A Need For Needs Analysis

Authors
Ln.T.Pushpanathan

Address for Correspondence:
Asst.Professor of English, School of Education, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Maha Vidyalaya, (SCSVMV University), Enathur, Kanchipuram-631501, Tamilnadu,India

Abstract

Needs Analysis can provide an insight into the beliefs, opinions and views of the learners and teachers and can help in making a language programme more attuned to the needs of the learners and can also help in establishing the ownership of a change and innovation among the teachers because it is finally a response at these two levels of teachers and learners, which can determine the acceptance or rejection of any change or innovation and thus success or failure of a change or innovation. Needs analysis discovers and describes language needs by using an analysis of a linguistic practice which characterizes the target situation within a discourse community. It is the first step in viewing language learning through a broader concept of the learning process. When the curriculum content, materials, and teaching approaches match learners’ perceived and actual needs, learners’ motivation and success are enhanced.

This paper aims at explaining the importance of needs analysis and its need in the modern era.

Key words: Needs Analysis, learners’ needs, needs analysis framework, language learning.
Introduction

Needs analysis is an information gathering process. West (1994:1) states that the term ‘analysis of needs’ first appeared in India in 1920. However, needs-based curriculum planning in modern times probably owes its genesis to the legacy of public aid to education programmes in the USA in the 1960s when identification of needs was a legislative requirement for receiving finances for activities carried out by publicly funded educational and service-providing agencies (Berwick 1989:51). Another factor which contributed to the appearance of needs analysis as educational technology was the behavioural objective movement which emphasised precision and accountability in educational system by insisting on specification of goals in measurable form (ibid). Thus, in this regard needs analysis (NA) is not exclusive to language teaching (Dudley-Evans & Johns 1998:122). Its emergence in language planning can be traced back to the 1970s and its widespread proliferation in the domain is attributable to its adoption by The Council of Europe’s modern language project (Nunan 1988:43). Tudor (1996:66) opines that the development of a perception of need within communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1970s had a widespread influence on needs analysis work.

Importance of Needs Analysis in Curriculum

Needs Analysis is considered as a basic principle of ESP (Robinson 1991:7) and most of the information on Needs Analysis initially came from ESP (West 1994:2). This is probably due to the fact that an Needs Analysis approach is more useful when learners’ needs are linked to a ‘discrete set of communicative situations’ (Tudor 1996:70). This factor diminishes the utility of Needs Analysis approach for General English (GE) teaching as the needs of the learners’ in General English are not specifiable (Hutchinson & Waters 1987:53). However, Hutchinson & Waters (ibid) advocates the use of Needs Analysis for General English on the grounds that in the case of language learning there is always a perceptible need of some kind. Tudor (1996:70) also shares the same opinion and argues that even if the ‘needs are less specific, choices still have to be made’ and that ‘course content should be based on an analysis of the situations in which the learner will be required to use the language, whether these situations and the language needs which arise out of them can be specified with precision or only in terms of a general orientation’. Thus the implication is that Needs Analysis has an importance in all kinds of language learning and teaching situations whether for specific purposes or general purposes and makes a learning programme more relevant to the real life needs of the learners.
The Uses of Needs Analysis

Richards (1990:2) considers Needs Analysis as ‘fundamental’ to the planning of general language courses and in language curriculum planning Needs Analysis can be utilized as a means to a number of things, i.e.:

1. It can serve as a device for gathering an extensive range of input into the content, design, and implementation of language programme through involving all the stakeholders (Richards 1990:1)
2. It can help in setting goals, objectives and content for a language programme by determining general and specific language needs (ibid:2).
3. Needs Analysis can be instrumental in providing data which can be used for reviewing and evaluating an existing programme (ibid).
4. It can help teachers in understanding the local needs of the students and making decisions in pedagogy and assessment for further improvement (Tarone & Yule 1989 cited in Iwai et al. 1999:10).

All these uses of Needs Analysis refer to the fact that Needs Analysis can be used for a range of purposes. It can be helpful in determining whether a programme should be implemented by finding out if it matches the goals and objectives of the learners for learning a language and at the same time used as part of a programme can help in improving various components of the programme and making these more oriented to the needs of the learners. Needs Analysis can also help in evaluating an existing programme and if found deficient can help in establishing the need for introducing a change and what kind of change may appropriately match the needs of the learners and simultaneously be acceptable to teachers.

