ACCENTUATING THE NEED FOR NEEDS ANALYSIS IN SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS – A REVIEW

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Abstract: The 1960's & 70's were a witness to the origin of a number of theories which proposed communication as the goal and basis of all language learning. Following this, the aim of English teaching was modified to help students develop a second language competence, to speak the language fluently and confidently with ease and comfort in real situations. But unfortunately, earlier accounts of language teaching, "shows emphasis on a very limited range of competence which has been called 'classroom English' or 'textbook English', and has often proved less than useful for any 'real' communicative purpose" (Verghese, 1989: 16).A change in this deep set conviction is possible only when learners take ownership for their own learning through a process of needs assessment required to realize their communicative needs in the second language. The paper presents a review of literature related to needs analysis, the earliest models of needs analysis, its definition and significance, and highlights the need for needs analysis in second language programs.

Keywords: Needs Analysis, Communicative Competence, Second Language Acquisition, Low Proficiency, Pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s heralded the advent of a new approach to the teaching learning of English widely known as the Communicative Approach in language teaching, which is based on the principle of language as communication. The aim of language teaching as pointed by Richards & Rodgers (2001) was to develop what Hymes (1972) stated as 'communicative competence'. Surprisingly the teaching of English as a second language in most undergraduate colleges in India has not received this impetus. The existing syllabus and approach practiced in English teaching-learning has resulted in a situation where students spend more time on the literary content in the text book than using the language to communicate. Rajendran (2013) in his study denunciates the current methodology of teaching English in undergraduate colleges in rural Andhra Pradesh, India, which does not in any way lead to language enhancement of students who are totally devoid of linguistic proficiency at the time of joining and who sadly enough graduate with a degree which leaves them wanting in communication skills. The work signals an urgent need for change in the teaching - learning of English as a second language at the Under-Graduate Level. Fatihi (2003) opines that people who mostly use English, especially those who use English for the purpose of communication, who although have undertaken the study of English for years as a part of their curriculum, are often found lacking in their

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ability to essentially use the language or comprehend others' use of the language in everyday communication, whether verbal or written.

While the study of English as a second language will always remain a debatable issue, it would be a significant move by eminent academicians & concerned authorities to shift the emphasis of English studies from the subject to the learner and make the teaching of English more student-centric.

Canale and Swain (1980:27), in their most deeply researched and widely cited paper, 'Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing', enumerate five important principles which guide the progress of communicative approach for a general second language programme:

1. Communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and communication strategies, or what is referred to as strategic competence.

2. A communicative pedagogy should encompass strategies comprising activities and tasks which help meet learner's communication requirements.

3. Second language classes should provide learners with opportunities to interact with highly skilled speakers of the language which will fulfil their need for listening and comprehending real time language.

4. Learners should make optimal use of all those facets of communicative competence that they have developed through acquisition and use of native language in the initial stages of learning the second language.

5. Providing learners with the information, practice, and milieu needed to meet the communicative wants of second language learning should be the main goal of a communication - oriented second language programme.

Second Language Teaching, as Richards (1990:1) observes, is frequently perceived from a very constricted viewpoint- that of the teaching act. As a result much of the work on Second Language Teaching-learning deals with either the pedagogy, or with the designing and use of instructional materials. In cases where students do not learn the language, it is thought to be the fault of the technique, the material, or the instructor. In fact, the success of any language program (as with any successful educational program), comprises not just the mere act of teaching but requires a number of levels of preparation, advancement and execution, of which needs analysis forms an important part.

Reasons for low proficiency among general English language learners has for a long time taken refuge in factors like big size of class rooms, learner's background, inadequate exposure to the target language, methodology adopted, mother tongue influence, lack of learner motivation, etc., which have been undisputedly agreed upon &readily accepted by all involved. A change in this deep set conviction is possible only when learners take ownership for their own learning through a process of needs assessment which will make them aware of 'the language skills'

they need, make them responsive to whether "the prevailing course sufficiently addresses the needs of prospective students" and whether it aids them in identifying 'the gap between what students are able to do and what they need to be able to do' (Richards, 2001). Needs assessment thus is a technique which promotes learner understanding, heightens learner awareness and necessitates learner participation in an assessment of his own needs.

Why do Needs Matter?

