# WHAT EVERY EFL INSTRUCTOR NEEDS TO KNOW: EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF NEEDS ANALYSIS

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**Abstract**
One of the first issues that any foreign language teacher needs to take into consideration prior to commencing on their language course is the implementation of a comprehensive learner needs analysis (NA) also referred to as needs assessment. Garnering information on, among others, students' learning preferences, their previous learning experience or their goals is pivotal in order to design a course that would cater to students' different needs and meet their expectations. A one-size-fits-all approach is not in line with the reality of language teaching in the 21st century, hence the need for the introduction of NA during language classes.
The aim of the following article is to explore the area of needs analysis – examine its beginnings and further development; define its basic components and also investigate the different data-collection instruments language teachers have at their disposal. The article will also present the results of a pilot study exploring Polish teachers' perspectives on the introduction of needs analysis in the foreign language classroom.

**Keywords**: needs analysis, needs assessment, learner needs

## 1. Introduction

Looking back at teaching practices over the years one might conclude that language teaching was frequently based on teachers' intuitive assumption of what their learners needed in order to thrive and achieve linguistic proficiency (Wilkins 1976, Munby 1978, Tarone and Yule 1989, West 1994). Today we may observe an increasing number of teachers and educators who find such an approach at least dubious and could not conceive of embarking on their course without meticulously analyzing the needs of its participants. As Long points out, "language teaching using generic programs and materials, not designed with particular groups in mind, will be inefficient, at the very least, and in all probability, grossly inadequate" (2005: 1). The researcher goes on to stress how significant it is for teachers to be acquainted with the notion of NA and the different methods of implementing it in the classroom.

The term needs analysis was first introduced in the 1920s by Michael West who was then working on his experimental project in India (West 1926 in West 1994). He set out to investigate the concept of surrender value, which referred to the value that a student would receive from a course, even if they failed to complete it. It was then that West resolved to carry out a needs analysis survey among Bengali students. The results pointed to the dire need of teaching reading to students, even if that meant focusing less on teaching the spoken language (Howatt 1984). Promising as it was, for some time the idea of needs analysis paled into insignificance. It re-emerged much later – in the 1970s – with the advent of English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses that highlighted the role of learner needs in terms of course design (West 1994). However, despite the fact that instructors saw eye to eye on the significance of conducting a formal needs analysis, there was a conspicuous dearth of examples of how to implement it in a language setting, which hindered progress in this area.

Initially, the focus of needs analysis was English for Occupational purposes (EOP) (Richterich 1971, Stuart and Lee 1972). In course of time, however, more emphasis was placed on EAP (English for Academic Purposes) (Jordan and Mackay 1973, Mackay 1978). Later on, more prominence was given to general language learning (Allwright 1982, Holliday and Cooke 1982, Jones 1991, Nelson 1992, West 1994). When it comes to the scope of NA, initially is was limited to designing the syllabus on the basis of students' target situation needs. This area has also undergone certain changes, such as the inclusion of, among others, teaching methods, language learning strategies or the materials to be used during the course.

## 2. Defining the term

One of the most famous and pioneering works in the area of needs analysis is Communicative Syllabus Design by Munby (1978). The work meticulously explores different procedures that could help to identify target situation needs through questions about the most significant variables, for instance the setting, content, interlocutor, attitude, communicative needs, target communicative events or the proficiency level in different language skills. The author refers to this set of procedures as the Communication Needs Processor (CNP). Helpful as it was in the development of ESP, CNP was far from flawless, though. While, as Hutchinson and Waters note, CNP did help to create a list of linguistic features of the target situation,  "there is much more to needs than this" (1987: 54). There were also others who were less than enthusiastic about Munby's model. Davies (1981) was critical of the fact that the model was not based on any empirical research. Brindley (1984) perceived CNP as not sufficiently inclusive – the model excluded cognitive and affective learner characteristics (see Long 2015). There was also a commonly held belief that the proposed model was simply too complex (Coffey 1984) and difficult to apply in practice (Woodrow 2018).

