

Need Analysis – A Fundamental Groundwork for Language Teaching – Learning Process

(Assessment of Need Analysis and its role in objective setting, curriculum planning and lesson delivery)

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Abstract:

In the recent world of fast and technological advancement, learning process has become very targeted and focused. Whether the approach adopted is traditional or modern, it becomes essential to outline the needs and requirements of learners. This paper aims to bring out the inevitable role of Need Analysis as the platform or the groundwork on which the entire teaching – learning process stands. This paper will try to establish how an effective assessment of learner needs can contribute to a prolific course delivery and learning outcome. Need analysis can always serve as an effective tool for teachers that they can use to plan and deliver their lessons that can adhere to students' particular learning needs and to the individual learning styles. This paper will bring out the importance of understanding the relevance of gauging learning needs and adopting the suitable methodology and teaching style to proliferate learning.

Keywords:

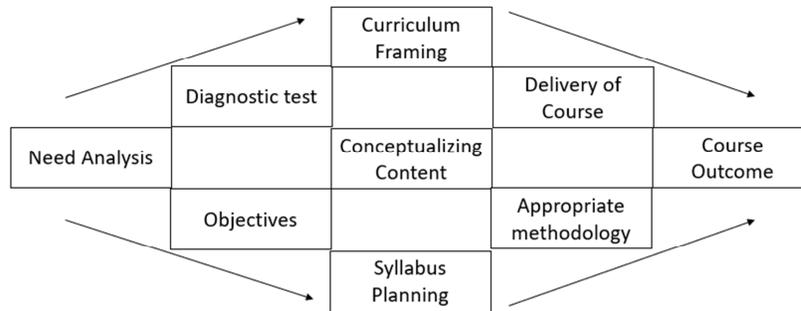
Need analysis – assessment of learning goals – diagnostic test – objectives – curriculum – conceptualize concept - learning styles – methodology – learning outcome.

Language learning and teaching process has been revolutionized recently. Earlier language learning was a general process in which learners expected learn a few rules of grammar, some speaking or writing techniques. But slowly, with growth of career avenues and rising need for specific skills, learner expectations are becoming very specific and earmarked. The needs of communication may vary with different types of communication goals and different learner levels. So the most crucial thing is to find out about the areas, styles and discourse that the learners may engage in more. This would not only give a

good hold over the target situation but also help the trainer to judge a learner's actual usage of the language. Needs assessment is necessary to understand the learners' practical use and requirement of English. It helps to develop a student centric curriculum. An effective needs analysis looks at the communication needs in many different ways. For example, it analyses the language they need by function (complaining, making polite requests etc.), skill (e.g. emailing, negotiating), genre (minutes, reports, job interviews etc), and analyses other factors in conjugation with their regional and cultural effects.

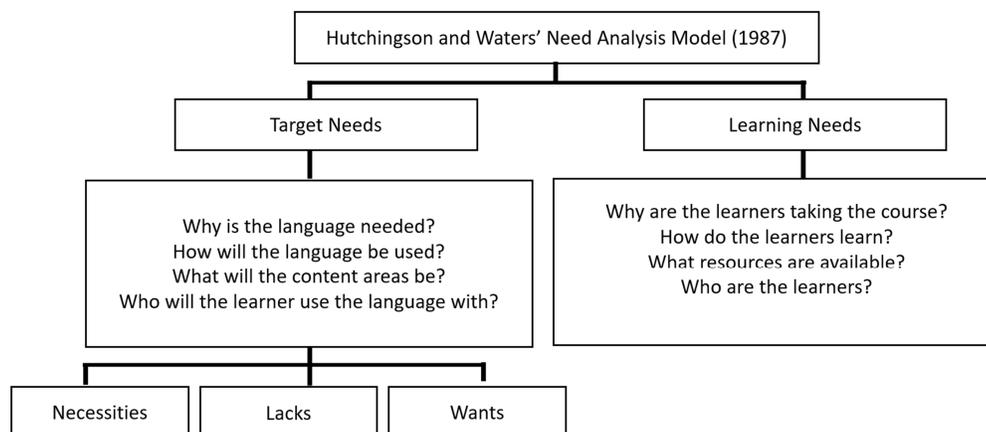
Formally, 'Need analysis' is a relatively new concept in the language learning process. Nevertheless, teachers, trainers and facilitators all over the world have been doing it directly or indirectly to assess their learners and to plan their lesson delivery (Iwai et al. 1999). It was Michael West who first introduced the concept of Need Analysis in 1920. According to West, an analysis of needs establishes two things about the learners – the purpose why they should learn and the method how they should learn. (West 1994). According to Need analysis, as an indispensable part of language training curriculum started picking trend after the 1960s. It was from here that language training was started to be channelized into learners' specific needs. The very popular field of study now, ESP – English for Special Purposes is a result of assessing specific learning goals of people.