Criticisms on Needs Analysis

Needs Analysis, despite a wide scope of its functionality, has been criticized for its limitations (Nunan 1988:43). Widdowson (cited in Nunan 1988:43) is of the opinion that syllabuses based on precise needs and specific ends can result in insufficient and limited competence, without developing learners’ ability to spontaneous communication. He argues that syllabuses with general purposes are process-oriented, more educative in function and lead to general competence. Nunan (1988:45) dispels this criticism of Needs Analysis based syllabuses by Widdowson as logico-deductive and having no empirical grounds. Nunan further strengthens the position of Needs Analysis by suggesting that courses based on Needs Analysis can result in more
meaningful and interesting learning experiences as they are more relevant to the potential purposes of learners’ language use. He attributes this criticism to a failure, on part of these critics, ‘to appreciate the significant shift which has occurred over the years, and still tend to equate needs analysis with the sort of narrow-band ESP approach’. This shift has been manifested in ‘a broadening scope of Needs Analysis to encompass the full educational process — the determination of objectives, contents and curricula, for the production and testing of new materials, for the development of autonomous learning, assessment by the learner, feedback for the conduct and reorientation of the project, teacher education and re-education and for running an entire system’ (West 1994:12).

The stance adopted by Nunan and West seems to hold ground. A learning programme which is not relevant to the needs of the learners cannot result in productive learning experience because need is also linked to motivation and motivation has an effect on learning. Thus learning experiences not matching the needs of the learners can de-motivate learners. Needs Analysis can play a vital part at all stages of the execution of a programme as it provides a tool for assessing the needs, and measures can be adopted to meet them and thus keep motivation sustained by bringing in relevance and giving the learning experience more precision. Needs Analysis, in the case of change or innovation, may not be rejected because of the fear that it may result in a programme with narrow goals or objectives rather it can help in preempting the ‘hit and miss’ situation where a programme was implemented but did not succeed because it was conflicting with the learning culture.

The shift, mentioned in the previous paragraph, from a narrow approach to broadening the scope of Needs Analysis has resulted in a range of frameworks for Needs Analysis. These frameworks have been categorised as target situation analysis, deficiency or present situation analysis, strategy analysis, learning-centred approaches, means analysis and language audit (West 1994:8-12, Jordan 1997:23-28).

**Needs Analysis Framework**

Target situation analysis framework has been proposed by Munby and focuses on the needs of the learners at the end of a language course (Robinson 1991:8). Deficiency or present situation analysis tries to establish what the students know at the beginning of the language course (Jordan 1997:24). Strategy analysis focuses on gathering information about the preferred learning styles and strategies of the learners (ibid). Learning-centred approach has been presented by Hutchinson & Waters (1987). It advocates that learning is determined by the learner and this framework encompasses target needs which include necessities, lacks and wants, and learning needs which
denotes what the learners needs to do in order to learn (ibid). Means analysis approach takes into account information regarding contextual constraints which include cultural attitudes, resources, materials, equipment and methods (Jordan 1997:27). Language audit tries to define language needs for companies, regions or countries (ibid).

However, Needs Analysis conducted for the purpose of evaluating learners’ and teachers’ attitudes, opinions and beliefs towards a proposed or intended change or innovation should have the following frame work (adopted from Dudley-Evans & ST. John 1998:125):

- Information about the learners related to their purpose of pursuing a learning programme. Their attitude to leaning English language, their previous learning experiences, cultural background should also form a part of this information gathering process. This information can be gathered through various sources including institutional and through the learners themselves.
- Present situation analysis which may provide information about the effectiveness of the prevailing programme vis-à-vis future and present needs of the learners.
- Information regarding the preferred styles of learning or learning needs.
- Information regarding the importance of particular skills for the learners and their preferences for learning those skills.
- Information regarding the role relationship between teacher and learners.
- Information regarding the preferences for teaching learning activities.

Once all this information is available then it can be matched against an approach of language teaching and decisions can be made whether a positive attitude towards acceptance or ownership of a certain approach exists.

The underlying philosophy for such a Needs Analysis should be democratic philosophy (Brown 1995:38). This philosophy defines need as any change that is desired by majority of the group involved and such a philosophy leads to gathering information about the leaning most desired by the chosen group (ibid). Needs Analysis, embracing democratic philosophy can help in choosing a methodology which suits the type of learning and teaching public (West 1994:2). The concern in such a case should be that the learners will learn best ‘what’ and ‘the way’ they want to learn (Jordan 1997:26).
Conclusion

Needs Analysis approach may be useful for gathering information regarding attitude, belief and opinion, however, any change or innovation entails more than these factors. It needs a comprehensive evaluation of all the contextual factors and in such a situation probably a more comprehensive approach which has the elements of all the approaches is recommended.

Needs analysis can be limited to gathering information about the attitudes, beliefs and opinion of the learners and teachers and concurrently a more comprehensive Needs Analysis can be conducted to gather information about all contextual factors.

Reference: