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Needs Assessment in Curriculum Development: An ESP Look through the Munbyan Model

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Abstract: One of the attempts made at making language instruction and learning more effective is language needs analysis, or assessment, arising from, or in line with, the attention diverted towards ESP in second language instruction. It is the process through which the needs for which learners learn a language are arranged and prioritized. It further surveys students on their backgrounds and goals, consults faculty regarding course requirement, classifies assignments, observes students in authentic settings, and identifies linguistic and behavioral demands. This paper aimed to substantiate needs analysis in second language learning taking it into a more specific consideration from communicative perspective by assuming communicative syllabus as the requisite to language instruction in today's world where utmost need for communication is seriously tangible. In so doing, it investigated Munby's (1978) model of needs analysis, as one of the most comprehensive frameworks developed in needs analysis in second language instruction, proposed in the attempt for designing a communicative syllabus as a the requirement of today's language instruction, and elaborated on its components in detail. This paper finally made accounts of such criticisms thrown on this model as being complex, learners-centered, constrained, not yielding a sequential framework of things to be included in second language syllabus design.

Key words: language needs analysis, Monby's model of needs analysis, syllabus design

A Brief History of Needs Analysis

Language teaching has had long history, dating back to centuries ago. Up until around a century ago there had not existed a systematic approach to language teaching in the senses that the need learners had for learning the language had not been taken into account, and all aspects of language had been taught to learners. Since a century ago, however, language instruction specialists have paid special attention to the need for which language learners are trying to learn the language, thereby omitting the instruction of language skills learners have no need for; this was called needs analysis. According to Richards (2001), from the 1960s demand for specialized language programs started and applied linguists employed needs analysis procedure in language teaching and since, according to Brindley (2004), ESP courses are often set up in response to occupational or educational demands, the detailed specification of target language behavior was a crucial step in ESP syllabus design. Therefore, it is of high importance to carry out needs analysis before, in the middle, and at the end of a specific course of instruction (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2015), especially in language teaching.

Needs Assessment in Language Teaching

Language needs analysis (language needs assessment) is the process of determining the needs for which a learner or

group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities. Needs assessment makes use of both objective and subjective information (e.g. data from questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation) and seeks to obtain information on:

Ø   The situation in which a language will be used.

Ø   The objectives and purposes for which the language is needed.

Ø   The types of communication that will be used.

Ø   The level of proficiency that will be required.

Needs analysis is part of curriculum development and is normally required before syllabus can be developed for language teaching (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). In language teaching, needs analysis is often seen as the identification and selection of the language forms that the target students are likely to require in, practically, using the particular language (Brown, 1996).

Research and Needs Analysis

The research on learner needs, known as needs analysis or needs assessment, involves surveying students about their backgrounds and goals; consulting faculty about course requirement; collecting and classifying assignments; observing students in naturalistic settings, such as lecture classes, and noting the linguistic and behavioral demands; or combining these techniques to obtain a description of assignments, discourse, and classroom behavior (Benesch, 1996).

Researchers identify and describe existing elements of the target situation to provide the basis for curriculum development (Benesch, 1996). Critical needs analysis, on the other hand, considers the target situation as the locus of possible reform. It takes the hierarchical nature of social institutions into account and treats inequality, both inside and outside the institution, as a central concern.

Communication and Syllabus Design

It is crystal clear that with the recent surge of language pedagogy towards communicative approaches to instruction the selected materials should, as Swan (2009) maintains, bring functions of language into focus at the expense of forms of language. This type of syllabus, putting focus on language functions, is termed the communicative syllabus. Communicative syllabus was, according to Pienemann(1985), motivated by the communicative shift in the late 60s and early 70s. This shift was evidenced by a number of linguistic sub-disciplines such as the ethnography of speaking, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and so on (Kenneth, 1985). Yalden (1983) suggests that a communicative syllabus determines the following aspects of the syllabus components:

1.   A detailed consideration of the purposes for which the learners wish to acquire the target language.

2.   Some idea of the setting where learners will use the target language.

3.   Socially defined roles that learners will assume in the target language.

4.   The communicative events in which learners will participate.

According to Maftoon (2001), the first step in the construction of a language course is defining objectives which have been specified by the analysis of needs of learners. Maftoon (2001) further maintains that being involved in a communicative syllabus design without identifying and analyzing the language needs of learners appears to be impossible the reason being that if language is a system for expressing meaning and if language learners have different communicative purposes, these materials are to be reflected in the materials the learners should be taught and to be included in the activities expected of learners to later engage in the target language.