According to R West, need analysis can be categorized into five aspects – "Target-situation analysis, Deficiency analysis, Strategy Analysis, Means Analysis and Language audit" (West, 1994). This acts as a device to know the learners' necessities, needs, lacks and preferred language and methodology for learning, which further helps to develop courses that have a reasonable and targeted content for exploitation in the classroom. Needs Analysis is therefore a process for identification and defining valid curriculum and instructional and management objectives in order to facilitate learning in an environment that is closely related to the real life situations of the student. It brings into sharp focus the settings and roles that learner is likely to face after he finishes his formal education. It encompasses both what learners know and can do and what they want to learn and be able to do. The right analysis of learning need will lead to the best course outcome.



The five concepts outlined by R West contributes to an overall evaluation of the learning goals and methods surrounding a learner. ‘Target situation analysis’ help to understand the circumstances under which the learner will require the language. Hence language concepts and aspects corresponding to the same can be planned. ‘Deficiency analysis’ can make aware of the loopholes in a learner’s learning levels. ‘Strategy and Means analysis’ can help determine the right method of delivery to be employed by the teacher and ‘Language audit’ can help hold on to the appropriate language complexity level used for lesson delivery.

Need Analysis helps to answer the starting question before commencing a course – “Why do the learners need to learn English?” (Hutchingson & Waters, 1987). An analysis of learning needs acts as a major component is ESP – English for Special Purposes. Assessing students' language needs is a crucial part of planning an effective lesson. The requirement of analyzing needs and the importance of it is rightly portrayed in Hutchingson and Waters’ self explaining diagram of Need Analysis.



Hutchinson and Waters' Need Analysis Model

Need analysis can be categorized into two distinct types. The first is situation based and the other is learner based. The Situation based needs are analysed from the language competency and functions that the workplace and the boundaries of work demand. For example, a telecaller needs good listening skills and good accent development; a company secretary needs good note taking and note making skills, along with effective writing skills. The level of language input will be decided by the factors pushing the work needs of the learner. The Learner based needs are analysed depending on the personal factors of the learner. These personal factors could be educational background, social circle, motivation and learning styles.

Needs of communication can be assessed on two levels – generic and specific. Tools used for a generic evaluation of communication needs may include questionnaires, forms or group discussions; whereas the tools needed for a more specific insight into the needs of the learners, should be more detailed and communicative. For example, personal interactions with a similar group, personal interviews, task based assessment which assess the language needs of a group in a particular genre of work, etc.

An effective tool for Need Analysis – Diagnostic Test

For any course to be effective, its content should be based on a thorough investigation of the learners' needs. It is important to obtain the necessary information about the learners' expectations of a course and their learning preferences so that the trainer can select relevant content. Needs Analysis is an integral part of all courses. The specialised tool that can help reveal the language needs and requirements of the learners is a Diagnostic Test. It provides an accurate and early assessment of a student's learning needs and proficiency levels which help determine the most appropriate courses. The results obtained in a Diagnostic test helps a trainer to evaluate the strong and weak areas of a learner. Usually a Diagnostic test is conducted with the intention to assess the exact needs of the learner. Learners come from different backgrounds and are exposed to different levels of language input. A Diagnostic test effectively tests the areas already familiar to the learners and the areas in which they need more input. It helps to group similar learners together and expose them to the level of English they are comfortable learning and grasping, gradually leading them from the known into the unknown areas of usage. Diagnostic tests produce authentic results that reflect the language level of each learner. It can be used by different organizations for different purposes.

