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Language Curriculum Development and Importance of Needs Analysis

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Abstract

Language needs analysis/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 also a part of curriculum development and is normally required before syllabus can be developed for language teaching. The inclusion of needs analysis in second language curriculum development began in earnest in 1960s as language programs started emphasizing English for specific purposes instruction. The type of needs analysis for ESP focuses on gathering detailed language used for vocational or other specific language needs (Martin, 2003). Needs analysis procedures made their appearance in language planning and became widespread in language teaching. In their first days, such procedures were used as the initial process for the specification of behavioral objectives which then explored different syllabus elements, such as functions, notions, lexis, in a more detailed manner. The present study is an attempt to investigate the role of needs analysis in curriculum design and materials development. Administering the needs analysis in classrooms and procedures for conducting needs analysis are discussed. Both high-stake and low-stake holders can avail from the implications of this study.

Key words: Curriculum development, needs analysis, ongoing needs analysis
1. Introduction

The inclusion of needs analysis in second language curriculum development began in earnest in 1960s as language programs started emphasizing English for specific purposes instruction. The type of needs analysis for ESP focuses on gathering detailed language used for vocational or other specific language needs (Martin, 2003). According to Phan (2005), during the 1970s, needs analysis procedures made their appearance in language planning and became widespread in language teaching. In their first days, such procedures were used as the initial process for the specification of behavioral objectives which then explored different syllabus elements, such as functions, notions, lexis, in a more detailed manner. “At the same time, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) became a matter of general interest and LSP experts were making efforts to give birth to a more comprehensive and better LSP syllabus. As a result, needs analysis was warmly welcomed by LSP teachers as an approach to course design, which focused on learner's needs” (Nunan, 1988, cited in Phan, 2005).

Based on Richards et al. (1992), in language teaching, needs analysis 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 assessment makes use of both subjective and objective information (e.g. data from questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation) and seeks to obtain information on:

a. the situations in which a language will be used (including who it will be used with)

b. the objectives and purpose for which the language is needed.

c. the types of communication that will be used (e.g. written, spoken, formal, informal)

d. the level of proficiency that will be required

Needs assessment is a part of curriculum development and is normally required before a syllabus can be developed for language teaching. The present study aims to investigate the role of needs analysis in curriculum design and materials development. Basic principles of language curriculum design are mentioned, and purposes of doing needs analysis in curriculum development are discussed. The target population and users of needs analysis are defined. A distinction has been made among needs, wants, and lacks. Administering the needs analysis in classrooms and procedures for conducting needs analysis are discussed.
2. Basic Principles of Language Curriculum Design

There are some sets of principles of language curriculum design. According to Johnson (1989), one important set of principles of language curriculum design is proposed by Johnson (1989). His classification consists of three principles including coherence, permanent change and innovation, and different approaches integration. Tomlinson (2010) considers 6 principles of language acquisition that should be taken into account while developing language materials.

It is worth looking at other researchers’ lists of principles to see how they differ from each other’s list, and where they overlap. Useful lists can be found in Ellis (2005) which lists 10 overlapping principles with Nation and Macalister (2010), Brown (1993), and Krahmke and Christison (1983) each proposes their own principles. However, Nation and Macalister (2010) consider 20 principles. They divide these principles into three groups, namely:

1. Content and sequencing
2. Format and presentation
3. Monitoring and assessment

The principles have been divided into three groups. These three groups represent the three major divisions of the central circle in the curriculum design diagram. The first group of principles deals with content and sequencing. That is, they are concerned with what goes into a language course and the order in which language items appear in the course. The aim of these principles is to make sure that the learners are gaining something useful from the course. It is possible to run a language course which is full of interesting activities and which introduces the learners to new language items, but which provides a very poor return for the time invested in it. This poor return can occur because many of the lessons do not contain anything new to learn, because the new items have very little value in the ordinary use of the language, or because they set out interference conditions which result in a step backwards in learning rather than a step forwards.

The second group of principles deals with format and presentation. That is, they are concerned with what actually happens in the classroom and during the learning. Most practically, they relate to the kinds of activities used in the course and the ways in which learners process the course material. It is in this aspect of curriculum design that teachers may have their greatest influence on the course.
The third group of principles deals with monitoring and assessment and to some degree evaluation. In each of these groups, the principles have been ranked in order of their importance, so that the first principle in the group is the most important of that group, the second principle is the next most important and so on.

According to Nation and Macalister (2010), regarding ongoing needs and environment analysis, the selection, ordering, presentation, and assessment of the material in a language course should be based on a continuing careful consideration of the learners and their needs, the teaching conditions, and the time and resources available. Nation and Macalister (2010) believe that this principle stresses the importance of doing needs analysis during the planning of a course.

