Needs Analysis: The First Step of Curriculum Development in Language Pedagogy

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Abstract

In recent studies, one can see a fundamental change in language pedagogy from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches with an emphasis on the needs of the learners. Needs Analysis (NA) has become an important feature in the development of a curriculum for any English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course. The paper discusses different models of Needs Analysis and uses the elements in these models as a framework to discuss Needs Analysis Model in the Indian multilingual context.

Introduction

Coping with advances in curriculum development is a challenge because of globalization and technological advancement. The diversity in the foreign language classroom has increased along with increased attention to the role of the learners in acquiring another language. Analysis of the needs of learners is critical as teaching is becoming learner-centred rather than teacher-centred. In teacher-centered classrooms, decisions on teaching methods and materials were with the teachers. But in a learner-centered classroom, teachers play the role of facilitators, and students have the autonomy to decide what they need. The challenges in developing a Needs Analysis-based curriculum in English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses unfold the role of Needs Analysis.

Needs Analysis and Curriculum Development

According to Nunan (1988), Needs Analysis refers to the gathering of information about learner's needs and communication tasks for syllabus design. It is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning"(Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: P.19). In the Indian educational context, the emphasis on Needs Analysis came through a survey by Michael West in 1926 on the Bengali student's need for English (For more details, see Fatihi, 2003). Needs Analysis is an important part of curriculum development.

Curriculum development in language teaching began in the 1960s with the notion of Syllabus Design (Richards, 2001). Curriculum development is a comprehensive process, and syllabus design is a part of it. According to Richards (2001), curriculum development in language teaching comprises seven systematic stages; (a) needs analysis, (b) situational analysis, (c) planning learning outcomes, (d) course organization, (e) selecting and preparing teaching materials, (f) providing for effective teaching, and (g) evaluation. Dudley-Evans (1998) observes that four interrelated activities: needs analysis, syllabus design and material selection, teaching and learning, and evaluation are the key stages in ESP.

The design of the syllabus comprises the selection of the syllabus and preparing teaching materials. It considers the needs of a group of learners for developing the aims and objectives of a program (Richards, 2001). Needs Analysis is the first step in the development of a curriculum (Jordan, 1997). According to Fatihi (2003) Needs Analysis identifies and defines curriculum and instructional and management objectives to help learners learn by creating authentic learning environments.

Curriculum Development is a Challenging task in a Multilingual Country Like India

India is a land of diverse languages and cultures. Every state has a Regional language, an official language, and mother tongues. Given such diversity, designing a course for a group of learners is challenging. Regarding ESP, this situation becomes even more difficult because students come from heterogeneous backgrounds with varying

levels of English language competencies.

Besides, there are some drawbacks in the current curriculum which hinder curriculum development. Syllabus changes happen every five years, whereas batches of students of ESP pass out every year. In the five years, these students will miss out on the new techniques that are added to teaching methods. So, one has to revise the syllabus every year and the revision should be through a Needs Analysis. Another challenge is that English is not a mandatory paper at the school level; instead, it is additional and teachers teach English through the regional languages. Further, learner needs are not considered in designing the syllabus, resulting in teacher-centered classrooms. Competency assessment is also not a part of the curriculum hindering evaluation of learning. All these, together, pose a challenge for developing a curriculum that is based on an analysis of the needs of the learners.

Before talking of the components of the Needs Analysis-based curriculum in the Indian context, one needs to understand the models of curriculum development.

Curriculum Development Models

There are various models for curriculum development (Taba, 1962;Richterich and Chancerel,1977; Munby, 1978; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). All these models emphasize on needs analysis of the learners and place students at the forefront. Since teacher's awareness of learner's needs is essential, Taba (1962) points out the importance of involving teachers in curriculum development. Munby's model goes into more details about the processes. He suggests considering the communicative needs for

analyzing the needs of the learners, in which participant profile is the result. Munby's model has some drawbacks one of them is that the participant profile is not connected to the syllabus design.

Richterich and Chancerel (1977) make this connection by noting that teachers examine information about learners before the start and during the course. They propose a Present-Situation Analysis (PSA) that ascertains the learners' stage of language development. The drawback of this model is its over-reliance on learner's perception of their needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggest that instead of concentrating on language needs if courses are designed considering the learning needs, it will yield positive results. Target needs and learning needs are the key factors in this model because it facilitates learners to move from the starting point to the target goal.

The above models consider the learners and their role as central to learning because they are the experiencers/ beneficiaries. The role of the teacher is also an important one, as a teacher-facilitator implements the course. Besides these, the course aims and objectives, the syllabus, appropriate teaching methods, and evaluation are a necessary part of the processes. We try to apply some of these elements as a framework to talk of a Needs Analysis model for an ESP course in the Indian context.