- Universities can use it to test large groups of new students quickly and reliably.

- Language Schools use it to test students before enrolling them into appropriate courses.
- Corporate training companies use it to decide what level of training employees need.

Diagnostic tests are tools designed to give students and teachers of English a quick way of assessing not only the learning needs of a student, but also the approximate level of a student's knowledge in a particular subject and the level and amount of input to be given to improve that knowledge. A Diagnostic test compares the level of learners with accepted set standards. It measures neither intelligence nor ability but the exposure and experience one has in a particular area. It determines how much one knows and how well one knows it. When a group starts a course, all the participants may not find the level appropriate; some may find it too basic and some may even find it too advanced. In order to rebuff the assumption that all learners can begin at the same level, Diagnostic tests are administered.

For example if a learner is aimed at taking up training in IELTS, it is necessary to find out which skills he needs more focus on. This is possible if a diagnostic assessment is done before the course commencement. The test should be exactly in the same pattern as the real test, with the same limits set. The scores obtained can be then compared to the bands and the band descriptors set by IELTS. This can decide on the following aspects of the course that the candidate wants to take up:

- At what level to start
- Whether more teaching required or more practice
- Which skills need to be focused on
- What should be the course duration

A Diagnostic test serves only to place learners into a suitable course. It does not attempt to judge how smart or dull learners are. It does not attempt to say how much they can accomplish in the future. It only judges, based on the experience of those writing the test, what class would best serve their learning needs at the moment. The purpose of the test is to ensure that learners continue their language training without repeating the same material and with as few gaps in their learning as possible.

An accurate analysis of learner need will ensure framing effective objectives. An objective is an explicit statement of goals that a learner would achieve at the end of the course. A profound knowledge of the learners' intentions and expectations is required to set the right objectives. Objectives need to be of

significance to the learner and should be based on relevant educational needs and important life opportunities. Objectives should be framed to bring about improvement in knowledge, skill, behaviour or attitude. They should be realistic and achievable.

While designing a course and setting objectives, one must keep in mind the acronym 'SMART'. AS DEFINED BY Peter Drucker in 1955, SMART stands for:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Relevant
Time-bound

A specific objective has a greater chance of being achieved than a general goal. To set a specific goal one must answer – “What exactly are we going to do for whom?”

For eg: General goal would be “Learner should improve in English.” But a specific goal would be “Learner should be able to produce good vocabulary and use intermediate grammar to improve his English.” Specific objectives are a step-by-step approach to the larger objective.

Measurable objective means that the learning outcome should be quantifiable. There should be an appropriate device or method to monitor progress by checking how much learning has taken place. Usually a comparison between the precourse evaluation and final evaluation produces this result.

For any objective to be achievable, there should be a realistic path to achieve it. The objective must be feasible with the available resources and within the course limitations. It is important to specify an expected level of change. For eg. A learner who speaks very basic English may aim to be able to speak with better diction and structure in a month's time. But if he looks forward to have fluency and diction like the native speakers, its is impracticable.

An objective being relevant relates to the relationship between the objective set and the outcome expected at the end of a course. An objective should be of importance to the learner in terms of what he wants to be

able to do. If a learner wants to improve his business writing but he takes up a course in presentation skills, is of very little relevance to him.

Every good objective must be within a time frame which is neither too narrow nor too broad. A time frame not only keeps a learner focused but also helps the trainer to plan ahead. SMART objectives helps a trainer and a learner to attain goals which are concrete and tangible.

