations.

Lacks are those abilities and knowledge, which individual students have not enough. It is very important to determine what a particular learner already knows and what he lacks so that to match the target proficiency against his existing proficiency.

Wants are considered in an objective sense. It is admitted that the learners play an active role in the teaching-learning process, they have their own image of their

needs. Awareness is a matter of perception, but perception may vary according to people's standpoints. So this can also be rather subjective. Moreover, it is quite possible that learners' perception will conflict with the views of the teachers, sponsors, or course designers. Teachers' and sponsors' views can be similarly at odds.

How can a teacher act then? It should be born in mind that learners' motivation in the learning process is extremely important, and learner-perceived wants cannot be ignored. "A method which frustrates the prediction of the learner is patently bad. Much of satisfaction [of] learners will come when they feel that the hurdles they themselves have predicted, have been cleared." [Davies & Currie, 1971]. Though there cannot be any clear-cut answers, each situation must be judged according to the particular circumstances, the most important thing is to be aware of such differences and to take them into account as much as possible.

Prioritising the needs is another important thing to make it possible to set the realistic goals, and to focus on the top priorities.

Where exactly does needs analysis fit in among the key stages of a course? The classical schemes tend to place it as the pre-requisite of any course:

Information is collected to learn what learners need



The entry level of learners is assessed



Goals are set up



A course is designed (or a syllabus is created)



The necessary materials to exemplify syllabus items are selected or produced



The teaching-learning process takes place

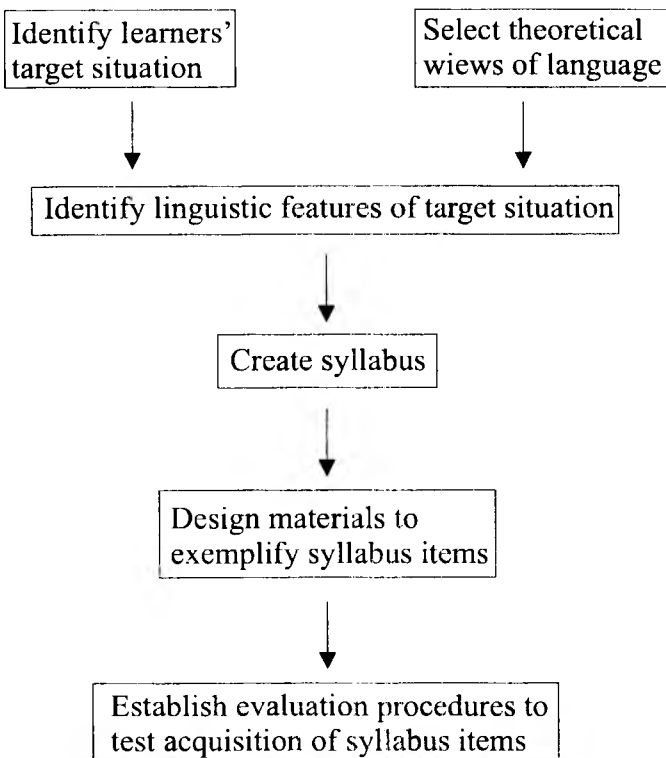


Learners' exit level is assessed to test acquisition of syllabus items

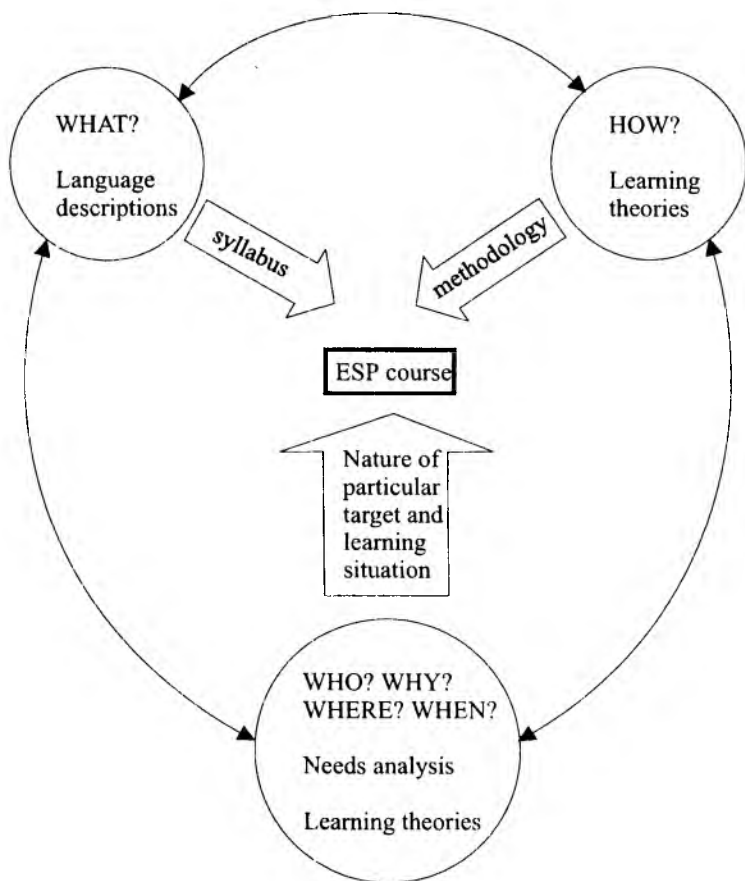


The course is evaluated to see whether its objectives are met

Many scholars also include stages of selecting theoretical views of language and teaching methods into the set of key stages, cf. [Hutchinson, Waters, 1987].



