

Studies of Needs Analysis for the Language Classroom

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Abstract

When creating a language learning class or curriculum, it is important to consider the language needs of those involved. This not only includes the students, but the instructors and administrators as well. However, how does one determine the needs of these individuals? Additionally, after learning about these needs, how does one use that information to make justifiable decisions on what the curriculum's goals and objectives should be? To best answer these questions, one should conduct a needs analysis. First, this paper will define needs analysis and explain its importance and define the concept of needs in the field of language learning. Additionally, the procedures of performing a needs analysis to create an ideal language learning environment will also be discussed in this paper. Finally, previous research on needs analysis will be discussed. This literature review will act as a basic guideline for those looking to administer a needs analysis for their classes.

What is Needs Analysis and why is it important?

Juan (2014) states that needs analysis became popular in the 1970's to 1980's with publications on English language curriculum for specific purposes (Richterich and Chancerel, 1980; Munby, 1978). Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) define it as, "the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities" (p. 189). In the field of language learning, the purpose of a needs analysis is to determine the language needs of participants and to find what parts of language deserve the most attention when considering these individuals' goals with the language. Of course, the needs are often based on what students need to improve on their current language skills, and it also considers the needs of the various practitioners and educators involved as well. Brown (1995) defines the process of a needs analysis as a "systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation" (Brown, 1995, p.36). The term "defensible curriculum"

is an important part of needs analysis, and Brown (2009) explained that it was “one that satisfied the language learning and teaching requirements of the students and teacher within the context of the particular institution(s) involved” (p. 269). In other words, needs analysis is essential for creating a productive and ideal language learning environment whose goals and curriculum have been created based on proper gathering and analysis of information. As many suggest, needs analysis is an important part of creating curriculum and according to Nunan (1988), needs analysis should be the starting point for curriculum planning.

Needs analysis is also important for several reasons. At all levels, learners will have different goals, as well as different levels of confidence and enthusiasm towards studying the language. Furthermore, unless all learners are pure beginners, individual learners come into a class with a different set of skills and experiences with the target language, making it necessary to find the kind of language that targets and satisfies the students’ needs. Needs analysis is a method of finding all this essential information needed to not only help create an ideal language learning environment, but also aids in modifying learning during the actual learning process. As students’ language capabilities and motivations tend to differ on an individual level, as well as change constantly during study, a needs analysis is needed to ensure that students continue learning both what they want and need out of the target language and helps ensure that their enjoyment towards studying remains constant during classes. As a result, needs analysis should always be considered when looking to set up a classroom or a full curriculum.

Defining learner and educator needs

This section will define what are needs in a needs analysis. Different types of needs have been commonly mentioned in previous literature, and these needs have to be identified prior to creating a language learning class or curriculum in order for it to be successful. Juan (2014) and Hayban et. al (2015) both reviewed the different types of needs often mentioned in language learning research. These are (1) perceived needs and felt needs, (2) objective and subjective needs, (3) target needs and learning needs, (4) needs classified from the perspective of “outsiders” and “insiders”, and (5) situational and communicational needs. The different needs sometimes have similarities between one another but will be discussed here as they are mentioned in the literature.

The perceived needs are the language needs of learners as viewed from “experts.” These “experts” could be the educators or other practitioners, and this view of needs suggests that these are the needs not viewed by the learners themselves. They are what “experts” view as necessary language for the students. On the other hand, felt needs are what the learners themselves view as their language learning needs. In other words, the language students feel they need and want from their learning. Next, I will discuss objective and subjective needs. Juan (2014) wrote that both Brindley (1989) and Robinson (1991) had similar ideas on objective and subjective needs with