# An Effective Needs Analysis Model in the Indian Context

In the Indian context before the development of a curriculum for an ESP course, analysis of the needs of learners should consider the following factors: the proficiency levels in English, the aspect

where they need help, the problematic skills, and the techniques to overcome these problems. Teachers play the role of a guide and a facilitator transacting the course. The components of the needs-based curriculum would include task-based activities; the proper practice of all the four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing, vocabulary building techniques, drilling of situational sentences, introducing technical terms, and language material based on selected approaches and revision of syllabus every year, creating a learner-centered classroom, using English as a medium of instruction, using competency assessment test and evaluation. This approach will enhance the outcome of an ESP course.

A visual representation of a model is given in Figure 1. The model takes a learner-centered approach and is based on needs analysis. In this model, the profile of the learners is a crucial factor for course designers because the social background of a learner affects learning a particular language. The profile includes who the learners are, in which environment they are going to use the English, with whom they will interact and the purpose of learning English. The next crucial component of the model is assessment.

Figure 1
Needs-based Model for Learner-centered Curriculum
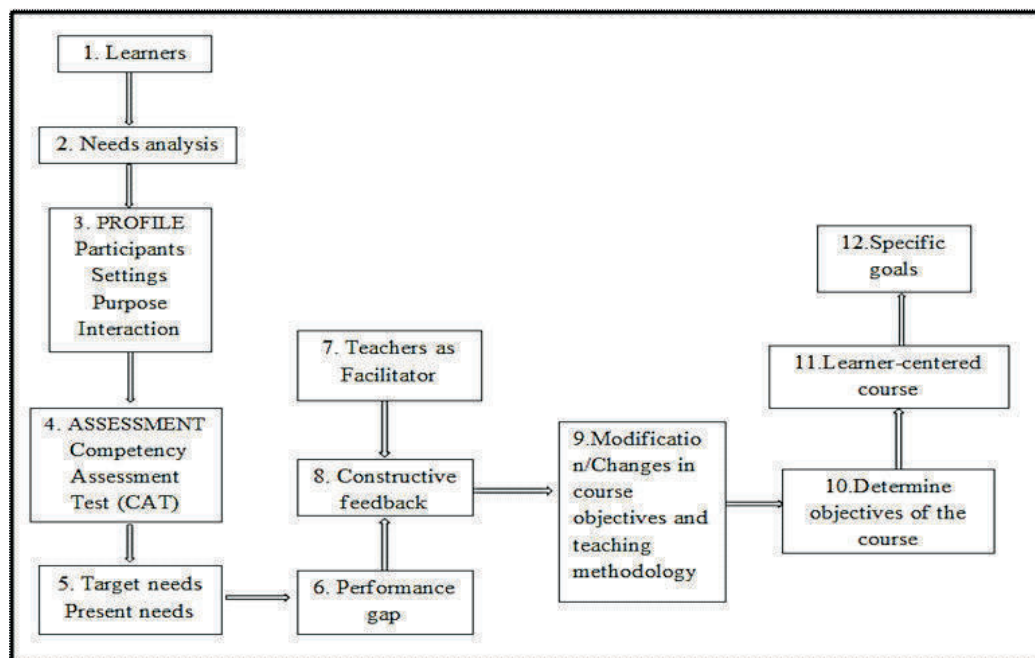
Before starting the English language programme, the Competency Assessment Test is used to assess the proficiency of learners and on that basis develop a proficiency questionnaire to include the target and present needs. The gap between the two is used to generate constructive feedback. The suggestions of teachers who are going to implement the program in the class also feed into the feedback. The learner's feedback, the teacher's feedback, and the performance

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gap together shape the framework of the needs-based curriculum. The framework helps to rework the curriculum, for example, reframe the objectives or change the teaching methods. Such a systematic approach to Needs Analysis and syllabus design is necessary for the Indian multilingual context, to enhance the effectiveness of the ESP course

Conclusions

The rationale for an approach that uses Needs Analysis in Curriculum Development is that it potentially provides a solution for the problems faced by most English language learners. The curriculum considers the socioeconomic backgrounds and covers the specific needs and wants of the learners. Therefore, for developing an effective curriculum it is critical to know why learners study English and under what circumstances will it be used. Needs Analysis focuses on the specific goals even as the approach curtails the adjunct goals. Therefore, in the Indian context, Needs Analysis is a solution for developing a learner-centered curriculum for an ESP classroom.

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