The only drawback of this scheme is that the whole process is seen as linear and the stages are fairly self-contained. But in fact all these phases are not separate. They are evidently interdependent and often overlap. In reality, needs analysis is not over after the first meeting with the students or the analysis of their needs from other sources. Teachers regularly come back to it because the learners can have a clearer view of their needs as the time goes; their needs can change with the time, the teachers would always like to speak to the learners during the course and after they have started operating in the situation for which they have been preparing themselves, to see whether the course meets their requirements. That is why we find the circular schemes [Hutchinson, Waters, 1987], [Dudley-Evans, Jo St Jones, 1998:121] more accurate and revealing. Being more complicated, these cyclical representations make it crystal clear that all the elements in a course are connected, that neither of the activities is one-off; and that they all need to be on-going. These schemes correspond to the idea of the learning cycle.



The major trend in needs analysis in recent years has been the use of information from and about learners covering the two main domains — the target situation and the learning styles. The analysis of the target situation is the first step in identification of learners. Its goal is to look at what the learners are going to do with the language. Fundamentally, it is a matter of asking the right questions, some of which can be answered by research, others will rely on intuition or on the teacher's experience, or can call on theoretical models:

WHY does the learner need to learn English? (For study, for work, for training, for status, for promotion, to pass an exam, for a combination of these)

WHO will the learner use the language with? (Native or non-native speakers; in superior, inferior or peer position; will they be colleagues, customers, teachers, etc.; what level of knowledge will they require)

WHERE will the language be used? (In what physical setting — office, lecture theatre, hotel, etc.; will the learner be alone/have to speak over the telephone/attend meetings, etc)

WHEN will the language be used? (Concurrently with the course or subsequently; will it be used frequently or seldom; in small amounts or in large chunks)

WHAT content areas, what subjects will be needed: tour operating, philosophy, diplomacy, etc.? What level of proficiency must be achieved? What topic areas need to be covered?

HOW will the language be used? (A medium for speaking, writing, or reading) What channel will be used? (Face-to-face communication, telephone, others) What types of texts/discourse will the learner be working with? (Academic texts, lectures, informal conversations. Catalogues, technical manuals, etc.)

Here we can only stress again that the interpretation of the needs can vary according to the point of view of a particular respondent. Educational matters, like any human matter, are subject to all the vagaries and foibles of human behaviour. Since, while the lecturers would tend to exaggerate the needs, the students may have a much lower indication of them because of their beliefs or knowledge that it is not really necessary.

Analysing the target situation is only a part of the story. The analysis of learners' needs will never be complete without taking into account the learning situation: how the learners learn; what their learning experience is, what the conditions of learning are. And we can use "six honest serving men" again to find out about this aspect:

WHY are the learners taking the course: is it compulsory or optional? Are status, money and promotion involved? What is their attitude to training — do they really need to improve?

WHO are the learners? What is their age and sex? What do they know about English? What subject knowledge do they have? What are their interests and socio-cultural background? What teaching styles are they used to? What are their attitude to English and cultures of English-speaking countries?

WHERE will the course take place? Are the surroundings pleasant, noisy, dull, or cold? What potential does the place provide and what limitations does it have?

WHEN will the course take place? How much time is available? At what time of the day? How often? Is the course concurrent with the need or pre-need?

WHAT resources are available? What is professional competence of teachers? Do they know the subject content? What materials are available? What aids are available?

HOW do learners learn? What is their learning background? What sorts of techniques are likely to bore or alienate them? What methods should be used to better achieve the goals?

When the answers to all these questions are known it is easy to come with a list of goals for the course.

To sum up, let us highlight the following:

1. Needs analysis is a corner stone, which makes possible to design a very focused course.

2. Its concept has broadened during the years due to experience and research. The modern concept is that needs analysis is a complex process interconnected and intertwined with the key phases of course design.

3. The whole environmental situation — target situation needs, learning

needs, learners' lack and wants, professional and personal information — has to be taken into account.

4. Needs analysis is not a single affair but a recurrent process, which might influence the changes in the course.

5. The findings from a needs analysis are not absolute but relative and subjective.

6. There is no single set of needs for all groups of learners, though, on the other hand, learners' needs are not necessarily unique in each case, they can be systematised.

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WRITING AS A PERSONAL PRODUCT IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Forewordilities of the Internet are limited

Electronic communication has established a new inventory of forms for interaction. Although apparently more limited and less rich than interactions in which the participants are physically present, 'virtual communication' also provides new opportunities and new problems in the presentation of self.

Teachers dealing with CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) sooner or later come to realise the specifics of the teaching process in a computer lab with 5 -10 PC's. The teacher-student relationship gradually assumes the form of joint work in virtual environment. This environment, depending on the resources of the school, may be limited, closed inside a local intranet, or open to the vast resources of the Internet. But even if your PC-lab has access to World-Wide Web, a good deal of time in your on-line language lesson will be dedicated to things unavoidably individual. Individual and typewritten. Compiling glosses, making grammar and lexical exercises, text processing and compression — all sorts of serious reading/writing work are performed individually. In short, one might even have the impression that the computer makes your students fulfil serious work in isolation. It is just like in a village, where each labourer works in his or her own field (pun intended). But computer-literate students have a strong feeling of belonging to a larger entity. Their desire to share experience is sincere, and becomes a motivating factor for joint work in virtual environment. So, if your students are prepared for communicating in virtual environment, let it be so.

Probably, your hardware parameters and course requirements will be among the decisive factors in choosing concrete software tools. We would like to draw your attention to both 'local' and 'global' approaches towards using such software and software-related items as:

1) ICHAT — a real-time programme for classroom use,

2) ICQ — a web feature, for enhancing the interpersonal / group communicative competence of students,