objective needs referring to needs that can be analyzed by gathering information such as language proficiency during study, language use in real situations, and the difficulties students feel they have with the language. This information should be observable and measurable so it can be used as data during a needs analysis. Subjective needs are the students' emotional and cognitive needs relating to the language. Examples of this include confidence, expectations, and personalities, all of which should be considered before and during language learning. Brown (1995) discussed that both objective and subjective needs could be quantitative and qualitative and further added that needs analysis should preferably include both objective and subjective needs to identify situational needs and general language needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) are often associated with the terms target needs and learner needs. Target needs consider the language needed in a target situation and refers to the learner's necessities, lacks, and wants to be able to communicate in that situation. Hutchinson and Waters (1987 as cited in Warti, 2020) explain the three with necessities referring to the language needed to meet the demand in the target situation. For example, a learner who studies English with the intention of working as a flight attendant would need a set of language skills needed to perform in that field. Lacks refers to the differences between "necessities" and the learner's current language capability. It is also needed for practitioners to identify what is a reasonable target proficiency when looking at the learners' current proficiency. Wants are what the learner feels they need, but as Warti (2020) writes, wants may not actually be the language the learner needs for their target situation. In other words, there could be a gap between what learners want to learn and what they need to learn. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) mention that the difference between learner needs and target needs is that while target needs are used with the beginning and the end goal of the learners in mind, learner needs refers to the process of learning and what students need to remain motivated. Although a class can be thoroughly planned out and well designed by analyzing the student population and their language goals, learner needs have to be considered as learners can grow tired of learning and instruction should remain enjoyable and useful to the students to maintain their motivation for studying the language. In short, it's what a student needs in order to maintain interest in the language and educators need to keep these learner needs in mind to make sure students continue wanting to study. Next is the needs as viewed from outsiders and insiders. Juan (2014) points out that these two are connected to the previously mentioned perceived needs and objective needs which are the needs as viewed from outsiders and are needs that come from information that can be verified. On the other hand, needs that are subjective or felt are needs that are perceived by insiders, and as previously mentioned refer to affect and cognition. Finally, there are situational and communicative needs. The situational needs focus on the needs of those involved in the language program or classroom considering the limitations. This can include the learning styles,

curriculum or classroom goals, and language proficiency of those involved. Similar to previously mentioned needs, communicative needs refer to the language necessary for the target setting in the future. Targeting communicative needs means looking at the level of proficiency learners need to acquire for their future tasks. Juan (2014) points out that this is similar to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) target needs, but the difference is that communicative needs are more concerned with the language needs for the learner in the future, and target needs are more concerned with gap between the learner's current language proficiency and their intended proficiency level.

While many of these definitions of needs have overlapping themes, the point is that needs of all involved individuals must be identified and language curriculum should be based around those needs. How these needs are identified and targeted comes in the form of conducting a thorough needs analysis when deciding a curriculum and continues during learning.

Needs Analysis Procedures

Brown (1995) writes that there are three basic steps to performing a needs analysis which are (1) making basic decisions about the needs analysis, (2) gathering information, and (3) using the information, (p. 36). He further adds that before conducting a needs analysis, curriculum designers must decide who will be involved in the project. Four groups to consider are (1) the target group, (2) the audience, (3) the needs analysts, and (4) the resource group, (p.35). Brown (1995) defines the groups as follows. The target groups involve the target population of students, but this can also include the teachers, administrators, and practitioners involved in the program as well. The audience also involves the teachers, administrators, and supervisors of the program. These are the people who will be asked to follow up on the information gathered from a needs analysis. The needs analysts are those who are asked to conduct the analysis itself. These could be outsiders such as consultants and it is often their duty to divide responsibilities and tasks for the assessment. They also identify the three other groups mentioned in this section. The analysts may also not be outsiders; they may be the teachers or administrators themselves in some cases. Finally, there is the resource group. These are people who have information about the target group, and this could include parents or guardians, future employers, or professors. These individuals could provide very valuable information about the student population. For example, employers could provide information on the language proficiency they expect from their future employees. Parents or guardians can provide information about the students' feelings about their studies.