3. Needs Analysis in Curriculum Development

According to Lekatompessy (2010), curriculum development should be viewed as a process by which meeting learners’ needs leads to improvement of learners’ learning. Therefore, curriculum developers should gather as much information as possible toward the learners’ needs. This procedure which is used to collect information about the learners’ needs by Richards (2001, p.51) is called as the needs analysis (NA). Iwai (1999) considers this as 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. However, While Brown (1995, p.21) defines this as the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to satisfy the language learning requirements of the students within the context of the particular institutions involved in the learning situation.

Lekatompessy (2010) believes that needs analysis from the historical point of view was introduced into language teaching curriculum through the ESP movement among 1960s to 1970s. Even though, this needs analysis was not advocated only for ESP, but also for second/foreign language students in general. In fact, needs analysis have been conducted informally for years by teachers who wanted to assess what language points their students needed to learn. Indeed, the various activities usually called “approaches” are different expressions of this desire to figure out what students need to learn. According to (Iwai et al, 1999) Information sources for informal needs analysis might include scores on an overall language proficiency test, facts gathered from a background questionnaire that asks where and for how long students have had previous language training, or impressions gleaned from teacher and students interviews about the students’ cognitive and linguistic abilities (Iwai et
al., 1999). Furthermore, Johns (1991), considers the needs analysis as the first step in course design and believes it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. This information should include the desired outcomes or expectations of a high quality program, the role of assessment, the current status of student achievement and actual program content. The information should also consider the concerns and attitudes of teachers, administrators, parents and also the learners. While the data should include samples of assessments, lessons from teachers, assignments, scores on state standardized tests, textbooks currently used, student perception and feedback from parents. As for the feedback, based on Nation and Macalister (2010), learners should receive helpful feedback which will allow them to improve the quality of their language use.

4. The Purposes of Needs Analysis Regarding Curriculum Development

Richards (2001) on his discussion toward needs analysis says that the first step in conducting a needs analysis is to decide exactly what its purpose or purposes are. Basically, needs analysis in language teaching may be used for a number of different purposes, such as:

1. To find out what language skills a learner needs in order to perform a particular role, such as sales manager, tour guide, or university student
2. To help determine if an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students
3. To determine which students from a group are most in need of training in particular language skills
4. To identify a change of direction that people in a reference group feel is important
5. To identify a gap between what students are able to do and what they needs to be able to do
6. To collect information about a particular problem learners are experiencing

5. Needs, Wants and Lacks

Learners often find it difficult to define what language needs they have and cannot distinguish between needs, wants and lacks. It was Allwright (1982, cited in Lekatompessy, 2010) who made a distinction between needs (the skills which a student sees as being relevant to himself or herself), wants (those needs on which students put a high priority in the available, limited time or in other words it is what learner feels she/he needs), and lacks (the difference between the students present competence and the desired competence or what learner does not know). His idea were adopted later by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, cited in
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Lekatompessy, 2010), who advocate a learning-centered approach in which learners’ learning needs play a vital role supporting If the analyst, by means of target situation analysis, tries to find out what learners do with language, then learning needs analysis will tell us “what the learner needs to do in order to learn (Hutchinson & Water, 1987).

6. The Users of Needs Analysis
A needs analysis may be conducted for a variety of different users. For example, in conducting a needs analysis to help revise the secondary English curriculum in a country, the end users include curriculum officers in the ministry education, who may wish to use the information to evaluate the adequacy of existing syllabus, curriculum, and materials; teachers who will teach from the new curriculum; learners, who will be taught from the curriculum; writers, who are preparing new textbooks; testing personnel, who are involved in developing end-of-school assessment; and staff of tertiary institutions, who are interested in knowing what the expected level will be of students existing the schools and what problems they face (Richards, 2002, p. 56).

Determining the likely audiences is an important first step in planning a needs analysis in order to ensure that the information they needs is obtained and that the needs analysis will have the impact it is designed to have. Therefore, the audiences might be involved in small-case needs analysis such as done by a single teacher on his or her class would consist of the teacher, other teachers, and the program coordinator. Further, needs analysis can have a political dimension. It can be used to support a particular agenda, for example by giving priority to one group to the exclusion of others within a population or in order to justify a decision that has already been made on economic or other grounds.

7. The Target Population
According to Richards (2002), the target population in a needs analysis refers to the people about whom information will be collected. For example in conducting a needs analysis to determine the focus of an English program in public secondary school in an EFL context, then the target population might include policy makers, ministry of education officials, teachers, students, academics, employers, vocational training specialists, parents, influential individuals and pressure groups, academic specialists, and community agencies.