Setting need based objectives is vital because it helps the trainer as well as the learner to have realistic expectations. It helps to reduce the gap between the objectives and the outcomes. The curriculum and a syllabus planning and effective delivery of the same is dependent on a proper need analysis and right learning objectives. Once identified, needs can be stated in terms of goals and objectives which, in turn, can serve as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies, as well as for reevaluating the precision and accuracy of the original needs assessment. Thus, needs assessment is an integral part of systematic curriculum building. (Iwai et al, 1999)

A curriculum that maximises the learning is one that recognises learner needs. It provides clear guidelines on what they are learning and how they will be assessed. It involves a range of strategies to meet different teaching needs and explicit teaching to support learning so the learners develop and consolidate the required knowledge and skills to meet the expected future demands of work. To ensure that the intended learning goals for all the learners are met, it is essential to have an effective learning plan.

Framing an independent ongoing learning plan for the learners is an important component of the curriculum. It is designed by taking into consideration the language needs of the learners, planning and assigning learning strategies which would be specific to the needs, determining a time period within which learners would be able to progress in the study of the language , and setting up the tools and resources that will help in the entire process. It is important because it gathers relevant information from the learners before and during the course and helps the trainer to stay focused while conducting the sessions. It is necessary to do need analysis on a regular basis so that the gap between the needs and the curriculum objectives are minimised. (Soruc, 2012). A curriculum, unlike a syllabus, is dynamic. It always takes into consideration the learning needs, resources to be used, teaching strategies, assessment, the time frame,

the anticipated outcome. These are all interconnected and provide the experiences that contribute to student learning. An ongoing learning plan and updated assessment of needs, helps a trainer to stay student centric throughout the curriculum. It enables a trainer to bridge the gap between what is taught and what is learnt. It also helps to analyse effectivity of the methods and facilities used and corrects them if needed. In this way the trainer is able to better align his teaching methods with student needs, to maximise the learning of all their students. Once the suitable curriculum is planned to suit the syllabus, the content is organized in a way that it suits the classroom delivery. Language learning has many aspects – functional aspects of grammar, written skills, communicative skills, etc. In the process of conceptualizing the content, the trainer plans the language aspects to deliver in a syllabus as the need assessment suggests.

When the groundwork is well set, the last stage contributing to effective course outcome comprises of course delivery using appropriate methodology. As discussed earlier, the role of need analysis comes to forefront yet again. Just as it contributes to a constructive curriculum planning, it also determines the best method and best mode to deliver the same. Along with the learning requirements, an analysis of need also suggest learner types and their learning styles. The learning needs and the learning styles of the learners should be integrated to augment language learning. According to R M Felder, the knowledge about the different learning styles of the learners will maximize their learning process by focusing on targeted lesson delivery. For example, if a learner is assessed as a visual learner primarily, he may not respond well to lecture mode of teaching. He might need more of visual input in learning like charts, pictures, slides, etc. According to the learning style identified, the trainer can employ appropriate methodology for concept delivery. For example, if the learners have a kinesthetic or dynamic learning style, the teacher may employ roleplays, task based teaching. If the learner is a visual learner, the teacher may make use of videos, slides, audio visual mode of imparting the language content.

Hence, it can be said that Need Analysis is like the foundation structure of a building. It not only contributes to gauge the learning requirements of a learner but also helps to determine the course and curriculum targets that can be focused and gains prolific outcomes. It also helps a teacher to assess the learning style of a learner and develop effectual methods to adhere to the identified learning method preferences, thus, accentuating the process of language learning. It shifts the traditional teacher centric focus of a classroom

to a student centric environment in class and encourages learner autonomy. Need Analysis helps to maintain credibility, adherence and transparency while delivering a course.

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Online resources:

- <https://www.engr.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/drive/1QP6kBI1iQmpQbTXL-08HSI0PwJ5BYnZW/1988-LS-plus-note.pdf>
- <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED572922.pdf>
- <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=md9IaP4zUnoC&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=michael+west+on+needs+analysis&source=bl&ots=5h9qT6029W&sig=ACfU3U3o8ITLf27LURJm2tqt8fx18Kn7Eg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj937mxnbnAhUKILcAHTzEAEoQ6AEwCXoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=michael%20west%20on%20needs%20analysis&f=false>