Prior to defining the notion of needs analysis it seems reasonable to explain the term *needs*. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) distinguished *learning needs*, or in other words what the learner should do to learn; and *target needs*, that is what the learner should do in the target situation. In fact, the latter is a blanket term for numerous concepts. The first one is *necessities* which can be defined as "the type of need determined by the demands of the target situation – what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 55). Identifying necessities might, however, be insufficient. One should also carefully examine what the learner already knows in order to address the necessities that they lack. The two researchers add that "the target proficiency (…) needs to be matched against the existing proficiency of the learners. The gap between the two can be referred to the learners' *lacks*" (1987: 56). The third term that also merits attention is the one of *wants*. These, also referred to as subjective needs, are what the learner feels they need when learning the language. There is a risk, however, that students' idea of their needs may not be accurate – after all not every student is fully cognizant of the demands of the target situation (Woodraw 2018). Finally, one should mention *constraints* or *means analysis* (Holliday 1994), which pertain to resources, for instance staff, accommodation, materials, the time available, classroom facilities, etc. When discussing means analysis Long commented that "sensitivity to these factors can ultimately have a major positive impact on the way a program is implemented (…), and on the eventual likelihood of success. Thus, if a NA is worthwhile, a means analysis must also be" (2015: 115). As West (1994) observes, all of the factors mentioned above lacked due attention for a considerable amount of time. Luckily, they are now perceived as significant issues when it comes to course design.

Needs analysis can be defined as all the procedures applied with a view to gathering comprehensive information about learners' needs, whether these are necessities, constraints, lacks, etc. Woodrow refers to NA as "the systematic analysis of what learners need in order to operate in the target communicative situation" (2018: 54). When defining NA, English (2005) also focuses on the necessity to identify the gap between the current and the target situation. In their definition of needs analysis, Altschuld and Witkin address also other issues. They perceive the process of analysing learner needs as a "set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about programmes or organisational improvement and allocation of resources" (2000: 9). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe NA should focus on learners' target situation and their learning needs. The two researchers stress the fact that knowing about the learners' target situation is simply not enough. What also merits further attention is the way students learn the language. Hence, these two concepts should be taken into consideration when planning to implement NA.

## 3. Issues to consider

It goes without saying that needs analysis is an intricate process which cannot be limited to investigating one variable only, for instance students' target situation. In order to yield the most satisfying results, it is vital to design the whole procedure with great care. When planning the implementation of needs assessment one should therefore consider, among others, the methodology to be used, who the informants will be or when NA should take place. These issues will be addressed in the following sections of the article.

## 3.1. Time

Probably one of the most commonly held beliefs about the implementation of needs assessment is that it should be carried out at the beginning of the course. While this approach is not incorrect, literature suggests that NA be also introduced before the course starts, in its middle and at the end (see Hoadley-Madiment 1983, Hutchinson and Waters 1987, West 1994). Conducting analyses prior to the course can prove very helpful as it gives the instructor sufficient time to select the necessary materials and adapt the content to cater to learners' needs. On the other hand, at this stage of NA the teacher rarely has direct access to their students and is more likely to consult other stakeholders, for instance HR managers, sponsors, employers, parents, previous teachers, directors of studies, etc. Hence, there is a risk that the data obtained may not be fully accurate. What should be born in mind when opting for a pre-course needs analysis is that "analyses of this sort may frequently have to be reviewed as learners' perceptions evolve" (West 1994: 5).

When it comes to implementing needs analysis at the start of the course, there are greater chances of collecting reliable data as the instructor can address their learners directly and ask them what their expectations are. On the downside, some learners might struggle to identify their needs at this stage of the course and might require more time. Moreover, they might lack the language to answer the teachers' questions, especially, if these are lower-level groups. Some students might also have limited linguistic awareness and find the concept of needs hard to comprehend. Finally, the teacher has certainly less time to select or adjust the right materials that would meet students' needs.

The third possibility is conducting a NA during the course. The reason for such a decision is simple – circumstances change, students' needs evolve and might be slightly different than those declared at the start of the course. Also, new needs might emerge. Furthermore, students' perceptions and awareness might change as well – some learners need more time to realize that their learning priorities are not what they thought they were at the beginning of the course. What should be stressed is that needs assessment ought to be treated as an ongoing procedure (Woodraw 2018) and it "is not a once-for-all-activity. It should be a continuing process, in which the conclusions drawn are constantly checked and re-assessed" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 59).

