NEEDS ANALYSIS AND THE `GENERAL ENGLISH' CLASSROOM.

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ABSTRACT

Although learners' needs are theoretically of prime importance to current learner-centred approaches, needs analysis is rarely carried out in the General English classroom. It is argued that this is partly because of an erroneous belief that it is not possible to specify the needs of General English learners and partly because of a lack of literature on the practicalities of analysing needs data in the context of General English.

An example of the analysis of psychological and social needs in one particular General English classroom is worked through in detail. The purpose of this is (a) to show that it is possible to specify General English needs even in the abstract area of psychosocial needs (b) to demonstrate that needs analysis can be useful in the General English classroom with respect to problem-solving and as a basis for designing aims, courses and materials (c) to provide a

concrete illustration of how analysis of data can be performed and how a tight and direct link can be maintained between needs, aims, materials and what actually occurs in the classroom.

Introduction

Needs analysis tends to be associated with ESP and neglected in the `General English' classroom. Hutchinson and Waters (1987 pp 53-4) say that "What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need .... for the time being, the tradition persists in General English that learners' needs can't be specified and as a result no attempt is usually made to discover learners' true needs."

One might expect to find an increased interest in the analysis of learners' needs at the heart of current learner-centred and communicative approaches, and indeed there have been several general acknowledgements of the place of needs analysis in curriculum design, for example Richards (1990 p2): "Needs analysis is also fundamental to the planning of general English courses." However, nitty-gritty close analysis has been noticeably absent: there have been no articles on needs analysis in either the ELT Journal or Applied Linguistics for the last 5 years.

The problem for the General English teacher who is interested in needs analysis appears to be this: there are some excellent guides to the theory of needs analysis (Berwick 1989, Brindley 1989) as well as Munby's exhaustive lists and taxonomies of communicative needs (Munby 1978). But the crux of the matter is how one interprets the data collected and what one does with it. When you receive a pile of questionnaires back, how do you convert them in practical terms into

courses or materials? "Interpretation is probably the most practical problem any needs assessment manager is going to encounter..." (Berwick 1989 p59). At this point the General English teacher appears to be currently on his/her own, without any guide to how to go about it.

An example of needs analysis in the General English Classroom

The rest of this article gives an example of how needs data was, in one situation, collected, interpreted and translated into materials design. The procedure is not intended as a guide or a model: there are many possible types of needs analysis (outlined in Berwick 1989). Rather, it is hoped that the example will provide the reader with a basis for judging whether it is in fact possible to specify learners' needs in the General English classroom and whether it is potentially a useful exercise or not.

In this case the needs analysis was carried out because the learners did not appear to be validating or engaging with the main coursebook which was being used. It must be stressed that this was a particular type of needs analysis suited to a particular situation: the emphasis was on discovering motivation and psychological and social needs rather than on making lists of individual communicative needs or linguistic items.

Needs Analysis Data

The learners (3 classes of young learners in Barcelona) completed a needs analysis questionnaire: the results are summarised below.

QUESTIONNAIRE : RESULTS

This questionnaire was completed by 29 of my students in November 1991. Students were asked to answer yes or no and indicate very important items with a star. The original questionnaire is shown with the total results written into each column.

Purposes and Reasons

Why are you learning English?

	Yes	No	Star
So I get better marks at school	14	15	1
So I can pass an examination in English	20	9	4
So I can travel to other countries	29	0	18
So I can speak to foreign people	29	0	12
So I can get a better job when I leave school	27	2	16
So I can learn about Britain	7	22	1
So I can understand pop songs in English	18	11	1
So I can understand films or TV in English	23	6	

So I can understand books in English
26 3

Because my parents want me to learn English
13 16

Because I enjoy learning English
18 11 2

Because my friends go to Instituto Britanico
0 29

Because English is an important world language
29 0 15

I don't know why I'm learning English
2 27

Ways of Learning

How do you like to learn?

	Yes	No	Star
Grammar	10	16	1
Conversation	26	3	11
Video	28	1	16
Computer	25	4	15
Listening from Cassette	18	10	2
Writing	19	8	1
Reading	23	6	6
Learning vocabulary	15	12	1
Homework	4	23	
Working alone	6	21	
Pair work	23	4	
Group work	28	1	4
Whole class work	22	5	2

Problems

Which areas of English are the biggest problem for you? The lower the number the bigger the problem.

How to pronounce English words
└124

Speaking
└130

Listening (understanding English people)
└130

Reading
└173

Writing
└132

Learning new words (vocabulary)
└135

Spelling
└140

Grammar
└70

Discussion of the Data

"Need is apparently indicated by high-frequency, overlapping responses to choices available on the questionnaire." (Berwick 1989 p60)

The results were strikingly homogenous, even though the learners filled in the questionnaires individually and without discussion. This suggests that the group members had similar needs, and that even at their age (14-18) the learners were definitely aware of having specific needs and were able to identify them.

