

Needs Analysis in Developing Language Materials

Nguyen Thi Thu Trang*

*Faculty of Foreign Languages, Banking Academy of Vietnam

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Abstract: A fundamental principle for crafting effective instructional materials is to identify the students' needs. This process of data gathering about students' needs, desires, and deficiencies, and its subsequent interpretation for the creation of a more student-centric syllabus, is termed as a needs analysis. Undertaking a needs analysis process prior to a language course aids in designing suitable materials or modifying existing ones to address any inconsistencies.

Keywords: Needs analysis, student-centered curriculum, meaningful materials

1. What is Needs Analysis?

Brown (1995) describes needs analysis as the systematic collection and analysis of both subjective and objective data aimed at defining and validating curriculum processes that cater to students' language learning needs within specific institutional contexts that influence teaching and learning activities.

Nation and Macalister (2010) emphasize that needs analysis should be employed to determine what the learners already know, what they can do, what they need to acquire or achieve, and how well this caters to their desires. It is crucial to conduct a needs analysis in a foreign language classroom. This aids in ascertaining whether the custom-designed course or syllabus adequately meets the students' needs, identifying the language skills that need strengthening, and collecting data on potential challenges or issues. Needs analysis also helps teachers identify their students' learning styles and preferences, enabling them to design more effective and engaging lessons. This approach can lead to a more personalized learning experience for each student.

2. Approaches to Needs Analysis

Several approaches to needs analysis exist, with the most significant ones being the sociolinguistic model, systemic approach, learning center approach, learner-centered approach, and task-based approach.

2.1 Sociolinguistic Model

According to Munby (1978), needs analysis is conducted in the form of students' profiles. Students are required to list their regular daily communicative experiences when filling out a profile. The medium could be spoken, written, visual, etc. Additionally, students need to mention the desired outcomes, which could be a story, a dialogue, etc. The communication

channel, setting, communication partners, English proficiency level, subject, dialect, and tone are expected to be included in the profile. Once the profile is created, students' needs are incorporated into the syllabus.

2.2 A Systemic Approach

Richterich and Chancerel (1977) designed the systemic approach with the aim of understanding students' needs, focusing more on the learner. The model's creators intend to understand learners' needs, conducting assessments before, during, and after the learning processes. However, as this approach focuses on the learner and the learning situation, the real-world needs assessment is missing. Thus, despite having a needs analysis as one of its components, a systematic analysis might not provide valuable information as learners often cannot articulate what they precisely want.

2.3 A Learning-Centered Approach

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) devised a learning-centered approach, which effectively analyzes students' needs from the onset up to the target situation. The focus of analysis based on the learning-centered approach is on the students' learning process rather than the knowledge learners wish to possess at the end of the classes. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the target needs explain "what the learner needs to do in the target situation" (p. 54). Students' target needs encompass the necessities, lacks, and wants. Necessities elucidate what students need to know to perform their responsibilities. Lacks describe what people do not know - "the gaps between what the learner knows and the necessities" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 56). Wants are defined as "what the learners think they need" (Nation, 2000, p. 2).

The learning needs of students are influenced by their demographic background, prior education, and cultural factors. For instance, in a multicultural classroom, students from diverse backgrounds may have different target needs based on their cultural values and language proficiency levels. Teachers can employ the learning-centered approach to analyze and address these individual needs to enhance students' learning outcomes.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), assessing students' learning needs should be done in accordance with teaching and learning styles. The minimum requirement for the teachers' knowledge should be stated. Additionally, students must specify a convenient venue, desired course materials, their expectations for the course's achievements, and the necessity of the classes to students. Another key component of this approach is the continuous systematic assessment of students' needs using tools such as interviews, surveys, questionnaires, observations. For instance, a teacher in a diverse classroom may use surveys to gather information about students' language proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. With this information, the teacher can tailor lessons to meet each student's specific needs and create a more inclusive learning environment.