Lastly, NA should also be conducted at the end of the course in the form of, for example, a final test evaluating students' progress over the year, which can

later on be complemented with a group discussion. This way students can assess whether they made any headway and see whether the course helped them to achieve their goals and develop their language proficiency. This could also prove helpful in terms of identifying goals, priorities and needs for the next school year.

### 3.2. Sources of needs analysis

It seems reasonable to put the learner as the central point of any needs analysis, after all it is the student who wants to master a foreign language. Additionally, listening to the learner gives them "a sense of ownership and responsibility which can be a motivating force" (Woodraw 2018: 59). However, there are too many teachers who decide to obtain information solely from their students assuming they will receive all the necessary data. Relying too heavily on students' responses might seem inadequate and, consequently, exert an impact on their headway. While, in most cases, students are able to specify their reasons for learning the target language, they sometimes fail at directly addressing their language needs due to limited linguistic awareness or insufficient resources. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to identify those needs and, as Long puts it, "complete the diagnosis" (2005: 20). The researcher even compares the process to a visit at the doctor's – the patient is expected to say what ails them, but it is ultimately up to the physician to choose the right treatment.

Another source of information that the teacher might fall back on is job descriptions. These can prove invaluable when identifying learner needs, especially since most of them contain a comprehensive list of job requirements. Gaining a better understanding of what the students' work-related duties are can help the teacher design their course more effectually and in a manner that meets their students' needs.

Consulting a domain expert could also prove highly informative. They can provide the instructor with vital information concerning the specifics of a given job, its everyday reality, work environment, etc. However, as many researchers and practitioners concede, making use of task as the unit of analysis can yield even better results. As Long puts it "task-based analyses reveal more than text-based analyses about the dynamic qualities of target discourse" (2005: 23). In other words, to have a fuller understanding of students' needs, the teacher should be made cognizant of the specific tasks that the learner will be expected to complete.

Finally, what needs to be stressed is that in order to garner reliable information it would be advisable to make use of triangulation, i.e. consulting and comparing two or more sources. Such a step, instead of relying on a single source, could offer a wider and more realistic view of what the learner will really need. Moreover, different sources "add breadth and depth to an analysis" (Long 2005: 63). One should also bear in mind that triangulation reduces the chances of error and increases data credibility (Cowling 2007).

### 3.3. Methods

When exploring the different ways in which information on learner needs is collected Berwick (1989) mentions two types of procedures: inductive and deductive. The former comprise, among others, unstructured, or open-ended interviews, participant and non-participant observations and expert and non-expert intuition. The latter, on the other hand, include structured interviews and questionnaires.

Interviews are probably one of the most direct and frequently employed tools to learn more about student needs. As opposed to structured interviews and questionnaires, unstructured interviews, help to gain greater insight into a plethora of issues of interest and, to quote Long, "have the advantage of not-pre-empting unanticipated findings by use of pre-determined questions, categories and response options" (2005: 36). On the other hand, the interviewer has limited control over the course of the interview whose direction hinges on the interviewee's responses, which could be perceived as a potential flaw.

Another information-gathering instrument that merits further mention is participant and non-participant observations. Time-consuming as they are, participant observations are more effective, though, as Long puts it, both of them "have the advantage of allowing direct, in-depth contextualized study of what participants actually do, of the activities of interest in their natural environment" (2005: 42). As far as expert and non-expert intuitions are concerned, this instrument is frequently dismissed as not fully reliable. The researcher provides multiple examples of textbooks that include unrealistic situations and contrived language.

Structured interviews are a natural continuation of unstructured interviews and are certainly worth implementing. In contrast to unstructured interviews, however, structured ones contain pre-determined questions and are therefore not only easier to deploy but also to analyze. Dörnyei (2007) emphasizes a significant advantage of structured interviews, namely the fact that they address a defined field, which makes it easier to compare the obtained data across the different respondents. Despite the numerous advantages resulting from this form of garnering information, it is far from flawless. The possible drawbacks include, among others, lack of flexibility in the light of fixed questions or limited spontaneity when it comes to interviewees' responses.