8. Procedures for Conducting Needs Analysis
There are a variety of procedures can be used for conducting needs analysis and the kind of information obtained is often dependent on the type of procedure selected. Therefore, the use
of a triangular approach (collecting information from two or more source) is advisable to get very comprehensive and sufficient information. According to Nation and Macalister (2010), in conducting needs analysis of the writing problems encountered by foreign students enrolled in American universities then information could be obtained from many sources, such as from samples of students writing, test data on students’ performance, reports by teachers on typical problems students face, opinion of experts, information from students’ via interviews and questionnaires, and so forth. Procedures for collecting information during a needs analysis can be selected from among the following:

A. Questionnaires

B. Self-ratings

C. Interviews

D. Meetings

E. Collecting learner language samples

F. Task analysis

G. Case studies

H. Analysis of available information

9. Designing the Needs Analysis

Designing a needs analysis involves choosing from among various procedures above and selecting those that are likely to give a comprehensive view of learners’ needs and that represent the interests of the different stakeholders involved. Decision on choosing particular procedures should consider some factors such as collecting, organizing, analyzing and reporting the information collected. It is important to make sure that needs analysis does not produce information overloaded. Therefore the reason for collecting should be stated clearly to ensure that only information that will actually be used is collected. Based on Nation and Macalister (2010), the step by step procedures that can be followed in investigating the learners’ needs are:
1. Literature survey
2. Analysis of a wide range of survey questionnaires
3. Contact with others who had conducted similar surveys
4. Interviews with teachers to determine goals
5. Identification of participating departments
6. Presentation of project proposal to participating departments and identification of contact person in each department
7. Development of a pilot student and staff questionnaire
8. Review of the questionnaires by colleagues
9. Piloting of the questionnaires
10. Selection of staff and students subjects
11. Developing a schedule for collecting data
12. Administration of questionnaires
13. Follow-up interviews with selected participants
14. Tabulation of responses
15. Analysis of responses
16. Writing up of report and recommendations

10. Making Use of the Information Obtained

The data obtained from data collection process usually summarized in the form of ranked lists of different kinds. Therefore, more analysis and research would be needed to further understanding what is implied by each answer, before the information obtained could be used in course planning. It is so important since there is no direct application of the information obtained from needs analysis. In fact, there might be a number of different points of view emerged as to what should be changed, for example:

Learners’ view: more support for learning needed and reduction of the amount of material they had to study
Academic’s view: better preparation for tertiary studies needed in terms of reading and writing skills
Employers’ view: better preparation for employment required in terms of basic communication skills

Teachers’ view: better grasp of grammar needed by learners

From the case above, it is also important to remember that because needs are not objective facts but subjective, then the interpretation of information from a larger variety of sources, a great deal of consultation is needed with the various stakeholders to ensure that the conclusions drawn from a needs analysis are appropriate and relevant. Finally, the findings should be reported by using various formats in forms of a full written document, a short summary document, a meeting, a group discussion, or a newsletter.

**Final Remarks**

The principle of ongoing needs analysis according to Nation and Macalister (2010), can be used to guide the design of language teaching courses and lessons. It can be used to evaluate existing courses and lessons. It can also be used to help teachers integrate and contextualize information gained from keeping up with developments in their field. It may also provide a basis for teachers to use to reflect on their practice and professional development. It may provide a basis for action research within their classrooms. It can help them answer questions like: Is this a good technique? Should I use group work? And do my learners need to speak a lot in class? It also may act as one of many possible reference points in teacher training courses.

According to Lekatompessy (2010), needs analysis has a vital role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course and considered as a crucial component of systematic curriculum development. However, learners as the main sources in needs analysis often find difficult to define what language needs they have. Therefore, as the teacher or even institution should be aware of their impetus on successful teaching by conducting this needs analysis through some procedures. At least some advantages might be obtained by conducting needs analysis, such as:

A. In a learner-centered curriculum, teachers’ familiarity in content selection though extensive consultation with the students about their learning needs and interest is critical. Therefore 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.
B. Needs analysis can help 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, and also for the selection of appropriate teaching methods in a program.

C. In proficiency-oriented instruction/curricula, needs analysis helps teachers understand the potential difference in learning expectations between themselves and their students.

D. 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 curriculum development.

E. Needs analysis may provide the basis for planning goals and objectives for a future program, and also for developing syllabus design and teaching materials for the course.

F. A program that attempts to meet students’ perceived needs for the students will be more motivating and successful.

On the other hand, if Nunan’s (1997) concern is true about motivation and autonomy, in developing language materials we should pay close attention to the culture of the receivers. But if we are supposed to do this, how is it possible to develop, for example, EFL/ESL materials which are globally accepted and appropriate to all users around the world? One possible solution might be to develop regional materials taking into consideration the culture of a region, supposedly some specific countries like South-East Asia or Latin America.

Second, if the present textbooks are under the influence of cultural imperialism, is there anybody to prove that it cannot lead to better motivation in the learners? It may cause learners to have more integrative motivation towards the target language norms while having this peril of detesting the target language in any justifiable reason.

References


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