

# A “Process-oriented” View of Needs Analysis Procedures towards Enhancing the Humanistic Approach to EFL Learning

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## 1. Introduction

Needs Analysis (NA) is a distinct and necessary phase in planning educational programmes and curriculum development. It is used to collect information about learners’ needs focusing on the study of learners’ perceived and present needs as well as their potential and unrecognized needs. NA first emerged in language teaching in the 1960s and was closely associated with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Brindley, 1984) while in language planning, as Nunan (1988:43) reports, NA procedures made their appearance during the 1970s.

NA’s main concern is the *specification of learners’ language needs* before and during curriculum/course implementation (Fatihi, 2003; Seedhouse, 1995; Watanabe, 2006). The term *needs* is sometimes used to refer to wants, desires, demands, expectations, motivation, lacks, constraints and requirements (Brindley, 1984:28) or to the language skills needed and language forms learners will more likely need to use in the target language to communicate effectively in a foreign language context. Other approaches to the term define *needs* as **a. what** learners need to learn, **b. how** they feel about learning, **c. how much effort** they are likely to invest or **d. how much ability** they possess for the process of learning (Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004).

In English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, NA procedures follow either a ‘product-oriented’ approach to EFL teaching/learning which explores objective needs or a ‘process-oriented’ view which investigates learners’ humanistic needs, the so-called subjective needs, including learners’ motivation, personal learning preferences/styles and language needs/wants.

More specifically, in foreign language learning (FLL), needs are generally categorized into *objective needs* (what the learner needs to do with the language) and *subjective needs* related to the process of learning, that is, what the learner needs to do in order to effectively acquire the foreign language (Cunningsworth, 1983; Fatihi, 2003). Both are important for the effective design and implementation of a foreign language curriculum/course (Davies, 2006; Seedhouse, 1995) and there is a consensus that the first step

in curriculum development is a fact-finding phase leading to the assessment of learners' needs. Setting aims and objectives relevant to these needs is the next one. Other decision-making processes such as selecting, grading and organizing content and materials or classroom implementation also relate to learners' needs through needs survey, analysis, assessment.

## **2. The 'Process-oriented' view of Needs Analysis**

### **2.1. Literature review and rationale**

The process-oriented view of NA interprets needs in a broader perspective and has been recognized as more conducive to learning. This is because it deals with the 'how' of learning (process) and tries to discuss the influence of factors, such as individual differences, which are likely to have a serious impact on effective learning. In this framework, Ls' subjective needs, or the so-called *humanistic-psychological*, emerge as very important and worth investigating before, but mainly during the implementation of the curriculum.

According to the process-oriented NA, teachers should find means to match the curriculum to the actual needs of their learners and plan lessons that allow for effective and meaningful instruction. How to choose appropriate goals and objectives is also influenced and should be defined by learners' needs (Graves, 1996). The Council of Europe (2001:7) clearly states that coherence in FLL requires that there is a harmonious relation among its components: the identification of needs, the determination of objectives, the selection and creation of materials, the teaching/learning methods employed, evaluation, testing and assessment. Also, any description of proficiency levels has to be meaningful and related to learners' needs in a way appropriate to their age and interests.

In a similar vein, Holec (1979) maintains that the learner must have the ability to take charge of his learning. 'Learning how to learn' has acquired an increasing attention during the last decades and the focus of EFL learning has moved beyond the narrow goal of mastering a body of knowledge and has concentrated on the learner in terms of the 'process' of acquiring this knowledge.

Richards (2001) also points to the fact that successful teaching requires the consideration of learner factors such as knowledge, views of learning, learning styles and motivation. Thus, evaluating and adapting or supplementing existing materials to suit the needs of the learners in a particular teaching

situation is of paramount importance (McDonough and Shaw, 1993) in order to help learners maximize their learning potential.