Munby's Model of Needs Assessment

In line with Maftoon's (2001) emphasis on communicative syllabus design we can refer to Cunningsworth's (1983) suggestion of Munby's communicative syllabus design. This model attempts to specify validity in the target communicative competence (Fatihi, 2003), which is also argued by Delamere (1985) to provide workable language needs assessment. McGinley (1985) maintains that this model was at first regarded as a systematic way of analyzing needs at arriving at detailed syllabus specification. Munby (1978) designed what is known as Communicative Needs Processor (CNP), and teachers of English, especially those concerned with the teaching of English for Specific Purpose, highly utilize his approach to the analysis of needs and they follow his model for specifying communicative competence (Fatihi,2003).Besides, according to Piske and Young-Scholten (2009), in this model, the approach is that language learner is guided by an in-built syllabus and it is assumed that language acquisition is driven by meaningful interaction referred to as communication. According to Cunningsworth (1983), Munby's model of syllabus design for ESP programs puts emphasis on systematic attention to the communicative needs of learners.

Munby's overall model is made of the following element:

1. Participants: Information about the language and identity of learners: age, nationality, sex, present target language proficiency, and other languages known and the proficiency in them.

2. Communicative needs processor (CNP)

Munby (1978) divides his communicative needs processor into eight variables, affecting communication needs by organizing them as parameters which are dynamically related to each other. The CNP first starts by listing some participant data and then come the variables–four a priori and four posteriori.

A priori and posteriori parameters in CNP:

1- Purposive domain: deals with type of ESP involved and the purpose for which the target language is required. The purposive domain, according to Fatihi (2003), specifies the occupational or educational purpose for which the target language is required

2- Setting: physical and psychological.

3- Interaction: identifies those with whom the participant has to communicate and predicts the relationship that is likely to be expected to obtain between his interlocutors and him.

4- Instrumentality: identifies constraints on the input in terms of medium, mode, and channel of communication

Posteriori parameters as input in CNP:

5- Dialect: deals with standard, non-standard, regional or non-regional dialects. It for example specifies whether it is British or American or regional variety of either (Fatihi, 2003).

6- Target level: deals with the required proficiency for the participant so as to guide further processing through the model.

7- Communicative event: deals with what the participant has to do, both subject matter and activity, which could be done either productively or receptively.

8- Communicative key: deals with how participants should perform the communicative event, the manner or tone or spirit in which a communicative event is carried out.

The claim in CNP is to take account of the variables that affect communication needs (Munby, 1978). The above-mentioned parameters, as explained by Cunningsworth (1983), through a complex process of interaction provide a profile of communicative needs which are expressed in such behavioral terms as attending to customers' arrival or reading intensively for all the information in the text.

The aim of Munby's CNP is to find as comprehensively as possible the linguistic form a prospective ESP learner may later use in different situations in his target working environment (Songhori, 2008). According to Hutchinson and Waters (as cited in Songhori, 2008), what the language learner needs to know in order to function effectively in the target language

is the outcome of the processing data by means of Munby's model. Hutchinson and Waters (as cited in Songhori, 2008) offer a comprehensive framework for target situation analysis, comprising a list of a list of questions the analysis should find answer to, and they further argue that the target situation needs analysis is a matter of asking questions about the target situation and the existing attitudes towards the situation of various participants in the process of learning. However, most of these questions, as argued by Songhori (2008), relate to the Munbyan model. He summarized the question as below:

Munbyan purposive domain

Why is language needed? (For study-for work-for training-for a combination of these-for such other purposes as status, examination promotion)

Munbyan instrumentality

How will the language be used?

Medium: speaking, reading, writing, etc.

Channel: telephone- face to face

Types of text or discourse: academic texts, lectures, etc.

Munbyan communicative event

What will be the content area?

Subject: medicine, biology, shipping, etc.

Level: postgraduate, craftsman, etc.

Munbyan setting

Where will the language be used?

Physical setting: office, hotel, workshop, etc.

Human context: meetings, alone, on telephone, etc.

Linguistic context: in own country, abroad

3. Profile of needs: is established by the processing done on data in the CNP

4. Meaning processor: parts of the socioculturally determined profile of communication needs are turned into semantic subcategories of pragmatic kind and remarked into attitudinal tone.

5. The language skill selector: identifies the specific language skill required in order to realize the activities or events identified in the CNP.

6. The linguistic encoder: takes into account the dimension of contextual appropriacy.

7. The communicative competence specification: indicates the communicative competence of participant in the target language and is the translated needs profile.

