Learner Needs Assessment

GIVEN A LEARNER-CENTERED model, it should be clear that needs assessment is a key feature of planning for teaching adults, whether in a classroom or tutoring situation. Needs assessment is the process by which the teacher determines the various needs of his or her learners in order to develop a curriculum that is responsive to them. Such needs can include such factors as learning, social needs, and learning styles (Peck 1991).

However, assessing the needs of your adult learners may have some difficulties. According to Grant & Shank:

> *Effective needs assessment is vital because adult ESL learners who feel they are not learning what they need to know in English class are more likely to drop-out than to express their discontent. Eliciting need assessment information from Limited English Proficient (LEP) adults and applying that information to course planning presents a challenge. Traditional questionnaires ... may not be appropriate or effective for all learners, particularly those with limited literacy skills. In addition, the concept of participating in instructional goal-setting can be strange to adults from other cultural backgrounds where learners expect the teacher to set the course objectives.*

Often, when you ask your learners what they want to achieve in your class, they will respond that they want to "improve their English", however this goal is so vague as to be almost meaningless. The learners' needs must be clarified. Obviously, the first step of being responsive to a learner's needs is understanding what those needs are (Weddel & Van Duzer 1997).

You will find it most effective to assess you learners' needs early. Doing needs assessment in early lessons or first meetings will help foster the feeling that you, the teacher, and your learners are collaborators in the learning process. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to give adult learners the feeling that they are in control of their own learning and that what they are learning is relevant to their needs. It will also give you a basis for planning future lessons.

Peck (1991) gives a list of information that it would be useful to know about your students which includes the following (p. 364):

✶ *Preference for learning alone, in small groups, or in large groups*

✶ *Ear/eye preference*

✶ *Preference for observation vs. participation*

✶ *Use of language analysis, rules, and explanations*

✶ *Preference for immersion*

✶ *Use of translation*

✶ *Use of visuals*

✶ *Uses of rote learning*

This is a long and diverse list, and one tool won't be enough to assess all, or even many, of these factors. It may be necessary to use multiple instruments. Fortunately, there are a large number of tools that you, as the teacher, can use for such purposes. A few common ones include:

• **Written assignments** such as compositions, reports, narratives, etc.

• **Skills checklists** Lists of skills in which the learners indicate the particular skills that they want to work on.

• **Picture assessments** The learners circle or point to pictures which show the areas of language on which they wish to work.

• **Inventories of language use** The learners write about the places and situations where they have trouble with using English.

• **Questionnaires**

• **Sentence starters** The students are provided with short prompts, which allow them to write sentences indicating the topics that they wish to work on.

• **Interviews** These can be done teacher-student, student-student, or among the whole class as a group discussion.

• **Informal Observations**

Keep in mind that there are unlimited numbers of tools for needs assessment, not just the handful that I listed above. Sometimes I assess my learners' needs by merely having them make a list of objectives on the back of an index card, and I have found this to be quite successful.

If you reflect on the previous list, you will realize that some tools are more appropriate for beginner learners, some are more appropriate for advanced learners, etc. Of course, there is no rule against doing the needs assessment in the learner's native language, if that is possible, given your resources. Whichever tools you use, the result should be a list of clear, obtainable objectives that your students can achieve in the course of their studying English. Both you and your learners should be in agreement about these objectives.

As you will see in future chapters, it will be important to regularly re-visit the objectives with your learners to demonstrate how much progress they have made. Also, keep in mind that needs assessment is an ongoing process. As a student learns more and his or her life situation changes, his or her goals will also change. Therefore, his or her needs should be re-assessed periodically.

FURTHER READING

Online

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Activities

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Arlington Education and Employment Program (2003). *REEP Adult ESL Curriculum Needs assessment page.* Available from: http://www.apsva.us/15401081182015517/ lib/15401081182015517/reepcurriculum/learnerneeds assessment.html

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