Questionnaires are also heavily relied upon when it comes to learning about student needs. They can be easily designed and distributed among large groups of respondents, especially with the help of online applications. Moreover, since the questions included can be fixed, questionnaires decrease the chances of interviewer bias. As for the downsides, there is always a risk of a poor turn-out rate. Additionally, the scope of responses obtained could be somewhat limited.

Another tool that teachers could implement are learner diaries. These could be administered throughout a longer period with a view to helping students monitor

their progress and be up to date with their goals. So as to generate relevant and valuable data, the teacher could provide their students with guidelines in the form of additional questions to limit the number of irrelevant entries and make sure students focus on the area in question (White et al. 2007, Pawlak 2009, Trendak-Suślik 2015).

In order to obtain more reliable and in-depth information about learner needs one should also consider triangulation. Numerous researchers stress how efficacious triangulation by sources and by methods can be in terms of collecting high quality data (Jasso-Aguilar 2005, Long 2005, Brown 2016, Woodraw 2018). What is more, when planning the implementation of different methods one should take into account sequencing, i.e. instruments that are more open in their form, such as unstructured interviews, should precede those that are more closed, for instance questionnaires.

## 4. The study

While the notion of needs analysis has been present in the literature for a few decades, the number of studies conducted in this area is far from impressive. The author wanted to contribute to the slowly growing body of research by conducting her own pilot study among Polish teachers of various foreign languages. The author chose this particular format of the study in order to assess the potential for a future, full-scale project and to identify any possible problem areas.

The aim of the following sections is to report on the findings obtained in the course of the conducted pilot study that included 25 subjects. The author of the project wanted to gain greater insight into Polish foreign language teachers' perspective on the use and effectiveness of conducting needs analysis in the foreign language classroom. The author also wanted to know, among others, whether needs analysis was deemed feasible in a formal setting.

### 4.1. The instrument

In order to garner the necessary data the author resolved to make use of an online questionnaire that comprised 20 questions. Since the questionnaire was addressed at Polish teachers of various foreign languages, it was administered in Polish. This decision was taken to avoid any misunderstanding. In the first part of the questionnaire the author wanted to learn more about issues such as the subjects' work experience, the language they taught, their degree and title. The second part of the questionnaire comprised thirteen questions whose aim was to investigate, among others, the subjects' knowledge about the concept of needs analysis, their experience with this notion and their willingness to implement it during their classes. The vast majority of the questions included were open-ended ones. At the very end of the questionnaire the teachers were provided with additional space

where they could share their thoughts and comments, which some of them made enthusiastic use of.

## 4.2. The subjects

The number of subjects participating in the pilot study amounted to 25 practitioners, with English teachers (18) constituting the majority. There were also six German teachers, two teachers who taught French, one that taught Spanish and one that taught Polish as a foreign language. Some teachers admitted they taught two or even three foreign languages.

As far as the duration of language teaching is concerned, the average amounted to 7 years. There were teachers who had only just embarked on their professional career and those who had been teaching for over 20 years. The subjects' average age was 35 years. With regard to the subjects' degree, 5 practitioners held a B.A. degree, 19 an M.A. and one a Ph.D. The study also showed that 12 teachers worked in private language schools, 8 in primary schools, 9 in high schools and 1 in a technical college. There were 4 subjects who admitted to working at a university and 1 at a private university. There were 3 respondents who described themselves as self-employed. A disconcerting, however not that surprising finding is that 20% of the subjects worked in 3 or even more institutions.

## 4.3. Results

The second part of the questionnaire included 13 questions. The first item pertained to the teachers' understanding of the notion of needs analysis. There respondents said that in their opinion investigating students' needs refers to identifying their expectations (10), their learning objectives (3), their linguistic competence (2), their strengths but also perceived weaknesses (2). One teacher noticed the universal aspect of the concept and remarked that needs analysis is "something that everyone needs, it is something that gives us motivation and a sense of direction in life".

