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Research Article

A Needs Analysis Questionnaire: Designing and Evaluation

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Abstract:

This paper explores the reasons for the existence of a needs analysis questionnaire and attempts to define the needs of the learners in a specific teaching context. The aim is to clearly state the theory lying behind the particular field, explain the design of the questionnaire and demonstrate the findings. Needs analysis is a matter of great importance as it can greatly assist both teachers and learners, as well. The former could better apprehend their students needs and requirements and therefore provide them with the best standards of education. The latter could significantly benefit from the adjusted lessons targeted to their particular needs and consequently, acquire knowledge through a pleasant and less stressful procedure.

Keywords: needs analysis, questionnaire, teachers, learners

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the theory and critically reflect on a needs analysis questionnaire based on students' needs and preferences concerning the English language learning.

After a brief description of the teaching context and a literature review on needs analysis in the first part, the description of the content and structure of a questionnaire conducted in the classroom follows.

Finally, there is an attempt to present and discuss the results of the questionnaire in order to help make some improvement and changes in curriculum.

PART 1

Teaching Context

In the needs analysis questionnaire that was conducted (see Appendix I), forty-four students, attending the 1st Class of a State Junior High School (aged between twelve and thirteen years old) took part. They are not all monolingual , since five of them share a different L1.They are taught Think Teen 1st Grade and they belong to both beginners' and advanced level.

Theory on needs analysis and questionnaire design

Needs analysis procedures made their appearance in language planning during the 1970's, as Nunan (1988,pp43 in Ayakli C.,Karavas K.,Manolopoulou-Sergi E.& Spinthourakis J.A,2004.pp83.vol1) reports. According to Richards(2001:51) needs analysis is defined as 'the procedures used to collect information about the learners' needs'. Therefore, it is carried out through various ways and stages so as to assemble informational data about learners' needs in order to set valid objectives and design tasks that reflect real life purposes.

One of the most used forms of needs analysis that most analysts choose to perform is the questionnaire. Information which is elicited from it can be tabulated and discussed. In order for the questionnaire to be valid and useful to the 'qualified informants' (Tudor, 1996:74) it has to follow some specific characteristics.

According to Dörnyei (2003:16) the length of the questionnaire should not be more than 4 pages and the time required to complete it not more than 30 minutes. The layout should be short and orderly and the issue of anonymity should be early addressed. Moreover, the title should indicate the "domain of investigation" and instructions should be both general and specific, in order for the respondents to know exactly what they have to do. The content of the questionnaire should include questions that will provide the conductor of the analysis with the most accurate data, meaning data that will help them achieve their original goal. Furthermore, the questions should be varied so that the respondents not to find it monotonous.

Simple and clear wording is also essential in order to obtain the intended information and to be understood by all respondents (Taylor-Powell,1998:3).

PART 2

Description and justification of the sample needs questionnaire

The technique used by the teacher in order to conduct a needs analysis investigation was the questionnaire, "the most practical and thus the most used of all" (Ayakli et al, 2004:104) and which elicits "information directly from learners"(Tudor, 1996:73).

The goal the teacher set was to adjust the English lesson to the students' needs and the need to be addressed is clearly stated at the introductory remarks of the questionnaire. Basically subjective needs were sought to be indicated, thus questions that concern students' subjective and not objective needs were selected.

The particular questionnaire is to be filled anonymously so as to have a better validity as students respond the questions without worrying about affecting their teacher's opinion regarding their performance in English. Honesty and the fact that there are no right or wrong questions, aim at restricting their stress.

A brief explanation at the beginning of the questionnaire informs students on its purpose which is to adjust the English lesson to their needs. It is based on closed questions and particularly *Yes-No questions, multiple-choice, rating* and *ranking* questions. According to Richards (2001:60) these *structured items* (in which the respondent chooses from a limited number of responses) are easy to analyze and obtain information about many different kinds of issues. So in this case information is obtained by having students answering simply by a *yes* or *no*, by choosing alternatives provided and by attributing a value on a given scale so as to maintain the principal advantage of questionnaires, *objectivity* (Gardner and Winslow 1983:74 in West, 7).

