

Needs analysis and the General English classroom

Paul Seedhouse

Although learners' needs are theoretically of prime importance in 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 to show that it is possible to specify General English needs, even in the abstract area of psychosocial needs; 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; and 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, and materials, and what actually occurs in the classroom.

Introduction Needs analysis tends to be associated with ESP, and is neglected in the General English classroom. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:53-4) 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 in Richards (1990:2): 'Needs analysis is also fundamental to the planning of General English courses.' However, close analysis has been noticeably absent: during the past five years, for instance, there have been no articles on needs analysis in either *ELT Journal* or *Applied Linguistics*.

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? As Berwick (1989:59) observes: 'Interpretation is probably the most practical problem any needs assessment manager is going to encounter . . .'. At this point the General English teacher currently appears to be on his or her own, without any guidance on how to go about it.

***Needs analysis in
the General
English
classroom***

The rest of this article gives an example of how needs data were 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 to provide the reader with a basis for judging whether it is possible to specify learners' needs in the General English classroom, and whether or not it is a potentially useful exercise.

In this case the needs analysis was carried out because the learners did not appear to be validating or engaging with the main coursebook being used. It must be stressed that this was a particular type of 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
questionnaire***

A needs analysis questionnaire was completed by three classes of students in Barcelona, a total of twenty-nine young learners, age 14–18 years. They were asked to answer 'yes' or 'no' and indicate very important items with a star (see Appendix).

***Discussion and
Interpretation of the
data***

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 the learners were definitely aware of having specific needs, and were able to identify them.

There was 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 conversation were the favoured methods of working, with group work the preferred dynamic. This seemed to suggest that the students strongly disfavoured traditional learning activities (in contrast to Nunan's 1988:90 findings with adult learners) and wanted to move the focus away from teacher-fronted activities. It also suggested that they were interested in being entertained. Grammar was perceived to be by far the biggest problem, and reading by far the smallest problem, with no significant findings in the other areas.

The data suggested that the primary sources of motivation were psychological and social. The obvious way to cater for these learners was

to send them to a summer language course abroad, and many students had already been on one of these. However, the problem remained of how to cater for the stated psychosocial needs in a Barcelona classroom. The questionnaire showed the students were not particularly interested in learning about Britain, so we had to assume that their motivation was that they wanted to travel and experience things themselves. They were of course speaking to a foreign person every lesson (myself), but they were certainly thinking of interacting with foreigners of their own age. The impression from their answers was that there was a strong psychosocial dimension to be catered for here. They wanted to see themselves as sophisticated, internationally mobile Europeans of the future, for whom ability in English is vital. Furthermore, they saw 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 of this group can be defined as the Barcelona young learner and the Western teenager making contact and socializing with one another under the norms of international youth culture. The Barcelona learner's purpose is to establish social contact, gain access to the worlds of international travel, youth culture, and entertainment, and have fun.

Using this definition, the coursebook was examined to see why the learners 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 their target speech community, any work on travelling abroad, meeting foreigners, or English as a world language, and 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—to cater for the stated psychosocial needs, and enable the learners to move closer (in psychological and social terms) to their target speech community. We now need to consider the practical options for delivery of this aim.

Since changing the main coursebook 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.

Assessing motivations

If we select two out of the four prime motivations—'So I can travel to other countries', and '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 seems to fit fairly neatly together and suggest a methodological direction. CALL programs and video-based tasks can be designed to stimulate conversation among 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 and Fortescue 1987:63.)

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.

Developing materials

So the materials which were written were a computer reading maze which simulates a trip abroad, and includes conversations with foreigners. It is a reading maze in that the learner makes choices which may send him or her back to a previous page or forwards towards the way out. It is a simulation in that the learner has to imagine that he or she is taking part in the story on screen and is 'spoken' to by the computer. When learners use the software they read page 1 on the screen (arrive at the airport) and are 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, e.g. page 4, or 6, or 7 appears on the screen, with each page offering a choice of what to do next.

The main aim is to facilitate the learners' integration into their target speech community. The computer program does this by including action in relevant areas in the storyline. For example, the protagonist has two social or 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, and in 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 as a film star, a victim of a robbery, or a hero on the front page of the newspapers; you can get married, or simply 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 realization 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 recognized 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 1988:102.)

The materials described here 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 Subsidiary objectives which derive directly from the main aims are: to develop conversational and survival skills and an extended lexical set relating to travel abroad.

These subsidiary objectives were dealt with by being written into the storyline rather than being self-conscious 'exercises'. Conversational skills are intended to be developed by interaction between group members. However, there is simulation of conversation during the two social or romantic encounters with persons of the opposite sex. The imaginary conversation partner asks a question, e.g. '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 or her imaginary conversation partner, and so the 'conversation' progresses. The main purpose here is to introduce some of the most common exchanges which take place when making contact and socializing with other teenagers. 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 the students' self-image as '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 main 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 three target classes. It was felt that the materials would be successful if the main aim was fulfilled, i.e. if the learners had drawn closer to their target speech community, and their

psychosocial needs had been catered for. All students answered that they had learnt 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. The video made for evaluation purposes of the learners using the software showed that the learners engaged with the task with enthusiasm, and that 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 generalize from this example, the following conclusions may be reached:

- 1 In the case of this 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 proved successful in identifying the source of the problem.
- 3 The needs analysis data 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, 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 converting psychosocial needs into practical aims and course design.

Received August 1993

References

- Berwick, R.** 1989. 'Needs assessment in language programming' in R. K. Johnson.
- Brindley, G.** 1989. 'The role of needs analysis in adult ESL programme design' in R. K. Johnson.
- Hutchinson, T. and A. Waters.** 1987. *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, R. K.** 1989. *The Second Language Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, C. and S. Fortescue.** 1987. *Using Computers in the Language Classroom*. Harlow: Longman.
- Munby, J.** 1978. *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D.** 1988. *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C.** 1990. *The Language Teaching Matrix*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

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 the <i>Instituto Británico</i>	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 to cassettes	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

The author

Paul Seedhouse has taught EFL in Austria, Thailand, Brunei, and Spain, and is currently Lecturer in EFL at the Norwegian Study Centre, University of York. He

has an RSA Diploma in TEFL and an MSc in Teaching English from Aston University. His interests are in CALL, and the analysis of learner discourse.