2.4 Learner-Centered Approaches

The learner-centered approach considers the learner's attitudes and expectations as the main goals of needs analysis. Berwick (1989) and Brindley (1989) have proposed three primary approaches to this model. The first approach emphasizes that students should distinguish between the needs they have and the needs they deem necessary. Another approach in the learner-centered model is the contradiction of a product to process-oriented interpretations. If the product-oriented approach is chosen, the language itself becomes the primary focus of students' needs. However, if the needs analysis is based on the process, specific attention is given to the learning process and how learners respond to situational issues. The final contradiction is about the objective and subjective course needs. While the objective needs focus on a particular person in the learning process, the subjective needs pay much attention to a person's inner factors (Brindley, 1989). Notably, learner-centered approaches emphasize that a needs analysis should be based on both students' attitudes and feelings.

2.5 Task-Based Approach

A task-based method in needs analysis, as per Long (2005a), aims to identify the specific contexts in which learners would like to participate. Long (2005a) also states that students are interested in participating in a range of tasks, which supports their independence in decision-making. The concept of the cognitive independent approach is based on real-world or target task situations. Students are encouraged to use the target language in various imagined situations, for instance, arranging a doctor's visit, shopping, visiting the museum, etc.

3. Common needs analysis tools

The following tools are commonly used to describe the needs of language teaching-learning: questionnaire, interview, observation, discussion, telephone interview, and their combinations.

3.1. Questionnaires

The most widely-used needs analysis tool is questionnaires. These need to be customized to suit your particular teaching context but should ideally consist of a range of questions about students' motivation for taking the course, prior educational experiences, perceived strengths and weaknesses, scenarios in which they are likely to use the second language, goals and expectations, learning preferences, etc. The advantage of questionnaires is that they occupy a minimal amount of class time while providing teachers and instructors with the same data on every student.

It should be noted that the language used in questionnaires should be graded to fit students' levels. If they don't understand the questions, they won't be able to answer them! With lower levels, needs analysis should be conducted in the student's first language so that students can provide accurate answers.

For higher levels, however, Anderson (2017) suggests turning needs analysis questionnaires into a 'social event' by having students complete them in pairs. The idea is to have students alternate interviewing each other and noting down their answers on their worksheets, which are then handed to the teacher at the end of the activity. Meanwhile, the teacher monitors the pairs' work, taking notes on both the needs discussed by the students and any language-related needs noticed along the way.

3.2. 'Find someone who ...'

Many traditional ELT exercises, including "Find someone who...", can be easily adapted to include

a needs analysis component. Instead of using this activity to practice grammar or vocabulary, instructors or teachers can ask students about how they use English outside of class or about their preferred learning methods in the classroom (working alone versus in pairs or small groups, how they prefer to be corrected, etc.). Board games, class surveys, and discussion cards are a few other classroom activities that can be easily modified to encourage students to explore their needs.

3.3 Ranking

In a Business English course where students are likely to have very specific needs, instructors or teachers could write down various scenarios (attending conferences, responding to emails, etc.) or language functions (negotiating, politely disagreeing, etc.) and ask students to rank them according to their importance for carrying out their jobs. For groups likely to have fewer clearly defined needs, such as an adult conversation club, teachers could put dozens of topics on cards and allow the students to choose the top ten.

3.4 In writing

For needs analysis to be successful, students must be open and honest about the information they share. If teachers feel their students would be more comfortable doing so in writing, they could assign learners the task of writing an email. In the task instructions, specify exactly what kind of information should be included, e.g., their perceived strengths and weaknesses, their goals, time constraints for studying outside of class, etc.

3.5 Looking at the materials

One final activity is to group students and provide them with the coursebook that the teacher plans to use. Ask them to browse through it and discuss which parts they find most beneficial or interesting. Given that there may not be enough time in any course to cover every page in the book, it can be useful for both the teacher and the students to think about what to prioritize. Teachers might even find that their students want to cover sections of the book that they would have completely skipped!

In conclusion, needs analysis is crucial for instructors to tailor their teaching materials and teaching methods to meet the specific needs of their students, leading to better engagement and learning outcomes. It also allows for more flexibility in adapting the syllabus as needed throughout the

course. A wide range of existing needs analysis tools enable language teachers to gather both objective and subjective data necessary to develop teaching materials that meet learners' needs, desires, and course expectations.

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