Richards (2001) explains how the notion of 'needs' gained consideration and prominence. A consideration of societal and learner needs as a preliminary step in a re-evaluation of language teaching, together with the objective of offering a language course relevant to the learners' needs led to the advent of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) movement known in English language teaching circles as ESP (English for Specific Purposes). The ESP approach to language teaching started as a reaction to several real-world apprehensions the most important being the study of English (by an ESP student) to carry out a particular role. An important principle of ESP approach was that it started with an examination of the learner's needs to develop a course instead of around a scrutiny of the language. It was felt that "different types of students have different language needs and what they are taught should be restricted to what they need" (p.27, 28). In fact needs assessment as a concept started in association with the area of ESP. But needs analysis is also "fundamental to the planning of general language courses" (Richards, 1990:2)

In the context of learners' choice, Nunan (2013) draws on the example of Widdows and Voller (1991) who studied the aptitude of students of Japanese university to make choices regarding learning predilections. The results showed that the students often exhibited preferences disfavoring the content and methodology they were exposed to in the classes. The report they presented further accentuated the need for need analysis in university students:

"Students do not like classes in which they sit passively, reading or translating. They do not like classes where the teacher controls everything. They do not like reading English literature much, even when they are literature majors. Thus it is clear that the great majority of university English classes are failing to satisfy learner needs in any way. Radical changes in the content of courses, and especially in the types of courses that are offered, and the systematic retraining of EFL teachers in learner-centered classroom procedures are steps that must be taken, if teachers and administrators are seriously interested in addressing their students' needs".(p. 100)

(Widdows and Voller, 1991; as cited in Nunan, 2013)

Defining Needs Analysis

"Procedures used to collect information about learners' needs are known as needs analysis" (Richards, 2001: 51). According to Brown (1997) needs analysis is a study

of language forms which students will require to use in target language when they actually try to communicate. For Pratt (1980, as cited in Juan, 2014), needs analysis refers to "an array of procedures" that can identify, validate, and prioritize needs.

In his state of art article, 'Needs Analysis in Language Teaching', West (1994) mentions a shift in focus and scope of needs analysis. During the two decades covered by various surveys of methods to conduct needs analysis in foreign language teaching, both the focus and scope of needs analysis has shown a change. The focus glaringly of early needs analysis was professional/EOP, but in the later years has changed to educational/EAP. More recently the "focus has shifted again to include general language learning" (p.1)

Needs analysis procedures were increasingly employed in language teaching by applied linguists from the 1960s because of a rise in the demand for specialized language programs (Richards, 2001). For Fatihi (2003) needs analysis is a method to ascertain the requirements of learners, their wants, and deficiencies so as to design courses that have a realistic content for application 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" (p.39). The goal of needs analysis as Richards (2001) points out "is to collect information that can be used to develop a profile of the language needs of a group of learners in order to be able to make decisions about the goals and content of a language course" (p.90)

Combining the best features of the definitions of needs analysis by leading researchers (Richards, Platt & Weber; Stufflebeam, 1985, McCornich, Brinkerhoff; and Nelson, 1985, Pratt, 1980)Brown (1995)offers a functional description designed to facilitate the process of needs analysis as part of language program design. According to him, Needs Analysis refers to "the 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" (p.36) and recommends the following of certain systematic steps to execute a needs analysis. The three basic steps are:

1. Making fundamental decisions about Needs Analysis
2. Collecting Information
3. Expending the information

Kimzen & Proctor Model for Needs Analysis

Brown (1995) cites the example of English Language Institute, University of Hawaii, Manoa a long established institution, where in curriculum development had become stagnant and needed a boost. Teams of master's students were encouraged to do

the needs analyses and objective setting for ELI courses. The work of two graduate students, Kimzen and Proctor, who did an outstanding job of analyzing the academic listening needs of ELI students at UHM remains imprinted in the annals of needs analysis. Their paper not only served as basis for developing tests, materials, and, teaching in listening but also functioned as a model for other needs analyses that were performed later.

Literature search on what had previously been done to teach academic listening in other programs proved a useful starting point. Before the actual extensive research at UHM, Kimzen & Proctor conducted a quick survey during the spring of 1986 to identify the types of content area courses the students were taking in addition to their ELI requirements. Based on these survey results, a large number were chosen further because they were considered representative courses in the popular areas of liberal arts, science and business. Case studies were conducted in each course in order to specify the listening, note-taking, and discussion skills needed for these particular types of classes & fields of study. The proceedings of each class were tape recorded and observed twice. Both, instructors as well as students were interviewed. Kimzen & Proctor carefully examined, recorded and analyzed all gathered information and appended many relevant documents to their needs analysis report. The case studies approach, during which the needs analysts focused on the difficulties which both instructors and their foreign students may have in content classes, students' preferred learning styles and students coping strategies provided valuable insights into the lecture – listening process as well as for formulating tentative goals, micro skills, and objectives for ELI listening courses. A questionnaire which attempted to ensure that the tentative goals, micro skills, and objectives were consistent with the foreign students' self- perceived listening needs was administered. The gathered information was discussed at a meeting of the needs analysts, the ELI administrators, current & future instructors, a professional note- taker, and a business English consultant. Through their needs assessment, Kimzen & Proctor released a list of goals, micro skills and objectives which provided the listening courses with a solid basis for test development, material development and teaching.

Brown's (1995) remark that none of the curriculum development that has been accomplished in recent years in the ELI, would have been possible without the hard work of Kimzen & Proctor who put their hearts and souls into trying to figure out the language and situation needs of students which nevertheless provided a foundation and model for future needs assessment (p. 59-64), bears a testimony to their extraordinary contribution in the area of needs analysis.

