

Rethinking Needs Analysis in English Language Teaching: Learners Needs, and Classroom Practice

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Abstract

In the field of English language teaching (ELT), needs analysis (NA) has been considered fundamental for designing a suitable syllabus and developing language programmes. Needs analysis holds the promise of making ELT more purposeful, learner-centered and contextually-relevant by systematically determining what learners must learn, why, and how to best support them in doing so. The notion of 'needs' in the field of language instruction is not easily defined, though. Questions like *who is analysed*, who is analysing, what is legitimate and who is being served by needs analysis, are still very contentious in applied linguistics. This article looks at the theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches and current controversies in the field of needs analysis in the ELT classroom, specifically in relation to syllabus, instruction, and learning outcomes.

Keywords: needs analysis, ELT classroom, syllabus design, language program development, learner-centered pedagogy, English for Specific Purposes

Introduction

The history and development of English Language Teaching (ELT) is closely linked with the development of needs analysis. In advance of a formal concept, teachers and syllabus designers would make more or less explicit choices about students' language needs, what part of the syllabus to include, and which approach to teaching to use. Needs analysis is a field that is often associated with the development of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the seventies. Following Munby's (1978) and Hutchinson and Waters (1987) work, it has been generally agreed that language programs must be rooted in systematic knowledge of the communicative situations and demands that learners will likely face in their academic, professional or occupational setting in the target language context.

Needs analysis has transferred into other segments of ELT since its introduction in ESP, such as needs analysis related to syllabus development, teacher training and language program assessment. According to Long (2005), the need analysis is not a one-process technique, but it is a series of processes including target situation analysis, present situation analysis, learning need analysis, discourse analysis and genre analysis. All these options refer to a different aspect of students' side of the language needs. In these differing interpretations, the concept of 'need' becomes complex and can probably be understood as representing learners' linguistic needs, communication goals, learning styles, social identity and institutional demands.

There are a number of discussions concerning needs analysis, since learners' needs do not remain constant but they can change from time to time. It is important to have a basis for formulating a language programme, and identification of learners' needs. The difficult one is to choose how the programme will be put into practice, assessed, modified and adjusted as situations change among learners and/or teachers. This article aims to tackle these questions by exploring briefly some theoretical foundations of and orientations towards needs analysis, implications for classroom practice in ELT, and some key issues in needs analysis practice.

Theoretical Foundations and Evolving Conceptualizations of Needs Analysis

The key concepts and phrases introduced by Munby (1978) in his Communicative Syllabus Design have had a great influence on shaping the key ideas and terms of needs analysis. It suggests a comprehensive system known as the Communication Needs Processor that aims to be able to recognize communication needs in English that specific groups of learners had. The primary focus of Munby's approach is the 'target situation' or the situation in which learners would be functioning in the future academic and/or professional world in which they would deploy English. It questions learners about how they are expected to know English in such a situation and then create the syllabus based on the needs. This model is much talked about yet too rigid, mechanical. Critics objected that it did not place enough emphasis on the individual learner and upon social and institutional factors relating to language learning (Brindley, 1989).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) provided a more wide-ranging, learner-centred perspective. They made a distinction between target needs and learning needs. Target needs are what the learners should be able to do in English in future situations of use. Learning needs indicate what learners need in order to develop the abilities well. The key message is that focus should be not only on the knowledge and skills that are acquired by learners, but also on the process in which they are acquired. For instance, a learner may need to read academic texts in English for future learning or work purposes. This skill is considered a target need. For this, however, the learner might need to be offered grammatical support, help develop their vocabulary, strategies for reading, appropriate learning activities, and the opportunity to become more confident. The requirements are the learner's learning needs. Hutchinson's and Waters' approach therefore takes into account learners as not only people who have to do specific communicative thing but also as social and psychological people with specific needs for the learning process.

One of the most theoretically important contributions of needs analysis is task-based needs analysis that goes beyond the identification of linguistic forms and communicative functions and focuses on the task to be performed in the target situations. (Long, 2005) Long's methodology was rather ambitiously oriented towards the empirical, which meant that he wished to employ ethnographic approaches, discourse analysis, and the input of experts' interviews in order to glean what he termed "target task types", universal categories of authentic tasks to feed into task-based language teaching syllabi. Task-based needs analysis provided methodological rigor, but has been criticized for being over demanding, not being suitable in low-resource educational environments, and possibly discounted as 'languaging' a collection of discrete tasks rather than an embedded and socially Talking activity (Seedhouse, 2005).

