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## Revisiting Needs Analysis: A Cornerstone for Business English Courses

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### ABSTRACT

Needs analysis is critical in aligning the content and methodology, in achieving relevancy to the participants in a business English course. The theory of learning is derived from practice, where stakeholders have a role in structuring the course and encouraging students to develop critical skills such as observing, analysing, and evaluating of communicative behaviour and learning (Holden, 1993). In this respect, needs analysis is directly concerned with planning and designing of the course content, with a focus on improving learning and training. Importantly, these activities are aligned to the students' needs (West, 1994). In this respect, this article focuses on different kinds of needs, which form part of the needs analysis concept. In so doing, it becomes easy to discuss the structure and administration of stakeholders needs. The paper further discusses relevancy, motivation, and stakeholder involvement, as well as limitations of needs analysis. The needs analysis discussion revolves around business English courses.

**Keywords:** *Needs Analysis, English for Specific Purposes, Business English, Course Design, Language Learning*

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### 1. Introduction

It should be firstly noted that needs analysis is critical for English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as well as in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Strevens, 1977a; Munby, 1978; Coffey, 1984; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Johns, 1991; Robinson, 1991; Ellis and Johnson, 1994; Nunan, 1988; Mancho-Barés, 2013; Li, 2014).

Indeed, needs analysis enables teachers to understand the potential for educational needs. This information is crucial in designing programs that could be responsive to the needs of stakeholders. Such programs require that teachers play an instrumental role in needs analysis, considering it part of the process to discover and taking the necessary action in fulfilling the stakeholder's needs (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991). Given the diversity and complexities linked to Business English or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) objectives, teachers should give priority to an in-depth analysis of critical activities needed to improve learning in an EAP course (Johns, 1991; Robinson, 1991). Needs analysis is instrumental in discovering, evaluating, and implementing

stakeholders' needs. As such, it is a critical part of accountability and reveals the relevancy in EAP courses, for example (Basturkmen, 1998; Richards, 1984).

In the introduction of ESP and needs analysis, the process of teaching languages does not follow the defining target. In fact, lecturers do not care about the real-world communicative purposes, which led to the birth of the acronym "Teaching English for No Obvious Reason (TENOR)" (Abott, 1980, p. 22). As documented by Schultz and Derwig (1981), instructors did not care about following the necessary steps in learning. Although the learners were taught that the learning process would propel them to greater heights, they were not keen to plan how they would reach the destination. It should be noted that Michael West was the first to introduce the analysis of needs concept, during the 1920s. However, the term became common 50 years later, with the growth of English for Specific Purposes. Hymes (1971) claimed that learners' needs are critical, and they should not be ignored. Further, needs analysis was emphasised by Wilkins (1976), asserting that the process of constructing language syllabus or a course should start by revealing the objectives.



Therefore, the design of a course or a syllabus is centred on learners' needs. Construction of the syllabus matches the particular type of communication, critical in engaging the students. Munby added his views on needs analysis, supporting its application on Communicative syllabus design (1978). With the introduction of CLT, needs analysis became critical in understanding the learners' intended purposes, particularly in learning the target language.

## 2. Context of Needs

Need analysis has been broadly used in the learning context. However, its definition remains controversial (Minodora, 2013). The term needs analysis has not been clear. As Richterich (1983) observes, the concept of language needs remains unclear, because the definitions provided are ambiguous. As stated in the dictionary, the term "need" could refer to anything such as an obligation, demand, and necessity. Elsewhere, an analysis is described as several elements on to which a whole is composed. In this sense, an analysis does not only entail collating information but also the categorised details, which serves a great purpose in evaluating and demonstrating a degree of "scientific exactitude" (Chambers, 1980). In the event the needs are inaccurately established, the process of analysis will not be effective. For instance, a course with no defined objectives has a risk of failing to meet the organisations' aims. On the contrary, a course based on a comprehensive survey of factors, which are likely to hamper the success of learning in an organisation, is likely to be rewarding (Holden, 1993). In this regard, the research examines different interpretations concerning needs, to determine the process of needs analysis. For example, "needs" may be classified as "perceived needs", in the event the teacher create certain opinions on learners' experiences. Conversely, the felt needs refer to the wishes and desires developed by learners (Berwick, 1989; Brookfield, 1988). Objective needs describe information concerning the learner, for instance, language difficulties, and language proficiency, whereas subjective needs refer to elements perceived as confidence, attitudes, and expectations of the learner (Robinson, 1991; Brindley, 1989). Breiger (1997) notes that needs analysis will play an essential role in identifying the general and specialist language, as well as the communication skills. Indeed, needs may

be classified as wants, necessities, and/or deficiencies (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The evaluation of the target situation refers to needs as necessities. This is what Pilbeam (1979) refers to as language audit. In The Target Situation Analysis (TSA), which was introduced by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), necessities are determined by the demand of the target situation, and this is what the learner should keep in mind, ensuring that the target situation functions effectively.

Chambers (1980) posits that needs analysis entails setting up of communicative needs and ensuring the objectives are realised. The objectives are drawn from the analysis of the communication, as evidenced in the target situation. It established that this analysis is categorised as Target Situation Analysis, referring to the accurate specification of learner's target, when it comes to using the language.

Richards (1984) describes TSA as language needs in a specific situation, as it describes the activities that the learner has to go through. It describes the groups and individuals who are part of these situations. In this case, questionnaires and interviews would be essential in determining the skills and measuring the level of proficiency that a specific course needs to deliver (Richards, 1984). Therefore, collecting information relating to the academic needs is one of the ways used in questioning the academic community, and this covers English and other departments. The language department gathers knowledge concerning teaching and takes part in evaluating what other departments could offer regarding reading and content. In addition, the responsibility of the student is also captured. Further, collecting information relating to professional needs involves raising questions on the overall English language needs, skills required for the business community, and understanding proficiency levels. Importantly, capturing this information would be instrumental in course design, and this included examining the general needs of business.

Allwright and Allwright (1977) presented the deficiency analysis, which examined the differences in students' ability and where these students wish to be. In a study by Robinson (1991), the process was described as present situation and combined target situation. This particular approach concentrates on learner's needs, given it examines the learners' demand of the course, evaluating the learner's goals

(Nunan, 1988; Mountford, 1988). Deficiencies entail subject matter and also linguistic deficiencies. In a discussion surrounding an advancement of ESP, it was proposed that students in a particular course should possess a minimum linguistic capacity, which they may have acquired from previous courses (Allen and Widdowson, 1974).

As noted by Chamberlain (1980), it would be important to link English syllabus broadly or make it parallel to the subject syllabuses taught in class. The process is effective when there is collaboration between the language teacher and the content teacher. An example of such process happens at the Lisbon Accounting and Business School where the course English for Business and Financial Reporting, which is an ESP course, works closely with the accounting department lecturers.

It is worth noting that sometimes students' wants could be parallel to their deficiencies or needs, and this applies in both academic and professional environment. However, it would be difficult to realise these wants, in the case students do not know what is expected in their professional and/or academic life. In addition, it could be difficult to realise progress where students do not have language awareness and have set unrealistic goals. Factors such as student opinions, wants, and analysis would be critical in guiding and helping the teacher define the goals and objectives of learning. The teachers' role is to conceptualise course content and selection of relevant course material (Sysoyev, 2000).

Indeed, it is essential for students to be aware of the language and professional needs. In doing so, it creates a positive learning environment, helping students work to achieve their wants (Bowers, 1980; Pinot dos Santos, 1994). Indeed, the different perspectives and interpretations should be considered, as a great part of needs analysis.

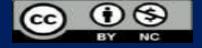
### **3. Structure of Needs Analysis**

The role of the teacher is to devise a suitable needs analysis, providing critical information applied on needs determination. In some cases, the course concentrates on satisfying academic and future professional needs, given the importance of gaining details concerning the targets. The process of needs analysis includes aspects such as students' study or job requirement. In essence, it is categorised as a goal-oriented definition, which may

also be considered as objectives. Secondly, it could be what the business sees as necessary for students to master. Thirdly, the activities that the learner should do to acquire language. In this case, the definition is seen as process-oriented. Fourth, it would be important to specify what they would like to gain from the language course. Lastly, lack of skills or failure to understand what is needed from learners. Additionally, the focus should be on identifying the academic need. As most students do not have information on their future job prospects, it becomes difficult for these students to supply information relating to what will be required of them at work.