Procedures of Gathering Information

The gathering of information for a needs analysis is an important step in creating a defensible curriculum. To do so, analysts should decide what questions they look to answer about the language program. Rosett (1982) suggests that five categories of questions should be identified

which are questions related to (1) problems, (2) priorities, (3) abilities, (4) attitudes, and (5) solutions. Problems refer to questions that look to identify problems being experienced with the learners. For example, analysts could look to ask students what difficulties they have when speaking with native speakers. Teachers can be asked what difficulties they are currently having with their group of students. Questions regarding priorities will differ depending on the program and they are designed to find which skills should be targeted the most. Ability questions designed to find the target students' proficiency. Brown (1995) recommends that this be done by tests that help diagnose students' weaknesses and overall proficiency, (p.44). Questions focusing on attitudes are an important part of a needs analysis. For example, students should be asked how they feel about a class being grammar focused. Teachers can also be asked about their feelings about the curriculum design. Solution questions are the final step of questions and should be usually asked near the end of the analysis when problems have been identified (Brown, 1995, p. 45). These questions should be targeted to find answers and opinions from individuals from within the program. Their opinions on what changes should be made should be seen as having more merit than outsiders.

For gathering answers to these questions there are many procedures that can be taken by a number of different instruments and methods. Commonly used methods are looking at (1) existing information, (2) tests, (3) observations, (4) questionnaires, (5) interviews, and (6) meetings. A number of these procedures should be taken to identify as much valuable information as possible, but all procedures have their advantages and disadvantages, and not all of them may be useful for conducting a needs analysis when looking at the target program.

Analyzing existing information requires looking at existing records. Examples of this could involve teacher evaluations and students' program evaluations. Tests are used to measure the students' proficiency. This will give analysts an idea about the overall ability of students and can also help with dividing students into different classes when the program is decided. It can also help with finding the most able teacher for a certain group of students when looking at their proficiency. Observations are made by viewing a class in real-time. This involves the analysts watching for students' behavior towards the class. Analysts should also observe the teacher and their teaching styles and how students react to them. Observations could be more informal where the analysts take notes or recordings if allowed, or they could be more formal where analysts create a checklist if they are going into the observation to look with more specific information in mind. Questionnaires are a useful method for gathering information on a larger scale when compared to other procedures mentioned (Brown, 1995, p. 50) and have been often seen in research (Kim, 2006; Watanabe, 2006; Liu et al., 2008). Some useful types of questionnaires are self-rating questionnaires which can ask teachers or students about their own self-image in relation to lan-

guage teaching or learning or the program in general. Questionnaires can also be used to ask how students feel about the curriculum or the materials that are used in the class to see if they are appropriate or not. However, Kim et. Al (2003) mention that information that is gathered by questionnaires does not necessarily show what participants do, but what they think they do. As such, other procedures like interviews can be used to confirm the data received from questionnaires. Interviews are also a commonly used procedure in needs analysis and is often seen in the literature (Huh, 2006; Chan & Ham, 2007; Noda, 2011). Interviews can be conducted as group or individual instruments and are used to gather personal responses and opinions in a private setting where participants are likely to feel more comfortable about their real opinions. Brown (1995) writes that interviews are time-consuming and are best used after information from questionnaires or observations are gathered so that analysts can make interview questions which target the more pressing issues. Meetings sound similar to interviews, but their purpose is quite different. For example, a meeting can be performed with individuals or with a group after a questionnaire or interview has been conducted for the purpose of solving an issue with the language program by finding a consensus about differing opinions during the meeting (Brown, 1995). As for which procedures are best, that's to the discretion of the analysts. Doing all procedures could be time consuming and would require more manpower than is available. Sommez (2019) analyzed several pieces of research on needs analysis to find which procedures were most used for collecting data, and the results showed that questionnaires were the most commonly used (Watanabe, 2006; Kim 2013). While several of the studies used multiple procedures (Morita, 2004; Huh, 2006) as recommended, questionnaires were the most used by analysts.

When a procedure is completed it's important to know how to use that information. The data gathered should provide ample information for analysts to create a potential set of goals and objectives to act as the foundation of each class in a program and the entire curriculum itself. Brown (1995) suggests four points when creating goals for a curriculum:

1. Goals are general statements of the program's purposes.
2. Goals should usually focus on what the program hopes to accomplish in the future, and particularly on what the students should be able to do when they leave the program.
3. Goals can serve as one basis for developing more precise and observable objectives.
4. Goals should never be viewed as permanent, that is, they should never become set in cement.