In recent years, however, the notion of needs analysis has been reconceptualized from a social and critical viewpoint, which challenges the positivist view underlying the concept. In 2001, Benesch proposed the idea of critical needs analysis, which suggested that current Needs analysis frameworks took the institutional and social context as the basis for determining the needs of learners without any questioning. A 'needs analysis' is not a neutral pedagogical instrument, but a tool that accommodates the prevailing power structures, if it is an analysis that only addresses what learners need to do in order to survive in the given learning environment without challenging the validity of that environment in making its demands. Benesch (2001) suggested that critical needs analysis should not only focus on instrumental communicative needs, but also on learners' rights, i.e., rights to question, negotiate, and reshape the institutional demands on the learners. This issue has had a profound impact in the field of ELT in postcolonial and minority education settings, where the needs manifested by the institutional actors may differ significantly from what the learners see as their needs and who they would like to become as a language user.

In their paper, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) expanded the theory in two ways; they identified the variable needs (preference, learning style, wants, etc.) of the individuals in the learner group and they decomposed the absolute needs (deficiencies which must not be exceeded if the learner is to function at all in his/her target situation). But pedagogically it is important because by not allowing this, it should make needs analysis a more participative at the group level process. The learners' "absolute need" in both engineering students of an ESP course is to be able to read technical manuals in English, while the subject of "variable need," that is, need in the sense of learning preferences, is completely different from their various experiences of learning English and other motivational orientations. They both have to be considered during the needs analysis process, but again methodologically problematic, and it is difficult to give individual attention and group level teaching in one class.

What is left finally, after putting together this theoretical background, is that needs analysis is not a consistent, rigidly structured methodology in terms of procedures and assumptions. Rather, it is a domain of ideas and concepts that is actively engaged by the learner whose answer to the question, what learners need can vary widely across the various theories of language, learning and education. For the field it is quite an advantage or a puzzle

for the teachers and syllabus planners in the classroom, that there is this theoretical plurality, some of the symptoms of which might prevent the closure of complex questions.

Methodological Approaches in ELT Needs Analysis

Since the theoretical approaches of the needs analysis is as diverse as needs analysis frameworks, the ways of analysing the needs in ELT are also as diverse. The approach used is inherently more than a technical one, depending upon assumptions about what is legitimate to know about student needs, who should be the ones to determine this knowledge, and for what purposes the analysis is used. On the one hand, needs analysis approaches in ELT can be represented in quantitative or qualitative form, and on the other hand, they can be learner-centered or stakeholder-centered.

Questionnaire and survey are the tools still most widely used in ELT, especially in ESP and English for Academic Purpose (EAP) programs. They are well known to have many merits; they are quickly and efficiently delivered to a large population of learners; they generate statistics for analysis; and they can be systematically compared among learners. Data collection instruments mainly used to collect information from questionnaires include the current language proficiency of the learners, the perceived language learning needs, attitude toward different language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and the preference of different teaching approaches. The interviews conducted for needs analysis have shown to be useful in yielding actionable results for syllabus development as they are properly and thoughtfully designed and piloted prior to use of the questionnaire.

Questions have their limitations as the tools, however. Their status as valid is as dependent on the constructs they measure as the constructs being measured are often under specified in language education. Relying on the grammatical basis of a five-point Likert scale to measure "need for writing skills" is based on the assumption that the learner has both the metalinguistic awareness to understand what writing is and the self-knowledge to be able to assess his/her skills. Both of these assumptions are not necessarily supported, especially by younger or less competent learners (Seedhouse, 2005). Second, however, questionnaires are only able to identify what learner consciousness can identify and report on about their learning requirements, rather than tacit knowledge, unconscious habits and unrecognised difficulties that may often be the more profound learning needs.

In addition to providing qualitative information, interviews and focus groups provide a complementary method of research which will provide the means for more in-depth and in-context exploration of learners' needs. Interviews do not presuppose categories for respondents, but they do provide the opportunity to let the learner express his/her needs in the learner's own terms, explain the "how" and "why" of how the learner perceives the situation, and give the researcher a glimpse into other aspects of the learner's language learning situation that may not have been anticipated. In particular, Long (2005) argued for the use of the interviews with informants who have the expert knowledge of the target situation, including the essential content of the target situation and the authenticity of the information, as an instrument to introduce authentic knowledge of the target situation instead of relying on information provided by the learners themselves.