West (1994) identified a plethora of parameters the stakeholders required in needs analysis. It would be important to ask a question of what and why. For instance, West describes necessities as a need that is controlled by the demand of the target situation. The analysis evaluates lacks, to reveal important elements that learners do not have. This is done through specifying what the learner lacks, as it will help determine the course design. The analysis further examines the wants, which reveals what learners feel or want. Learning strategies are also evaluated, revealing the preferred learning strategies, as these individuals progress from where they currently are to where they wish to go. Constraints are also examined, to understand what effects they have on the learning environment. Importantly, there is a need to look at the question of when. The key activity is to identify the point of the course, where needs analysis has to be done (Li, 2014). It is preferred that needs analysis take place at the beginning of the course or after the course has already started. The analysis requires examining the individuals involved. Some of the important individuals are teachers, institution, business community, and the student. In most cases, it is assumed that the analysis is meant for the student. However, the business community has to be considered. Stakeholders should understand how major activities are carried out. Some of the activities are diagnostic tests, interviews, observation of classes, entry tests on arrival, learner diaries, case studies, and survey based on questionnaires.

According to West (1994), learning strategies should be aligned to goals, as opposed to motivation. The research by West and Robinson failed to incorporate relevant materials in coming up with



stimulating courses with the ability to keep learners motivated.

Some of the approaches used in collecting information include questionnaires, tests, interviews, and participatory needs analysis. Alternatively, case studies could be effectively used. Both Prince (1984) and Robinson (1991) propose that there should be a consultation of learners through engagement with future employers. However, students need to check the job advertisement, to help them gauge the language competency required. The applicants are encouraged to study authentic material, which would be useful in their job. Indeed, this is impossible in the case of teaching academic learners, considering these individuals deal with pre-experienced learners. Nonetheless, some businesses are questioned and there could be a general outline of the business needs, which is likely to contribute to the success of the course.

#### **4. Stakeholder Involvement**

It is proposed that the stakeholder should provide a level playing field, as opposed to being accorded differing powers (Benesch, 1996). The English course has undergone a transformation, in a bid to minimise the needs of the students in line with those of business community. In this sense, many institutions fail to implement the needs analysis and instead opt to ask questions relating to academic requirements. As Richterich and Chancerel (1987) discuss, the pre-course indicators constitute academic organisations, students, and employers. In his argument, West (1992) asserts that the interpretation of the sponsor needs conflicts with the learners' needs. Elsewhere, Hutchinson and Waters (1993) explain the differences in defining necessities between teachers and learners, pointing out the contradictions. The authors argue that learners' perceived wants should be properly examined. In fact, the participation of one stakeholder in needs analysis will only lead to biased views. As Robinson (1991) outlines, the needs analyst should be careful while collecting information from different sources, given the diversity and multiplicity regarding the views of the stakeholders.

On this account, the process of needs analysis should incorporate questions that suit the expertise of a particular stakeholder. As Forey (2004) posits, people in business should be involved in the consultation phase, where their input should be established and compared to language instructors. The employer is better placed in

predicting the needs of the student or employee, based on business English. As such, the students' interest is possessing employable skills in the future (Li, 2014). Nonetheless, the employee lacks expertise skills in pedagogy. In this respect, the teacher is considered the pedagogical expert, although the teacher may not be in position to figure out the needs of the business community. Furthermore, the teacher may not have professional content, meaning it would be a challenge for teachers, especially when it comes to including content that is relevant to the professional world, while teaching English. Jackson (2003) observes that students appreciate help provided. At the same time, students believe feedback is essential in the learning process. In a report, it was revealed that students' input has benefits, especially in using grouping techniques, to get students engaged in the learning process, allowing students to interact freely.

It should be remembered that needs analysis could be done before (Johns, 1986). Alternatively, it could happen during (West, 1994) or sometimes after the course. Notably, the administration at the end of the course is considered as an evaluation, as opposed to declaration of needs. In analysing of needs, it would be important to formulate questionnaires, design course syllabus, and analyse the deficiencies. Ideally, all these activities should be preferably done in the early stages of the course (Robinson, 1991). Nonetheless, the learner-centred approach presents an opposing view, arguing that introducing it at the beginning makes it difficult to keep updated on the learners' changing needs. As such, it would be desirable for the analysis to take place throughout the entire course (Richterich & Chancerel, 1987). The idea is based on the concept, which states that increased involvement of learners in a course, leads to a change in learners' attitudes and approach (Robinson, 1991). Therefore, the process of needs analysis process should be continuous (Knox, 1987; Richterich & Chancerel, 1987). It would require the introduction of administrators and teachers, in promoting learner's progress in the entire course (White, 1988). It helps in establishing short-term, long-term, and medium-term needs, to help cope with learners' needs as time progress. This helps them understand how to express themselves and identify their needs. Indeed, the pre-course analysis lays the foundation to begin the course. Some further analysis takes place, as the course progresses.