The questions are to be found under the headings of *motivation, learning preferences and style, learning strategies* and *aptitude* which are crucial factors in effective foreign language learning as they provide information concerning subjective needs "which interferes with the processing of the input to be learnt" (Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004:97).

Statements, playing the role of instructions were placed (ref.15) before each new sector in order for the students to fully understand what they are supposed to do.

The first group of questions explores the learners' motivational orientation (Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004:117) which has to do mostly with their *hidden agendas* (Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004:118) or their own expectations regarding the lesson. The parents' role however is crucial to the students' attitude and valuation of the subject.

The second group investigates the learning preferences and style which "orient students to the completion of a task according their distinct preferences in approaching and completing a learning task (Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004:196) something which is explored in the learning strategies questions.

The last set of questions explore learners' aptitude in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing which has to do with *a characteristic of an individual which controls at a*

given time the rate of progress that he will make subsequently in learning a foreign language" (Carroll 1965 in Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004:92)

Presentation and discussion of results

After conducting the questionnaire, its results were carefully studied, with the aid of tabular forms, in order to reach some conclusions and create some implications for curriculum development taking into consideration some of the most important findings.

The results were homogenous, even though the learners filled the questionnaire individually and without discussion. This suggests that 'the group members have similar needs , and even at their age they are aware of having specific needs, and they are able to identify them' (Seedhouse 1995:60).

Starting from their background information, eight out of the forty-four students do not attend English lessons outside school. Those who study English outside school have been studying for four to six years.

As far as motivation is concerned, the three top answers in the question 'why are you learning English' reveal how sociocultural factors, surprisingly, affect so young students in the learning of a foreign language. Thus, internationalism of the English language ,finding a good job in the future as well as travelling abroad are three of the main reasons which motivate them to learn the English language. Chatting in social networks, which is very popular among these ages nowadays, and understanding of songs, films and articles on the Internet follow in their preferences. It's worth mentioning that seven students added in 'other' the fact that they simply 'love' the English language, something which was not included in the table and was not corrected by the teacher who created the questionnaire, since unfortunately there was no time for pilot testing.

Regarding the students' favourite topics at the top of the scale ,they place the Internet with a 84% percentage (see Appendix II, graph 1).Games follow very closely (82%) in the second position of their likes and music comes third (75%).All the top three topics depict reality and seem to be natural according to their age and needs.

At the bottom of their preferences, there is literature, transport and environment.

Results in their learning styles and preferences show clearly that students disfavor traditional learning activities, such as studying grammar rules or practicing pronunciation. They want to move the focus away from the teacher-fronted activities (Seedhouse 1995:60) and they do not like working individually (see Appendix II, graph 2).

On the other hand, they are in favour of pair work, listening to english songs and playing games. These results express the immediate need to adjust lesson into a more pleasant environment of learning adopting new methods according to the students' "wants".

Pair work appears generally as the most popular learning strategy (see Appendix II, pie 1) . Learners like learning vocabulary and grammar by practicing both orally in class, using new words or grammar rather than copying or doing exercises at home.

Finally, regarding the skills used in the classroom, learners seem to cope with the difficulties .However, they find listening the most challenging of all. The majority understand the main points of a text, regardless of the unknown vocabulary, which they can more or less be able to guess the meaning. Reading styles vary.

When it comes to speaking, even though pronunciation does not play an important role, students are afraid of making mistakes while talking. This finding explains their hesitation to express themselves in English or participate in a discussion.

Conclusion

To sum up, needs analysis and specifically the questionnaire can be used in all EFL situations. The questionnaire survey data can contribute to a more cohesive course development. However, the teacher should create and use it wisely, in order to help him improve his teaching situation. Above all, students should be made aware of their needs and how to identify them.

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APPENDIX I

A QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS’ NEEDS , PREFERENCES AND DIFFICULTIES REGARDING THE ENGLISH LESSON.