One important point made by Munby is that he distinguishes between behavior and meaning (Cunningsworth, 1983). He points out that a communicative activity such as doctor giving advice to patient is a unit at behavioral level and its constituents may comprise the microfunctions of persuasion, warning, invitation, etc. The point, as explained by Cunningsworth (1983) is that while a microfunction is ready for verbal realization, an activity is not. An activity needs to be processed into microfunctions before any decision before realizations of utterance can be made (Munby, 1978). According to Cunningsworth (1983), activity such as ordering a meal in a restaurant is not a meaning unit but a behavior unit, and before it can be realized as language, the functions constituting it should be identified. Therefore, as further explained, the customer may request the menu, ask for information about a particular food, ask for waiter's recommendations, etc., each of which are functions and can be directly encoded into language whereas the activity 'ordering a meal' cannot.

Below, Cunningsworth (1983) illustrates the stages involved in proceeding from the input of raw information about the target group to a statement of learning objectives for that group, keeping the distinction between units of behavior and units of meaning.

Criticisms to Munby's Model

Coleman (as cited Hamp-Lyons, 2011) states that Munby's needs model discounts learners and people and assumes identifying needs to be satisfying them. Bygate et al. (1985) argue that Munby's communicative syllabus design does not yield a very clear idea of how things must be put in sequence. Besides, McGinley (1985) states that Munbyan objectives do not appear to be any longer tenable due to being narrowly prescriptive.

West (1994), in a more substantiating way, casts the following criticisms on Munby's model of needs assessment:

1- Complex: The attempt made in Munby's model to be systematic and comprehensive made his instrument complex, inflexible and time-consuming.

2- Learner-centered: Munby's claim on CNP's being learner-centered seems to be true for the beginning point because this model seems to be later collecting data about the learner rather than from the learner.

3- Constrained: The idea held by Munby is that constraints should be considered after the procedure of needs analysis, while many believe that these practical constraints should be taken into account at the start of the needs analysis process.

4- Language: Munby does not manage to provide a procedure for converting the learner profile into language syllabus.

However, to extenuate the attacks on Munby's model of needs assessment, it can be stated that in order for a framework to be effective, it has to delineate detailed steps to be taken so precisely that the practicality of the framework in ensured, thereby, to a great extent, impervious to whatever loopholes of subjectivity and inaccuracy. Therefore, it goes without saying that complexity and prescriptiveness, argued by McGinley (1985) and West (1994) respectively, are ineluctably sequel to such a framework, or model, which aims to make language instruction as fruitful as possible.

Final Remarks

Skehan (1984) dubs Munby's model of needs analysis a two-stage model. The first stage of the model is based on 'communicative needs processor' (CNP), "a structured information gathering procedure, which allows the course writer to develop a detailed specification of needs which are associated with the role the ESP learner wants to fulfill" (p. 205). Information is collected on ESP learner, his purpose for learning, the setting in which performance will take place, the interaction types he or she will engage in, and the instrumentality involved. Further, as explained by Skehan (1984), information is on the dialects that will be of importance, the target level associated with the future role, types of communicative events that language learner will engage in, and the attitudinal key characterizing learner's future interactions.

Taking the profile of needs emerging from the first stage as its input, the second stage of Munby's model of needs assessment converts the needs into a syllabus specification (Skehan, 1984). Skehan (1984) and Phan (2005) argue that there exists a wide choice at this point between translation into 'microfunctions', e.g. apology, request or into 'microskill', e.g. recognizing indicators in discourse or basic reference skills. Waiters would benefit from a microfunctions-based syllabus, while science students would more benefit from the course based on microskills. The former, as explained by Skehan (1984) would include functions such as excuse, while the latter would comprise such skills as expressing conceptual meaning, and transcoding information from speech into diagrammatic display.

Despite the fact that Munby's model has its base in concepts of communicative competence, it is essentially performance related, with Munby's categories of communicative activity and communicative event as categories of real world language use rather than elements of a construct of communicative competence (West, 1994). Besides Fatihi (2003) states that the assumption behind the syllabi derived from the Munbyan model of needs assessment is that there are certain aspects of language peculiar to the contexts in which it is used and the purpose for which it is used. For example, as he explains, it is assumed that there are certain topics, functions, structures, vocabulary items, and so on that are peculiar to the world of motor mechanic and which cannot be found in General English, and it is also assumed that different areas of use will require different skills of communication from the learner.

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