In the Indian Educational context, the notion of needs analysis as Fatihi (2003) reports originally came into existence with the experimental project of Michael West who invented the concept of 'surrender value'. With an idea of exploring his notion of 'surrender value' more deeply, West undertook a needs analysis study

– an investigation of the Bengali's requirement of English, which is thought to be the seed idea of 'needs analysis' in the Indian Educational system.

The Need Based Survey for Science and Technology Program (NEST)

Drawing a parallel with Brown's remark on the hard work of Kimzen & Proctor which provided a foundation and model for future needs assessment, Fatihi (2003) makes a mention of the need based survey for Science and Technology which revolutionized the perception of Need based English for Science and Technology (NEST). Exhilarated by the investigational project of Michael West, the Curriculum Development Cell at the Institute of Technology, Kanpur, India, carried out the first study of the kind called Needs based English for Science and Technology (NEST) program. The objective of the survey was to investigate the language needs of the students of Science and Technology.

Although the study went beyond its defined locus, it ascertained a transformation of the ELT scene in India. The instrument of the study was a compacted questionnaire which had direct significance to students. Eight major areas examined by the questionnaire included the importance students attached to English for academic & professional purposes, whether fluency in English proved advantageous or not, what the relative importance of English was, whether students felt the need to improve English and which special skill was to be included, students' assessment of the existing course and their personal preferences for an English course, and finally students' attitude towards self-study materials.

The results of the survey indicated that for 90% of the students English was very important for purposes of study and 84% considered English proficiency most vital. The need for English was high (78%) for Research, technical and higher studies. It was moderate (59%) for Sales, Administration, and Manufacturing fields. The demand was low (14%) for Production, and Manufacturing field of works.

The need to use self-access materials came as a response to student dissatisfaction (70%) with the existing course and a large majority who found the existing English course uninteresting and useless. The study conducted by IIT Kanpur team threw light on the conflict between the course maker's perception of what the students need and the students' need in terms of what they expect in a language classroom. This conflict it is felt has serious pedagogical implications for teaching and learning English in India and that the students were positively motivated towards English not just for specific needs but also for their future plans (Fatihi, 2003: 57, 58)

Needs Analysis and Second Language Classrooms

The name most closely related to any discussion on the need for need analysis in General English classroom is Paul Seedhouse. The rationale behind Seedhouse's (1995) argument about needs analysis infrequently being carried out in general

English classrooms is attributed in part to the mistaken belief that it is not possible to lay down the needs of general English learners, and in part to the absence of previous work on the feasibility of analysing needs data in the general English context. The purpose of his study which included a needs analysis, through a questionnaire of 3 classes of students in Barcelona, where 29 young learners aged 14-18 participated, was to validate that needs analysis can be beneficial in the general English classroom with respect to problem solving and as a base for formulating objectives, courses and materials and also to create an awareness of what truly transpires in the classroom. Analysis of data revealed that students who were motivated psychologically and socially were strongly disinclined to common place regular activities and disfavoured activities controlled & lead by teachers. The Barcelona learners aim of developing social contact, gaining access to the world of international travel, youth culture and entertainment was fulfilled through a computer reading maze, which simulated a tour abroad and included conversation with foreigners, catering to their psychological and social needs.

The significance of needs analysis in the context of foreign language learners is best exemplified by Craig Chaudron et. al., (as cited in Long 2005)through a study conducted at University of Hawai' in Korea as a foreign language (KFL) program. The study which formed stage one of a three year pilot study for Task Based Language Teaching for Koreans started with unstructured interviews of stratified random sample of students enrolled in KFL classes and later included a survey of the entire population using a questionnaire. The study showed how students, thought to have no actual need for a language other than fulfilling a college language requirement, in actuality exhibited definite and varied, existing and upcoming communicative needs - needs which could not be sufficiently met through use of a one-size-fits-all course structure and set of instructional materials (p.9).

The introduction of a foreign language or English as a part of the curriculum at the elementary or secondary school levels in most countries unfortunately, is centered on what curriculum designers and educators think is best for students. In other words, "learners are not consulted as to whether they perceive a need for such knowledge. Their needs have been decided for them by those concerned with their long term welfare" (Richards, 2001:53).

To conclude, many educated Indians for whom English is more a first language, have expressed serious concerns about not much being done in most colleges and universities to improve communication ability of students. Any change in language teaching at the undergraduate level is possible only if the objectives and goals of second language teaching are practically understood through a needs analysis of second language learners' choices. The focus of second language classroom teaching would then shift from being unidirectional and teacher – oriented to being interactive and transactional in purpose. The emphasis then would be on the meaningful and

motivated use of language, where fluency is put over accuracy and interactive learning is encouraged as the way towards acquiring communication skills.

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