

Chapter 3 Needs Analysis

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the term “needs analysis” is defined, and the historical background to its emergence in language teaching is presented. Also, why needs analysis is conducted will be answered in section (3.2). In section (3.3), the approach to needs analysis followed in this study is defined, and the importance of the learners’ involvement in syllabus design is discussed. The last section (3.4) presents a summary of the important issues discussed in the previous sections.

3.2 Analysis of needs, Why?

Why needs analysis should be conducted can be best answered by simply stating ‘what needs analysis’ is. Berwick (1989:52) suggests a basic definition of need: a need is a “gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state.” Accordingly, the term “analysis of needs” was first used.

Needs analysis procedure in the field of language teaching was first used by Michael West in a survey report published in 1926 (White, 1988). In the following decades, however, little if any attention was given to needs analysis. This can be explained largely by the influence that the traditional structural view of the language continued to exert on the field of English language teaching (ELT), which resulted in the belief that the goal of second and foreign language learning was the mastery of these structurally related elements of language, i.e. phonological units, grammatical units, grammatical operations and lexical items (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 17). What language learners needed to acquire these structural elements, it was widely believed, was adequate knowledge of the language. The belief that all learners more or less acquired this knowledge in the same way argued against the concept of individual learner needs.

The term “need analysis” re-emerged during the 1970s as a result of intensive studies conducted by the Council of Europe team. The team was responsible for developing a new approach towards teaching the major European languages to European adults. Research and studies conducted by the Council of Europe team resulted in the emergence of the communicative approach to language learning which replaced the situational approach dominant in language teaching and learning at that time.

The Council of Europe team felt that successful language learning resulted not from mastering linguistic

elements, but from determining exactly what the learner needed to do with the target language. One of the terms, which the team came up with, was the “Common Core”. The common core suggests that language learners share certain interests despite their different goals in learning foreign languages. “The team recognised that there will be areas of interest common to all students, whatever their particular situation and specialisation” (Johnson, K 1982:42). The ‘common core’ provides a basis one can rely on in conducting needs analysis in the general English classroom (as in the case of Secondary schools in Saudi Arabia). It is argued that it is not possible to specify the needs of general English learners. So, needs analysis has been neglected in the general English classroom and emphasised in ESP as Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggested. However, this study attempts to show that it is possible to specify the learners’ needs in a general English learning context.

Nunan (1988) classified needs analysis under two headings: “objective” needs and “subjective” needs. He assigned objective needs to be diagnosed by the teacher on the basis of the personal data of the learners. In the light of this data, the teacher can select or plan a suitable syllabus. Subjective needs are derived from the learners themselves and influence the teaching methodology of the syllabus.

“Objective data is that factual information which does not require the attitudes and views of the learners to be taken into account. Thus, biographical information on age, nationality, home language, etc. is said to be ‘objective’. Subjective information, on the other hand, reflects the perceptions, goals, and priorities of the learner. It will include, among other things, information on why the learner has undertaken to learn a second language, and the classroom tasks and activities which the learner prefers.” (Nunan, 1988: 18)

“While objective needs analysis and content are commonly linked, as are subjective needs and methodology... it is, in fact, also possible to have a content/subject needs dimension (learners deciding what they want to learn) and a methodology/objective needs dimension (teachers deciding how content might best be learnt). The dimensions themselves are represented as a series of graduations rather than discrete categories.” (Nunan, 1988: 44)

3.3 Learners’ Expressed Needs

The aim of needs analysis regarding foreign language learning is to determine why a particular group of learners want to use the target language, through a number of procedures which provide analysts with the required data about the learners.

What Nunan (1988) pointed out is the main focus of this paper. It serves as the basis for more specific needs analysis which investigates possible gaps between what the learners want to learn and how the policy makers and professional advisors think they will best acquire this sort of knowledge.