There is surprising unanimity concerning the prime motivations: `So I can travel to other countries', `so I can speak to foreign people', `because English is an important world language' and `so I can get a better job when I leave school.' Video, computer and con-

versation are the favoured methods of working, with group work the preferred dynamic. This seems to suggest that the students strongly disfavour traditional learning activities (in contrast to Nunan's 1988 (p90) findings with adult learners) and want to move the focus away from teacher-fronted activities. It also suggests that they are interested in being entertained. Grammar is perceived to be by far the biggest problem, and reading by far the smallest problem, with no significant findings in the other areas.

Interpretation of the Data

The data suggests that the primary sources of motivation are psychological and social. The obvious way to cater for their learning purposes is to send them to a summer language school abroad; many students have already done this. However, the problem remained how to cater for the stated psychosocial needs in a Barcelona classroom. The questionnaire shows they are not particularly interested in learning about Britain, so we have to assume that their motivation is that they want to travel and experience things themselves. They are of course speaking to a foreign person (myself) every lesson, but they are certainly thinking of interacting with foreigners of their own age. The impression from their answers is that there is a strong psychosocial dimension to be catered for here. They want to see themselves as the sophisticated, internationally - mobile Europeans of the future, and ability in English forms a vital

part of this. Furthermore, they see English as being the language of youth culture.

The Concept of the Target Speech Community

When attempting to cater for psychosocial needs it can be very useful to try to define the learners' target speech community, so that one can visualize what is being aimed at. The target speech community is the social grouping which the learners are aspiring to become a member of. In the case of this group of learners their target speech community can be defined as follows:

The Barcelona young learner and the Western teenager making contact and socialising with one another under the norms of international youth culture. Barcelona young learner's purpose: to establish social contact, to gain access to the worlds of international travel, youth culture and entertainment, and to have fun.

Using the target speech community as defined above, the coursebook was examined see why they were not engaging with it. The reasons then became clear: although the coursebook is excellent in many ways, it does not include any action in the target speech community of these learners. It does not include any work on travelling abroad, meeting foreigners or English as a world language, and it is written for mature adults.

Development of a Main Aim

Now that the data has been interpreted and the needs more clearly defined, it is possible to develop a main aim. The prime aim will be to cater for the psychosocial needs stated and to enable the learners to move closer (in psychological and social terms) to their target speech community. We now need to consider what the practical options are for delivery of this aim.

Catering for the Main Aim

Since changing the main course book was not an option in this particular situation, it was decided to produce materials to cater for the stated main aim which could supplement the main course.

If we select 2 out of the 4 prime motivations: `So I can travel to other countries, so I can speak to foreign people,', a course of action begins to suggest itself. It may be possible to simulate a trip abroad including conversations with foreigners. This would correspond closely to the outlined target speech community.

This brings us on to the preferred methods of learning (computer,video, conversation,group work), which seem to fit fairly neatly together and suggest a methodological direction. CALL programs and video based tasks can be designed to stimulate conversation amongst group members: "Computer simulations can provide a motivating stimulus for free oral work, as they offer both a focus for oral activity and a continually changing scenario for learners to talk

about." (Jones & Fortescue 1987 p63).

Ideally, in this situation, interactive video (which combines video images with computer technology) could be used. However, there was no interactive video equipment available. It was therefore decided to concentrate on producing a simple computer program for BBC computers, for which equipment was at hand.

So the materials which were written were a computer reading maze which simulates a trip abroad which includes conversations with foreigners. It is a reading maze in that the learner makes choices which may send him/her back to a previous page or take him/her towards the way out of the maze. It is a simulation in thatt the learner has to imagine that he/she is taking part in the story on screen and is `spoken' to by the computer. What actually happens when learners use the software is as follows: the learner reads page 1 on the screen (arrive at the airport) and is given choices as to what to do next (get a taxi, go to the information desk, accept a lift from a stranger). Depending on which choice is keyed in, the story unfolds in different ways ie page 4 or 6 or 7 appears on screen next. Each page offers a choice of what to do next.

The main aim is to facilitate the learners' integration into their target speech community, which includes: making contact and socialising with other teenagers under the norms of international youth culture, gaining access to the worlds of international travel, youth culture and entertainment, and having fun.