In the second item, the subjects were asked whether conducting NA among foreign language students could benefit the teacher. Nearly all of the respondents (22) admitted that familiarizing themselves with their students' learning needs facilitated planning and running the course as they could adjust the materials to what their students needed and expected. Some teachers (3) also stressed the fact that implementing needs analysis made their work more effective as they knew what their students' strengths, weaknesses but also learning objectives were and this helped them to react accordingly.

In the third question the subjects were to mention how the students themselves could benefit from participating in the needs analysis process. Five of the subjects stated that NA helps the students identify and achieve their aims, which boosts motivation. Four teachers also pointed to the students becoming more cognizant

of their strengths, areas they still need to work on and of the whole learning process. Several teachers (9) mentioned becoming more self-reflective as one of the biggest advantages resulting from needs analysis. Two other respondents added that students who are asked about their needs, goals and expectations feel seen, heard and looked after, which exerts a profound impact on their work and attitude towards their classes.

Given all of the above mentioned advantages it seems somewhat surprising to learn that one third of the respondents never conducted needs analysis during their classes. When asked about their reasons, they mentioned the externally imposed curriculum (4) or course format (exam preparation) (3) lack of time (2), lack of sufficient knowledge (1) or the conviction that the teacher knows their students well enough and no additional analysis was necessary (1). The results reveal that some teachers, despite knowing what NA means, assume that it is unnecessary if there is a syllabus, which is a common misconception. Needs analysis addresses numerous areas, the course syllabus being only one them. What is more, it certainly does not mean that the teacher needs to change the program to suit their students' needs should they admit they are not satisfied with the material to be covered. This could be possible when running 1:1 courses, however, unfeasible when working in a public institution with more than twenty students in one class.

To the author's surprise, all of the subjects who admitted to never having conducted NA mentioned numerous ways in which NA could benefit the teacher and the student. The majority of these subjects were less experienced teachers who had taught for 1-5 years, which could explain why they did not conduct needs analysis. However, there were also three teachers who had taught for 16 years and yet refused to implement NA in their classes.

The next question addressed the effects of needs analysis among those who chose to implement it in their classes. All of the subjects noticed positive results, which is a very optimistic finding. The respondents said they could adjust the materials to meet their students' expectations, which resulted in higher motivation and a more positive atmosphere in class (13). Others (8) stated that thanks to NA they knew what to focus on more and also which areas needed less attention from the teacher. As reported by the subjects (9) needs analysis helped to save a considerable amount of time and address areas that require immediate attention, leaving behind those which the students feel comfortable with. The findings also revealed that 55% of the subjects conducted NA in their mother tongue while the remaining ones in the target language. Some of them justified their choice by saying that they had taught low-level groups, hence it would have been nearly impossible to use any other language as it would hinder understanding.

The subjects were also asked how often they analysed their students' needs during the school year. Most of them (9) said they only did so at the very beginning of the course, four of them twice and only two teachers explored their learners' needs three times during the school year. There were also two teachers who said

they tried to be up to date with their students' needs, which could mean talking to the students on a regular, though not clearly specified in the questionnaire, basis.

The next question pertained to the tools the teachers made use of in order to collect the necessary data. In the majority of cases (60%) it was a questionnaire and an interview (30%). There were also teachers who openly admitted to being oblivious to such tools and said they relied on their "common sense and a few questions prepared in advance". This particular item in the questionnaire should have been developed - the author should have asked about the specific questions the subjects included in their analysis to gain greater insight into the whole process. Very frequently teachers assume that asking their students about their goals and needs is enough to conduct an effective needs analysis. The reality, however, is that the whole process needs to be meticulously planned and carried out in a more comprehensive manner so that the teacher can garner as much relevant information as possible. Asking two or three questions is simply not enough in order to obtain high quality data.

The subjects were also asked to report on their students' reactions to the conducted NA. Three teachers said the students were indifferent, which might have resulted from the fact that they had engaged in similar activities in the past. The vast majority of the teachers (68%) said their students responded enthusiastically and even expressed their satisfaction with the fact that they were listened to. There were also students (4) who seemed somewhat surprised as it was their first encounter with needs analysis.