Genre Analysis and Discourse Analysis

Genre Analysis and Discourse Analysis are more linguistically advanced types of need analysis that conceptualize needs in terms of what is demanded by the texts and interactions of the discourse situations rather than on what the learner declares to be their needs. The genre approach, most prominently adopted by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), sees genres as a type of text used for specific purposes in a particular domain: textbooks, academic research articles, business letters, legal briefs, medical case notes, and so on. This is especially effective in gaining insights into the conventions of academic writing within disciplines, especially for writing in EAP; for example, it has inspired the development of detailed analysis of EAP conventions.

Discourse and genre analysis as needs analysis tools are limited by its retrospective nature: it is unable to readily predict how communicative practices are going to develop over time, be hybrid or mediated digitally and come to identify the language demanded by newly emerging communicative situations. (Flowerdew, 2015). With the use of a multimodal approach, social media and the new algorithmic information environments, the genre-analytic tradition with its focus on established written genres risks creating a needs analysis that is already outdated at the time it is put to use in the classroom.

Perhaps the most informative, but most time-consuming needs analysis method is observation, direct systematic observation of learners taking place either in their current learning situation or in contexts within the target situation. Ethnographic observation can reveal aspects of the learner's needs that a questionnaire or an interview could not have identified, the fear and anxiety hampering the learners' use of speaking in the classroom, the reading strategies that they actually use (not those they state on a questionnaire), the total climate in a classroom involving the dynamics of participation, and the difference between the communicative demands of the target situation and what the learner can actually do. Long (2005) noted that observing in the target language situation was a vital part of thorough needs analysis, especially in task-based needs analysis. Yet, ethnographic observation, which demands the time, access and experience necessary to sustain an ethnographic inquiry takes place outside the purview of most classrooms and basic pedagogical routines, where needs analysis is typically engaged instead.

This raises one of the most basic dilemmas in the methodology of needs analysis in ELT, that is, the contradiction between the practices of the rigorous needs analysis theorists and real educational practices. The academic literature depicts the needs analysis as an idealized multi-method, multi-stakeholder, longitudinal analysis that is very different from the needs analysis that takes place on the first day of class due to institutional requirements and the teacher's need to squeeze in a questionnaire. Such an admission is not a capitulation, it is only an essential first step towards the creation of more realistic, contextually appropriate practices which can be maintained by mainstream teachers in mainstream classrooms.

The Role of Needs Analysis in the ELT Classroom

Needs analysis has a multi-dimensional role in the ELT classroom, which could range from being used in the design of a syllabus and/or a syllabus to being employed to make

decisions at the teaching moment regarding the teaching and learning of language or second language. To grasp this position, one should extend the conception of NA as merely a step in the coursework and view it rather as an interactive procedure that weaves through the whole thread affecting language teaching and learning.

In terms of syllabus and syllabus design, needs analysis serves as the empirical basis for determining the learning objectives based on what language should be taught, how it should be taught, the sequence, the type of tasks and activities, and the ultimate learning objectives. Need analysis is absent, and therefore, the syllabus is rather prescribed by tradition, availability of text books or institutional traditions than by evidence of learner needs. Needs analysis has been marginalised in commercial syllabus development; this is reflected in the tendency to make textbooks that will appeal to a large range of contexts and learner groups (Tomlinson, 2011).

In ESP/EAP environments, where language learning is clearly related to specific tasks in the job field or academic task field, and the language learning knowledge is non-negotiable, needs analysis is especially important. Design of an English for Medical Purposes course, for instance, does not proceed responsibly without a systematic investigation of what medical practitioners would like in the communicative situations they find themselves in, for example, the genres medical practitioners encounter during the written presentation of medical cases and medical research writing, the nature of patient and practitioner conversational interactions, the interaction between medical case presentation and medical research writing (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002). In those significant professional settings, a needs analysis is neither a nice-to-have curricular addition, but an ethical requirement.