## **2.2. Towards a humanistic approach to EFL learning**

The Information Processing Model in the 1970s attempted to look at the ‘how’ of learning as opposed to ‘what’ of behaviourism which had flourished in an earlier period. In this way, main representatives and psychologists in the humanistic tradition are concerned with the worth of freedom for personal expression, development and growth. Humanists give primacy to the study of human needs and interests. The advocates of humanism (Maslow & Rogers) place emphasis on the inner world of learners and place the individuals’ thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human development. The study of motivation and self are also areas of special interest to humanists (anthropocentric/human-centered orientation as defined by Aristotle and Socrates) for effective education.

Learners are independent people who can decide for themselves with a critical mind and thought how to learn, what to learn, choosing from what we offer them. The process-oriented NA acknowledges the important role of learners’ personal needs, preferences and motives among other things and engages the instructor and student in an active dialogue as the teacher is to translate or interpret information obtained by the NA findings. It adheres to the main humanistic principle that ‘learners will learn best what they want and need to know’. Thus feelings and attitudes are as important as facts and in this way intrinsic motives for learning can be emphasized.

Furthermore, the role of the affective domain (humanistic emphasis) is essentially recognized as process-oriented NA is seen to cover of learners’ attitudes, their motivations, their interests and ego-involvement (Stern, 1992). In this regard, O’ Brien (1998) points out the implication that teachers must try to create opportunities for learners to enjoy their experience while at school by assessing the suitability of the textbook for a particular group of learners, by ensuring quality of teaching and learning, and coherence within the curriculum.

Last but not least, process-oriented NA leads to a ‘process model’ of curriculum development as well. This impact has led to school curricula in which learners are seen at the center of the educational process being assisted towards self-development and encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning by using awareness and self-awareness techniques regarding their own strategies of learning.

### **2.3. Why to conduct a ‘process-oriented’ NA?**

Learners’ beliefs about language learning are crucial because there may often be a conflict between teachers and learners as to what language learning and language teaching is. For example, recent research on the field has revealed a mismatch where it was found that learners favour a skills syllabus while teachers tend to follow a structural syllabus. Learning styles and motivation are also important factors which contribute to effective FL learning as well as strategies which interfere with the processing of the input to be learnt.

Seedhouse (1995) maintains that in a general English classroom (e.g. the Greek state-school context) teachers need to investigate such factors. Teachers should be able to measure, assess and cope with their learners’ individual needs, differences, learning styles, motivation and study their effect on learning. The aim is for teachers to become able to make their own decisions which will be guided by the needs of their learners. In other words, teachers need to become aware of their learners’ needs in order to consciously make choices on keeping, adapting or revising curricula. On the basis of understanding their learners’ needs they can select appropriate methods and materials and develop professionally as well.

Therefore, what is needed is a deep knowledge and understanding of the role of learners’ needs because there are factors which affect how people learn or may hinder their efforts. The ‘process-oriented’ approach to NA aims to assist teachers to make the maximum use of their learners’ potentialities by a. standing critically against the curriculum they are supposed to implement, b. creating coherent courses based on their learners’ needs, c. feeling more professional. Professional development is promoted because through a ‘process-oriented’ view of NA teachers can reflect upon their own methods to make informed decisions.

### **2.4. How to conduct a ‘process-oriented’ NA?**

Various techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, case studies, authentic data collection, tests and consultation of qualified informants (Tudor, 1996) can be used to conduct such a NA procedure. The teacher/educator is only one of a long list of stakeholders interested in NA and is usually involved in small-scale NA of their class of learners to explore their needs. The NA questionnaire is recommended as the most practical research tool to collect information since it can be both cost- and time-effective to

design and easy to be filled by learners in any teaching situation especially if simple wording is used.