Therefore, the teacher should be committed to conduct analysis in the entire course, making changes that match the ongoing learners needs (Richards, 1984). This approach is supported by Nunan (1988), asserting that subjective needs are equally important as objective needs.

One shortcoming of the approach presented by Nunan is that a teacher is not capable of designing a course from the beginning. It is proposed that changes have to be made to the course, in line with adapting the changing needs of learners. In addition, there are challenges of teachers being dependent on students, and it requires that students are aware of their needs and relevant information to learn. However, as stated previously, students do not have this knowledge, leading to lack of continuity, design, and goals in the course. In the case where learners do not know their actual need, they end up choosing a course that fails to match the requirement (Agnieszka, 2014).

### 5. The Case of Business English

As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) discuss, needs analysis is crucial to business English, as opposed to other English language areas. Learners taking a business course are more varied and it is not easy to predict their language skills. As such, a business English needs analysis makes use of any other business technique discussed (Mancho-Barés, 2013). Nonetheless, the information should be captured in tabulation, which helps in identifying the target language needs. As Holden (1993) states, a questionnaire or an interview could establish learner's perceptions, whereas a questionnaire identifies the learning styles.

It is proposed that a needs analysis approach used in 1976 to evaluate a company in Sweden could be ideal for an English course. The scale was the stages of Attainment Scale developed in 1976 by the English Language Teaching Development Unit. It was developed as a response to a requirement of a Swedish company, SKF, in order to evaluate the level of the English language needed to perform certain tasks in the company (Ellis, 2004). The needs analysis constituted 27 business skill areas, and these needs are aligned to lexical language and grammatical specification. It is worth noting that performance scale is complicated and captured many details. In each of the skill areas we can find definitions of what students should be able to do at each of eight levels of attainment. Since the publication of this scale, other

scales have been developed in a more refined and simplified way for users to access easily. In fact, the Stages of Attainment Scale prompted the development of simple scales, which analyse four or five key skills (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). The performance scales are critical in developing questionnaires that could serve business English courses.

Needs analysis is geared towards achieving course relevancy and achieving a high degree of learner motivation and ensure success in learning. The needs analysis reveals critical material, and this is not only restricted to higher learning institutions, but it as well serves business community and students. The direct involvement of learners is important, helping learners know how it is relevant to the academic and future profession. This motivates students to learn.

### 6. Limitations and Conclusions

Needs analysis has its fair share of limitations. The first problem is the difficulty in accurately predicting the future needs of learners in relation to the future profession, considering these individuals lack experience. In schools, learners are taught in groups, and these groups are not always uniform. Although some of the models have been designed to determine the individual needs, for example, Munby's (1978) model, these models cannot be adopted to meet the group requirement. Moreover, no data collection and analysing procedure is free from mistakes. Much of the analysis relies on subjective judgment and important details needed in carrying out the analysis may sometimes be missing or inaccurate. It should be noted that needs description is static, as a difference exists between the analysed needs of learners and what learners perceive as their needs, which are likely to change as they learn. Lastly, need analysis could encompass different functions and concepts, which could be difficult to organize coherently, as part of the course material. Cunningsworth (1983) and Maley (1999) assert that needs analysis places emphasis on the product view of learning, as opposed to reinforcing the process view.

In conclusion, needs analysis is critical for course designers in deciding the content of the course, in achieving relevance and promoting accountability among the stakeholders. It is the cornerstone for business English courses. There is need for constant and ongoing analysis, depending on the needs of the academic and business community (Li,



2014). Teachers should be involved in continuous modification, with the view to meet the needs. They should be aware of the business community demands. It is critical to create awareness of stakeholders needs. As such, the aim of needs analysis is to be sensitive to the requirements and requests of students, business community, and academic institutions, which would contribute to successful learning.

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