Generally speaking, in a secondary school, class English or community, and in preparatory English program, etc., the function of needs analysis is of something, but more diffused and important. In this study, needs analysis is used to delineate differentiating instruction in classrooms with varying student backgrounds and prior knowledge, learning styles, motivational orientations, and life experiences. Even when the teacher is doing what is broadly called informal, qualitative, needs analysis at the start of a course, it is easier to group learners suitably, select materials to match learners' interests and ability etc., and identify students who may need review and/or enrichment tasks (Richards, 2001). In this aspect, needs analysis is not something that can help determine the syllabus design but actually a professional competency, which means pedagogical intelligence that the teacher can have in order to view the learner as a person in the whole instead of seeing him or her as a mass of learners who can only be dealt with based on a given syllabus.

Needs analysis is also a crucial part of formative and summative assessment. Assessment which does not reflect contextual analysis of what learners can do with language may result in an examination of decontextualized language knowledge instead of communication competence. Norris et al. (1998) argue that when the communicative task is derived from a systematic analysis of what the learner will have to do in his or her target situation, then performance-based assessment frameworks are more valid. On the other hand, where assessment is not consistent with actual communication needs, as is often the case in

the academic field with many contemporary standardized English language competence exams; reading and writing skills are emphasized over the spoken language skills that most learners will find most useful) the course emphasizes test preparation more than true communicative ability.

In addition to syllabus and assessment, needs analysis is also a huge part of professional development for teachers. Planning instruments, gathering the data, interpreting findings, and transferring them into decisions for instruction is a process of conducting a needs analysis, which can enhance teachers' professional skills in a way that transcends the specific needs analysis for the particular course. Graves (2000) maintained that needs analysis is one of the most empowering tools for teachers in ELT just because it encourages teachers to become researchers and decision makers and not prescribers of a given syllabus. In educational systems where the teacher has traditionally been denied autonomy in syllabus development and appropriation of textbooks, typical of many Asian, African and South Asian systems, the acquisition of needs analysis competencies may represent a major step towards achieving professional autonomy and pedagogical agency.

It is however equally difficult to start questioning needs analysis on a critical level. If the needs analysis is not organised by teachers or learners, it can be used as a surveillance system instead of a pedagogical approach: it might become a way to audit deficiencies of learners and impose responsibilities on teachers to correct their mistakes, or to investigate learners as potential and carry out pasting of their aspirations, rather than examining their learners' potential. At that same time, Benesch (2001) pointed out that in many institutional EAP settings needs analysis is not used to empower the learner but to uncover ways which learners don't "fit the bill" in the communicative norms of an institution. In these contexts, it is used as a tool for normalizing rather than for liberating; confirming that a problem exists with individual students learning language and not with the structure of language learning tasks that makes language learning challenging.

This necessary critique of the function and practice of NA does not demean it, nor does it negate its practice; rather, it makes it challenging and adds to its richness. A collaborative needs analysis, one that affords learners a real voice in formulating their own needs, one that identifies the institutional requirements that impact on the learning process, and finally, one that views language learning as an interaction with the process of identity construction is quite different from one that simply lists learners' weaknesses for the purpose of administration. Needs analysis in the ELT classroom can ultimately be as broad as or as limited as a philosophy of education that can be derived from it.

Debates, Critiques, and Future Directions

Although widely used in ELT theory and practice, needs analysis is a subject of much controversy, and an upfront discussion of needs analysis cannot pretentiously ignore the debates as if these had reached a consensus that leaves it as an established methodology without question.

Among the on-going disagreements is the one between what is needed by the learners and what is needed by the institutions and the professionals. Learners do not always assess

themselves accurately as to what they need to learn. A phenomenon documented in many studies of SRL (Kruger and Dunning, 1999, who are the famous researchers in metacognitive incompetence, is often cited in educational studies) has been that novices are often not aware of their gaps in understanding with respect to competence they wish to acquire, whereas experienced learners tend to show a greater awareness of them. The learner who says "no need" in ELT may have no reason to be cognizant of how much the level of non-target language pronunciation can impede understanding by his interlocutors in his target language situation. Likewise, a learner who expresses his/her wish to study grammar might not fully be aware of how studying grammar will benefit him/her, but rather motivated by culturally induced expectations of language study.