(Brown, 1995, pp. 71-72)

While goals are more general statements which the curriculum designers believe are achievable in their program, objectives are a bit different. They come from the goals but are more specific. For

example, “Students will be able to write a research paper in English” would be seen as more of a goal. On the other hand, an objective would need more specific detail. For example, “Students will be able to find and use information from English-only texts to write a 1,000 word research paper in APA format.” A properly executed needs analysis should provide analysts or curriculum designers with ideas for clear program goals. From these goals, they can begin to create more specific objectives. These goals and objectives, however, are a suggestion, and ultimately it’s decided by the program themselves whether to set these objectives and goals or to modify them for their curriculum.

Needs Analysis in Research

Research in needs analysis has been growing over the past few decades and this section will show several studies that have been conducted in the past and their findings. Most studies on needs analysis tend to focus on English as a second language or foreign language. An often mentioned needs analysis is a study by Kimzin and Proctor (1986) that was conducted for the University of Hawaii’s English Language Institute’s (ELI) academic listening classes. The ELI offers English courses to students who have English as a second language, but who have been admitted to the University of Hawai’i. These students are considered to have a high proficiency in English but need extra classes to clear to graduate from the university. Kimzin and Proctor first identified the courses the ELI students were taking at the university by using a questionnaire. This was followed by several observations of the identified classes to learn more about what kind of listening they would need in the ELI. This was helpful to the researchers in finding tentative goals and objectives for the ELI courses and gave them an idea of what skills they should focus on in the ELI. The researchers followed it up with a questionnaire to see how students felt about these tentative objectives and goals as well as the potential listening skills to be targeted in the class. The results were then used to hold a meeting with ELI teachers and administrators to present the possible goals, objectives, and skills of focus for the listening courses. The research resulted in a new set of goals and objectives that were more clearly defined.

Needs analysis can also be effective for finding how students feel about their curriculum. Zhang, Han, & Wang (2020) conducted a study of English majors at Baoding University using questionnaires and interviews to provide insight into the students’ attitudes towards the curriculum. The findings of this study provided valuable information about the curriculum. For example, it showed that 49% of the participants viewed courses related to career development as their favorite courses. Other important pieces of information from this study were that 42% of the participants viewed the curriculum as fulfilling their language needs and 40% were satisfied with the curriculum and 39% having neutral feelings towards it. This information could be valuable to the university as teachers and practitioners could use that information to adjust their curriculum

to try and improve those areas to further satisfy and motivate the students. Similarly, Iwai et. al (1999) conducted a needs analysis for the lower level students of a Japanese language program at the University of Hawai'i to find student's Japanese language needs and to compare them to what their teachers viewed as their language needs. The study administered questionnaires to 46 teachers of lower level Japanese, and 688 students who were enrolled in the classes. The results showed that there were some agreements between the two groups. For example, both viewed socializing in Japanese as important as well as the ability to communicate while traveling in Japan (i.e., being able to use the subway). In the academic setting both groups agreed it was important for students to be able to have discussions and give presentations in Japanese. Importantly, the needs analysis was effective for finding the gaps between teachers and students. One such gap was that the students viewed tasks such as shopping for a long-term stay in Japan and speaking to colleagues and superiors in Japanese as important which teachers did not view as important. This suggests that students wanted to learn the language with intentions of living Japan which teachers were not targeting as much in their classes. The biggest gap shown between the two groups was that students viewed more academic and technical language relevant to their field of study while over seventy percent of teachers viewed this as not important. This shows that there can be a big difference between what teachers view as important and students view as important, and a needs analysis is a good way to target those differences. Research shows that needs analysis is important for designing a curriculum for students majoring in a language to view their overall satisfaction and motivation in studying. The research also shows that there can be a difference in perceived language needs between the teachers and students which can be addressed by performing a needs analysis.

