Needs Analysis

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes has become a typical approach to English language teaching and learning in tertiary education. The reason for this is that ESP learners are usually adults who have already mastered some knowledge of English and are learning the language needed in a particular domain, occupation, or vocation in order to acquire professional skills and perform particular job-related functions. Indeed, Hutchinson and Waters (1992) point out that learners know specifically why they are learning a language and it is the awareness of the need that distinguishes ESP from English for General Purposes (EGP). Thus, students' needs analysis is a key point in the development of any ESP course as this approach of language learning is student-centered.

Needs analysis was introduced into language teaching through the ESP movement. From the 1960s', the demand for specialized language programs grew and applied linguists began to employ needs analysis procedures in language teaching and materials preparation (Richards, 2002). Thus, to design ESP materials in particular or when talking about ESP in general, needs analysis seems mandatory to exist.

2. Definitions of Needs Analysis.

Needs analysis (NA) is assumed to be the cornerstone of an ESP course (Robinson, 1991; and Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Brown (1995) identifies the term needs analysis (also called needs assessment) as the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum which aims at meeting the students' needs.

Besides, Basturkmen (1998:2) defines needs analysis as "*the identification of difficulties and standard situations by observation of participants functioning in a target situation in conjunction with interviews and questionnaires*". She further says, "*Language needs analysis are most often used where the learners in selected situations face very similar difficulties.*" Moreover, Richterch and Chancerell (1987) as quoted in Basturkmen (1998:2) assert that "*the aim of needs analysis is not only to identify elements but to establish relative importance, to find out what is indispensable necessary or merely desirable.*" Hence, we can deduce that in language programs, needs are language related; once identified, they can be stated in terms of goals and objectives which, in turn, can serve as the bases for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies.

3. The importance of Needs Analysis

The discussions of the importance of needs analysis focus on its roles as a starting point or a guide for course design, syllabus design, materials selection, assessment or even classroom activities. Berwick (1989) says that needs assessment is important for decision planners to design the course. Assessment of a course needs involvement of learners' changes concerning learner needs which have to be made during the course with consultation of the learners. Within this context, McDonough (1984:29) points out that the language needs of the learner should be the bases for course development. He adds, "*information on his or her language needs will help in drawing up a profile to establish coherent objectives, and take subsequent decisions on course content.*".

Moreover, Riddell (1991:75) refers to the crucial role that needs analysis plays in syllabus and course design by arguing *"...through it [needs analysis] the course designer becomes equipped to match up the content of the program with the requirements of the student body [what learners need]"*. Hence, we can infer that teachers can use published materials, adapt or write in house materials. However, whatever option is selected, the assessment of student needs has to be taken into consideration.

Furthermore, Bowers (1980) states that students' needs is a guide in syllabus development, materials and examination. The significance of needs is quoted in Clark (1978:78), who asserts that "*The first step in any language teaching project must surely be to design a syllabus that will reflect the language needs and wishes of the learner concerned, and that will accord with a responsible theory of language learning*". Thus, Needs analysis should be carried out throughout the course in order to adjust the learning objectives as the need arises. In other words, feedback from the learner can be used as bases for modifying learning objective since learners can contribute substantially to the course if they are actively involved at all stages of the course design; at the initial, during, and final stages of course evaluation.

4. Instruments for Needs Analysis

Questionnaires and interviews are two commonly used instruments for needs analysis. Kumar (1996) discusses the advantages and drawbacks of questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires do not take long to administer and it is often possible to get information from a large number of respondents. The responses are anonymous and thus respondents will hopefully offer their opinions and ideas frankly unlike interviews which are time consuming and because of this the investigator can often only interview a few people. However, in an interview the investigator can probe responses and thus gain an in-depth understanding of the opinions and information offered. Additionally, unclear questions or answers can be clarified during an interview.

As a matter of fact, both types of data collection potentially have drawbacks. For example, people tend to think carefully about questionnaire items before responding. This may lead respondents to try to provide idealized responses (responses they see as socially desirable). Good interviewing skills do not come naturally to everyone and some interviewers may let their own opinions come across too strongly and lead to bias in the interview.