More specifically, a ‘process-oriented’ NA questionnaire focuses on the ‘how’ of learning and tries to investigate factors which may have a great impact on effective learning such as learners’ realization of their own needs, desires, preferences, problems and strategies (Fatihi, 2003). Hence, there is a shift from a *product-oriented* questionnaire which explores *objective needs* related to target language behaviour/communicative needs using lists of questions with the linguistic forms required to realize the language functions at the grammatical-rhetorical level, to a *process-oriented* questionnaire which seeks to answer questions investigating learners’ *humanistic* or *subjective needs* (e.g. personal motivation/ preferences/desires/needs/problems-Seedhouse, 1995) essentially related to the whole process of learning. In this regard, a ‘process-oriented’ NA survey could be designed, developed and administered based on three main research questions:

- a. *What are learners’ attitudes towards English language learning?*
- b. *What are learners’ language needs and wants?*
- c. *What are learners’ learning preferences/style?*

The above three research questions could serve as the main sections of a ‘process-oriented’ NA questionnaire that should be specified further by constructing relevant groups or subsections of questions. For example, the first section could be entitled ‘*Learners’ attitudes towards EFL learning*’ to ask learners questions about their beliefs and motives for learning English admitting the fact that learners bring to the learning situation different beliefs and attitudes about the nature of language and language learning which need to be taken into consideration in the selection of content and learning experiences because they may reveal a mismatch or discrepancy between what learners aim to do with English and what the teacher or curriculum want them to attain. Moreover, learners’ answers may reveal their *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation (Dörnyei, 1998) to learn English. In practice, extrinsic motivation (for reasons externally administered, as ‘rewards’) may inhibit learning in the long run and, therefore, should be minimized by fostering learners’ intrinsic motivation (learning English for its own sake) as it can have far greater learning benefits both in the short and long run (Dörnyei, 1998).

Similarly, the second section ‘*Learners’ language needs/wants*’ could investigate a. learners’ favourite language skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing) and b. their difficulties/problems or any need for further practice in certain language areas (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation). The third section entitled ‘*Learning preferences/styles*’ could comprise sub-

sections to investigate children's: a. ways of learning (preferred language activities/tasks and modes of work), b. learning strategies regarding vocabulary and grammar (translation, oral/written practice) and c. favourite topics. An individual's learning style refers to his or her preferred ways of learning and can be seen as a cluster of preferred learning strategies (O'Brien 1998) which are defined as the specific actions (cognitive, memory, social, affective, metacognitive) taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, the type of learning style learners may have or their aptitude, motivational orientation and use of strategies all constitute learners' subjective needs to be explored since they interfere with the processing of the input to be learnt.

### 3. Conclusion

'Knowing our learners' is crucial and necessary in making informed decisions on the teaching methodology and materials to use in order to achieve the best learning outcomes and motivate learners to be active participants in the EFL classroom and outside it as well. Both the syllabus should be appropriately designed and the teacher must be flexible and take initiatives during the teaching/learning process taking into consideration learners' actual needs and learning preferences/styles. To this end, the role of 'process-oriented' NA procedures is by far fundamental as they may give rise to useful implications for curriculum development, course and materials design promoting a *humanistic* approach to EFL learning (Seedhouse, 1995; Spratt, 1999; Young, 2000) by which curriculum implementation is seen as a collaborative effort between teachers and learners who are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding its content and how it is taught (Nunan, 1988). Data deriving from a such NA procedures need to be interpreted in a way that is pertinent to their focus, that is the research questions about learners' EFL needs, learning styles and strategies in order to 'explore' how consistent or compatible the findings are with the current teaching situation (Seedhouse, 1995).

To conclude, if our efforts in reforming education for all learners are to succeed, then we must focus on learners and the 'how' of learning, that is on human-centered learning by adopting a humanistic/anthropocentric point of view. As a result, the 'process' model in education can help promote the human development and calls for considerable professional competence and confidence on the part of teachers by triggering their professional development.

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**Abstract**

Most current methods in EFL learning follow a ‘process-oriented’ view of Needs Analysis (NA) procedures because it offers learners the opportunity to gradually come to understand their needs and express them in a pedagogically useful manner through ‘self-discovery’. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the ‘how’ of learning and its humanistic orientation in EFL learning. It discusses how the ‘process-oriented’ view of NA may feed into meaningful and effective decision-making for a General English classroom, the role of the affective domain and the influence of factors, such as individual differences, which are likely to have a serious impact on effective learning.

**Key-words:** needs analysis, process model, subjective needs, humanistic /anthropocentric approach, decision-making

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