Needs Analysis can be effective for language programs that are targeting language for a specific purpose (i.e., programs for business English). For example, several works have been published over the years for language needed for business (Rodgers-Revell, 2007, Juan, 2014). Huh (2006) conducted a needs analysis for an intensive English program at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa for the purpose of making a business English course for Korean students who needed to perform work tasks in English. Korean business professionals (i.e., previous learners of business English, potential students in the course, and experts of Korean business) participated in the research with five taking the semi-structured interviews over online messenger and seventy-three taking the questionnaires. The study looked to take a task-based approach to find what tasks were needed in English and to also identify the frequency of these tasks. As the information gathered from this study came from sources who had experience working in Korea with English, as well as potential students, this study was able to provide the program with useful information to create an English business course to target the tasks needed. The research showed that finding a

population of people using English in business abroad was an ideal method for designing a business program as their target student population were students looking to work in similar fields. This should be an approach that should be heavily considered when making a program with specific needs in mind. Doing so would make the program more appealing to students looking to target a specific set of language skills.

Discussion

The importance of conducting a needs analysis cannot be emphasized enough. Institutions and programs need to ensure that their curriculum has been made with proper care to satisfy the students and educators and following the procedures outlined gives them the opportunity to do that. The literature reviewed also demonstrates how researchers have used the analysis in the past to help shape and alter language programs by finding important information such as students' satisfaction, differences in learner needs from the students' and teacher's views, among others. It also shows how using a needs analysis is important for setting clear goals and objectives that are based on valuable information. Still, as language programs are growing, more thorough needs analysis should be conducted to make the best available curriculum for potential students. As a result, more opportunities to conduct research in this field and in many different languages are becoming more abundant and the opportunity to perhaps alter the procedures or try new methods of data collection or analysis are available too. As Sommez (2019) showed, analysts tend to use questionnaires and interviews quite often, but more focus could be put on the less explored procedures. Additionally, while research shows how analysts get to the goals and objectives, more follow up research could be conducted to show how individuals such as the teachers and students feel about those new goals and objectives. Similarly, research that shows if the program goals have been achieved after the end of the program would be important information for the research on the effectiveness of needs analysis.

The research is convincing, but I find that the literature leaves me with the question: How often is often enough for conducting a needs analysis? The research suggests it should be conducted regularly for ongoing programs to adjust the goals, objectives, and content when needed, but many would argue that's quite vague. While I also don't have a clear answer, whether the students' needs are being fulfilled in a program should be the goal of any curriculum and that suggests a needs analysis should be done often. Unfortunately, it may not be realistic to frequently perform large needs analysis projects. The amount of work needed to conduct an effective needs analysis of a program's entire curriculum requires a lot of cooperation and work from numerous individuals which may be too much to do on a regular basis. I suggest that instead of regularly performing a large needs analysis project, teachers and administrators should regularly evaluate their curriculum on a smaller-scale to see if a large needs analysis project is ap-

appropriate. For example, yearly surveys measuring students' and teachers' feelings towards the class content would provide useful information. Additionally, reviewing readily available data such as test scores would also be helpful for knowing if a needs analysis should be conducted. For example, in Japan, some universities require students to take TOEIC tests. If TOEIC is necessary and the test results show students haven't been improving in that field for several years, that would suggest some type of needs analysis should be used to target that area. Information like this is easily accessible to administrators and educators and could show whether there is a thorough needs analysis in necessary. Educators should always be considering if their curriculum is still effective, and if it appears that it no longer is, a needs analysis should be conducted under those circumstances to find what changes could be made.

Conclusion

As can be seen in the literature presented there are many researchers who support conducting a needs analysis to ensure that language curriculum meets the needs of the students, teachers, and administrators. This paper also introduced some essential components of a needs analysis and some procedures that should be considered when planning for a needs analysis. Finally, this paper provided some examples of needs analysis in research to show how it has been conducted in the past. With all of these in mind, those looking to create a language curriculum or adjust their curriculum, should strongly consider using some parts of a needs analysis to help create an ideal language curriculum.

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