The author of the study also wanted to know how the subjects used the information they collected while conducting their NA. An overwhelming majority (95%) mentioned adjusting the materials to match their students' expectations. A high percentage of respondents (70%) pointed to modifying the syllabus, however no additional explanations were provided. Three teachers mentioned adapting their teaching methods. Two subjects said they tried to include topics that matched their students' hobbies and passions. The range of the actions taken is somewhat disappointing and might suggest that teachers are not fully cognizant of the numerous options they have at their disposal – material/syllabus adjustment being only some of them.

Another issue addressed in the questionnaire referred to the course syllabus. The subjects were asked whether the externally imposed syllabus allowed them to conduct NA among their students. There were 13 subjects who said it was possible, 8 found it hard to answer the question and 4 who said the syllabus makes it virtually impossible to squeeze in any additional activities. This is an optimistic finding, however, the number of subjects participating in the pilot study makes the results far from conclusive.

In the penultimate question the author wanted to know whether, in the subjects' opinion, NA should constitute an indispensable component of a language course. 92% of the respondents answered affirmatively, others said it is hard to provide an answer. This finding is surprising, because it reveals that teachers who admitted

to never having conducted NA still perceive it as necessary. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate the reasons behind their reluctance to conduct NA.

Finally, in the last question the subjects were asked about their willingness to broaden their knowledge about NA by, for instance, attending webinars, conferences, joining online courses. Only two respondents showed their lack of interest in this area. Others answered affirmatively, saying that NA is growing in popularity and even becoming a trend in foreign language teaching.

At the end of the questionnaire, the subjects were provided with extra space to share their thoughts concerning needs analysis. A few of them stressed the importance of investigating students' needs, learning goals and expectations. They also mentioned the obstacles language teachers are faced with – large groups, the syllabus or less self-aware students who struggle when asked about their goals or expectations.  Despite these hindrances, they still perceived NA as a significant element of language classes.

## 4.4. Limitations

Helpful as it was, the questionnaire contained several flaws. To start with, the number of participants was relatively low, which made it impossible to draw final conclusions. Additionally, the author could have included more questions in order to collect more detailed data that could help to explore the notion of needs analysis. Areas that could have been addressed in greater detail include the following: describing the process of conducting NA, discussing the tools used in NA or the reasons behind the subjects' unwillingness to engage in NA. Despite all of the issues mentioned, the pilot study constitutes a good starting point and might serve as a reference for future more in-depth studies into the notion of needs analysis in the foreign language classroom. It also helped the author gain insight into foreign language teachers' perspectives on NA and its implementation in a formal setting.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings of the pilot study suggest that Polish foreign language teachers see eye to eye on the beneficial role of conducting needs analysis – they notice its potential and the profound impact it exerts on the student and the teacher as well. There are however a few practitioners, as the study reveals, who perpetuate the myth that needs analysis is unfeasible due to the clearly defined format of the classes (exam preparation), the externally imposed syllabus or the teacher knowing best what their students need. What seems to be of vital importance is raising teachers' awareness of what NA really entails and the steps that need to be taken in order to successfully investigate learner needs and expectations.

What is more, many teachers still seem to believe that a few questions about students' goals, strengths and weaknesses are tantamount to an effective needs

analysis. It goes without saying that conducting more in-depth studies into this area would help to draw more conclusive results, yet it is certainly a step in the right direction.

Furthermore, the process of language teaching can no longer be based on an intuitive analysis of students' expectations (West 1994). Students' learning needs should be carefully explored and acted upon. There is therefore no denying the fact that needs analysis should be perceived as a crucial component of language course design. Factors such as the constantly increasing "diversity of students, the importance and urgency of satisfying their equally diverse, often highly specialized, communicative needs, and the increasing value placed on course relevance" (Long 2015: 115) all justify the need of implementing NA into the language course at a very early stage. In addition, if carried out correctly needs assessment can, among others, significantly reduce student attrition rate, boost student motivation, build mutual understanding and rapport between the instructor and the student, all of which can lead to enhanced student achievement. While, as some concede, needs analysis does require additional work and extra preparation on the teachers' part, making it a time-consuming undertaking, it is certainly worth the effort as the long-term benefits mentioned above outweigh the potential short-term drawbacks.

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