The question asked above is a basic epistemological one, as to whose knowledge of the learners' needs should be understood when performing needs analysis, their own perceptions, the teacher's professional judgment, a knowledge of the target situation or discourses analyzed from authentic texts or interactions. There is no simple solution, and different data sources for needs typically differ in their conclusions as Cowling, through her study of a school-based needs analysis workshop, discovered when applying the results of self-reported needs data to discourse analysis data and expert informant data. Needs analysis, as such, is not a process of determining 'real needs' but of 'negotiating between several competing sets of values on what language learning ought to achieve' (Cowling 2007).

In many ways, the critical needs analysis framework of Benesch (2001) is one of the most radical critiques of the conventional NA practice. Benesh claims that needs analysis move away from the focus on what learners need to do and places it on what learners are entitled to ask. Benesch places ELT in a political arena instead of one of skill acquisition. It has had profound influence in the field of ELT scholarship, especially with regard to the English for Academic Purposes requirements that institutions in North American universities impose on immigrant and international students, which often seem more driven by the language and culture of a dominant group. But because critical needs analysis can be ideologically prescriptive in its own way, imposing critical theory on learners who may have other, equally legitimate, English learning motivations which do not fit with Benesch's politically progressive frame of mind it has been criticised. (Paltridge & Starfield, 2011)

There is disagreement, too, as to who is responsible for conducting needs analysis. In cases involving high-stakes ESP, Long (2005) strongly advocated for language professionals' and applied linguists' participation in the research process with their rich background of practical expertise. Others have called for alternatives to participatory, collaborative approaches where the learner invests their own identity in the needs analysis, running interviews, analysing data and then making decisions about the needs analysis syllabus content (Norton & Toohey, 2004). Participative needs analysis has clear benefits in terms of learner empowerment and motivation to learn, but it has time demands, which, of itself, is a restriction, requires sophisticated metalinguistic use, and necessitates some scaffolding for the learner during the learning process which may not be available in all learning contexts. The idealized participatory model, and the gap it poses in comparison with the actual viability, can

be a very large one in resource-poor environments that comprise the bulk of all ELT classrooms across the world.

The new technological paradigm, that of communication in a digital age, is also posing new challenges to needs analysis methodology. Shift to digital technologies in more and more areas of the English language such as email, social media, video communications, collaborative use of writing technology software, and algorithm writing are altering how and what English learners need to communicate in ways that needs analysis frameworks have not been able to adequately measure. One of the most methodologically developed of these approaches has been genre analysis presented by Flowerdew (2015), who claimed that genre analysis is inadequate in dealing with the communicative practice of hybrid, multimodal and ever-changing nature in digital environments. The needs analysis that was carried out for a business English course five years ago could have been quite different in the definition of business communication at this time, as digital technologies have evolved to make a massive difference to professional communication techniques since the COVID-19 era drove companies into working from home and collaborating online, worldwide.

In the future, the field of needs analysis research and practice needs to evolve in several ways if it is to continue to be relevant to the new and dynamic environment of ELT. Firstly, needs analysis frameworks need to move beyond the idea of needs analysis as one-off process activity before the course design, and embrace needs assessment as an ongoing, formative procedure that enables curricula to adjust to the changing needs of learners during the course's implementation throughout (Graves, 2000). Secondly, it should be more attentive to the affective (self-identification and motivational aspects) of L2 learning, as Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) have postulated the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self of the learner, not just the functional communicative needs. In fact, students' needs are not only linguistic but what they need to learn is also the ability to become English language users and therefore, if needs analysis overlooks this aspect, curricula will always be functionally “adequate” but not “motivationally empty”.

Thirdly and most importantly, what is still a big question in the area whether needs analysis, even as rigorously conducted as it may be, serves learners or serves the institutions and social structures that mark a legitimate need. Next and a very basic question, is whether needs analysis, even well conducted as it might be serving the interests of learners or serves the institutions and social structures which deem a need legitimate. This is not a question that can be answered absolutely from a single perspective, but one that has to be answered in practice in the decisions made by teachers, syllabus developers and educational policy makers when they make decisions on what and whose voice to include in their needs analysis as well as what to do when the answers they get differ from what they already work with in their pedagogies and institutional practices. In the best-case scenario, needs analysis is not a cumbersome process but an act of pedagogical sensitivity, a process of sustained critical awareness of the learners as a complicated human being with a complicated communicative life, and a designed instructional process of language learning that engages with human life in learning rather than the life that is learned.

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