The computer program does this by including action in these

areas in the story. The protagonist has two social / romantic encounters with teenagers of the opposite sex in which both parties exchange personal details. The world of international travel is encountered in difficulties in getting accommodation, problems with changing money and with taxi drivers. The world of youth culture and entertainment is introduced by an episode in a pub - one of the most common forms of entertainment for young foreigners in Britain. An element of fun and adventure is added in the various twists to the storyline: you can end up a film star, a victim of robbery, a hero on the front page of newpapers, get married, or you can have a quiet holiday and go home.

Authenticity

At this point one might object that this `simulation' of a trip abroad is hopelessly `inauthentic' and far from reality: there aren't even any pictures. However, the key issue underlying the materials design here is `learner authenticity':

"Another important type of authenticity (perhaps the most important of all) is what might be called `learner authenticity'. By this is meant the realisation and acceptance by the learner of the authenticity of a given text, task, set of materials or learning activity.

For learners to authenticate materials, these need, minimally, to

fulfil two conditions. In the first place, they need to be recognised by learners as having a legitimate place in the language classroom. Secondly, they must engage the interests of the learner by relating to his interests, background knowledge and experience, and, through these, stimulate genuine communication." (Nunan 1988 p102).

The materials are aiming to achieve strong learner authenticity precisely because they are based on the classroom activities which have the highest approval ratings and because they engage their prime motivations.

Subsidiary Objectives

We are now in a position to derive subsidiary objectives from this prime aim. Those which branch directly from the main aims are: to develop conversation skills and survival skills for travelling abroad. To develop an extended lexical set relating to travel abroad.

These subsidiary objectives were dealt with by being written into the story line rather than being self-conscious `exercises'. Conversation skills are intended to be developed by interaction between group members. However, there is simulation of conversation during the two social / romantic encounters with persons of the opposite sex. The imaginary conversation partner asks a question eg "Where are you from?" by printing the message on the screen and simultaneously `speaking' it using the speech synthesis software. The

learner is prompted to type in an answer and to ask questions to his/her imaginary conversation partner, and so the `conversation' progresses. The main purpose of these exchanges is to introduce some of the most common exchanges which take place when making contact and socialising with other teenagers under the norms of international youth culture. As can be seen from the evaluation video made of the software being used in class, the learners found these simulated conversations quite fascinating. No great claims could be made for this as a language learning exercise, but the impression from the video was that it was particularly successful in catering for the main psychosocial need and therefore furthered the main aim of the whole task considerably. Having a `conversation' in English by means of a computer coincides very precisely with their self-image as the `sophisticated, internationally- mobile Europeans of the future'.

The story catered for the objective of survival skills by including useful information on travelling, changing money, potential dangers, taxi drivers, emergency phone numbers etc.

To fulfil the objective of acquiring a lexical set related to travel each group of learners was equipped with a set of vocabulary sheets and a bilingual dictionary.

Evaluation

Since this was primarily a consciousness-raising exercise

rather than one involved in teaching verifiable linguistic items, the primary method of evaluation had to be that of asking the learners themselves what they felt the task had achieved. It is of course very difficult to assess whether psychosocial needs have been catered for, because we cannot see into learners' minds. A simple questionnaire was designed. The materials were trialled and evaluated with all 3 target classes. It was felt that the materials would be successful if the main aim was fulfilled ie if the learners had drawn closer to their target speech community, and the psychosocial needs were catered for. All students answered that they had learned either a little or a lot about travel abroad and speaking to foreigners, so the aim seems to have been fulfilled to some extent. They were also asked in the post--task questionnaire what they thought the reasons were for doing the task. `To learn about travel abroad and speaking to foreigners' was by far the most popular answer. A video was also made for evaluation purposes of the learners using the software, and this showed that the learners engaged with the task with enthusiasm and learner authenticity was achieved. The evaluation therefore established a direct link between their needs and motivations as identified in the needs analysis, the aims, the materials and what actually happened in the classroom.

Conclusion

The purpose of working through a single isolated example of needs analysis was to establish its potential for application to the General English classroom. Although it is not possible to generalise from this example, the following conclusions may be reached:

1) In the case of that particular class, the questionnaire results suggested that the learners (although young) had a very clear idea of their own needs and wants. Even in the rather nebulous area of psychosocial needs it proved possible to specify and define them.

2) The needs analysis was carried out in order to solve a particular problem, and it proved successful in identifying the source of the problem.

3) The needs analysis data actually suggested a direction for materials design to tackle the problem.

4) Course design and materials design can be based directly on needs analysis in the General English classroom. Needs analysis may be the preferred basis for design because of the concept of learner authenticity, and because a direct link can be drawn from needs to aims to course design to classroom implementation and evaluation. Given current interest in psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, examination of psychosocial needs may be a rewarding area to pursue, and the concept of the target speech community can be especially helpful in con-

verting psychosocial needs into practical aims and course design.

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