Even if time and effort is taken to conduct a thorough needs analysis to determine objectives, an important issue may still remain. That is, “it is quite possible that the learners’ views (of what their aims and objectives are) will conflict with the perceptions of other interested parties: course designers, sponsors, and teachers.” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 56). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) use the term learner “wants” to describe these learner views. However, this paper uses the term “expressed needs” (a term constructed in group discussions during M.Ed syllabus design modules, Moon 1998), since, as Berwick (1989: 55) suggests, ‘mere’ wants are often devalued and possibly ignored by needs analysts.

Accordingly, Richards (1984) suggests a strategy to assure the fulfilment of learners’ needs. It consists of four steps:

- 1- Determine the needs of a particular group of learners for learning English
- 2- Develop objectives for a language course that will meet those needs
- 3- Select teaching and learning activities and experience that will enable these objectives to be realised
- 4- Evaluate the outcome.

Maley (1984) points out several factors that need to be considered in developing syllabuses. They are cultural, educational, organisational, learner, teacher and material factors. According to Maley (1984) these factors are roughly hierarchical, in the sense that cultural factors will influence the educational and organisational factors, which will in turn influence teacher and learner attitudes, and the way in which material provision is made.

From another dimension, Uvin (1996) provides an enlightening account of the possible consequences of ignoring learners’ expressed need for sociolinguistic competence (and possibly discourse competence) in a completely different social context. After designing and teaching an English course for Chinese health-care workers - based on an exhaustive needs analysis that he had performed - the shortcoming of not taking into account his learners’ views were quickly apparent. He discovered that “as many of the learners in the programs were recent arrivals [to the US], they had language needs that went well beyond the workplace and so demonstrated resistance, inconsistent attendance being the major one.” (*Ibid.* 43) Uvin realised that the course had been designed without students’ participation, as he had conducted his analysis prior to in class contact with the students. So, the content was too narrow and the teaching methods did not match students’ expectations and abilities; therefore, the attendance was low.

With regard to the Saudi Arabia context, the factors Maley (1984) suggested may integrate with each other to form four major factors that shape the syllabus design process which are: Authority expectations, Teachers, Course designers, and Learners.

In regard to the Authority expectations, which are represented in this study by the Ministry of Education, they may include factors such as the national curriculum policy, general objectives, and educational cultures. According to what the writers of the textbooks (EFSA) said earlier (Al-Qurashi et al., 1995) these factors were considered when designing the syllabus. Similarly, teachers needs and expectations as well as the course designers' factor were also fulfilled, as the writers claimed that the textbooks (EFSA) were a product of both the designers' extensive EFL experience, and the detailed needs assessment done by them.

On the other hand, the learner factor, which may be described as learner needs, was not addressed in their procedure. This neglect of learners' needs may result in learner dissatisfaction with the course.

In fact, Uvin's findings, discussed earlier, are worth noting here, as EFSA (the textbooks under study) seem to suffer the same experience. Similarly to Uvin, the writers of EFSA conducted needs assessments prior to the actual teaching of the course and they did not let the students get actively involved in identifying course objectives, content, methods and assessment tools. Accordingly, this study tries to build a need analysis procedure to identify the learners' needs and to investigate how far the textbooks, which were a result of needs assessment being conducted by the writers, meet the learners' expressed needs. The investigation is based on the assumption that learners are an essential factor that should be considered in the implementation of language programmes.

3.4 Conclusion

Needs analysis can be classified into two headings: "objective" needs which contain factual information about the learners such as age, nationality, and home language, and "subjective" needs which reflect the perceptions, goals and priorities of the learner. Several studies in the literature have discussed the importance of considering the learners as a factor in developing the syllabuses. Among these is the study of Uvin (1996) which shows the importance of the learners' involvement in the process of syllabus design. Therefore, this study tries to stress the significance of considering learners' needs and, hence, investigates how well the textbooks (EFSA) meet the students' needs. It does so by trying to identify their needs and to find out how they perceive their textbooks (EFSA).