The following questionnaire is part of an assignment regarding students’ needs related to the learning of the English language. Your answers will help us adjust the English lesson to your demands and needs. It is anonymous and there is no right or wrong answers. Try to give careful and honest responses so as to use the results for the benefit of the students’ community.

Background information

1. Do you study English outside school? (Tick **V**) Yes…….. No……..

2. If *Yes* for how long? (please write) .....

3. Have you taken any exams in English ? Yes ……. No…….

The following questions will specify why you are learning English and your favourite topics.

Motivation

A. Why are you learning English? (Number the sentences starting from the most important to you)

a. To get good marks at school	
b. To understand English songs.films or articles on the Internet	
c. To chat with foreign people in social networks	
d. Because my parents want me to	
e. To help me find a good job in the future	
f. Because I want to travel abroad	
g. Because it’s in the school program	
h. Because English is an international language	

i. Other reasons (please write)

……
……

B. Tick your favourite topics (more than one answer is possible)

a. Friends …….
b. Free time …….
c. Travelling …….
d. Famous people …….
e. Art …….
f. Technology &Inventions ……
g. Environment ……
h. Music …….
i.Games ……..
j. Entertainment ……..
k. Literature ……
l. Food ……..
m. Health …….
n. Transport …….
o. Internet …….
p. Human rights ……..
q. Media ……..
r. Other (please write)……

The next question will show what you like and don't like practicing

Learning styles-preferences

Tick the appropriate column (☺= I like , ☻= I don't like)

	☺	☻
a. Listening to English songs		
b. Writing grammar exercises		
c. Writing stories		
d. Reading English texts		
e. Studying grammar rules		
f. Playing games		
g. Doing projects		
h. Doing vocabulary exercises		
i. Doing pair-work activities		
j. Working individually		
k. Speaking with classmates in English		
l. Practicing pronunciation		
m. Solving problems in English having visual prompts		
n. Acting up dialogues with classmates		
o.Doing listening activities		

The next question is about your learning strategies

Learning strategies

Circle a number from 1 to 4 (1=not at all , 2=little , 3=much , 4=very much)

A. Do you like:

a. Working alone? 1 2 3 4

b. Pair work? 1 2 3 4

c. Group work? 1 2 3 4

d. Whole class work? 1 2 3 4

B. Do you like learning vocabulary:

a. By hearing new words? 1 2 3 4

b. By seeing new words? 1 2 3 4

c. By copying new words? 1 2 3 4

d. By using new words? 1 2 3 4

e.Other (please specfy)……

C. Do you like learning grammar:

a. By studying grammar rules? 1 2 3 4

b. By doing exercises at home? 1 2 3 4

c. By doing exercises at school? 1 2 3 4

d.By oral practice in class? 1 2 3 4

e. Other (specify)……..

The two following questions will show how feel about the various skills involved in learning the English language

Aptitude

A. How often do you have difficulty with each of the following skills (tick what expresses you more)

	Very often	Often	sometimes	Rarely	Never
Reading					
Writing					
Speaking					
Listening					
Spelling					
Learning vocabulary					
Learning grammar					

B. Circle the answer that best suits you:

Listening : Do you understand:

a. The class cd's? always often sometimes rarely never

b. When the teacher talks in English? always often sometimes rarely never

c. When your classmates talk in English? always often sometimes rarely never

Reading

a. Do you read the text quickly to understand the general idea? always often sometimes rarely never

b. Do you read the text slowly to understand every detail? always often sometimes rarely never

c. Do you understand the main points of the English texts? always often sometimes rarely never

d.Can you guess the meaning of unknown words? always often sometimes rarely never

Speaking

a. Do you speak English during the lesson? always often sometimes rarely never

b. Are you afraid of making mistakes while talking? always often sometimes rarely never

c. Do you find it difficult to talk with other people? always often sometimes rarely never

d. Do you have difficulties in pronunciation? always often sometimes rarely never

Writing

a. Do you have the right syntax when you write in English? always often sometimes rarely never

b.Do you use the appropriate vocabulary? always often sometimes rarely never

c. Do you organize your paragraphs correctly? always often sometimes rarely never

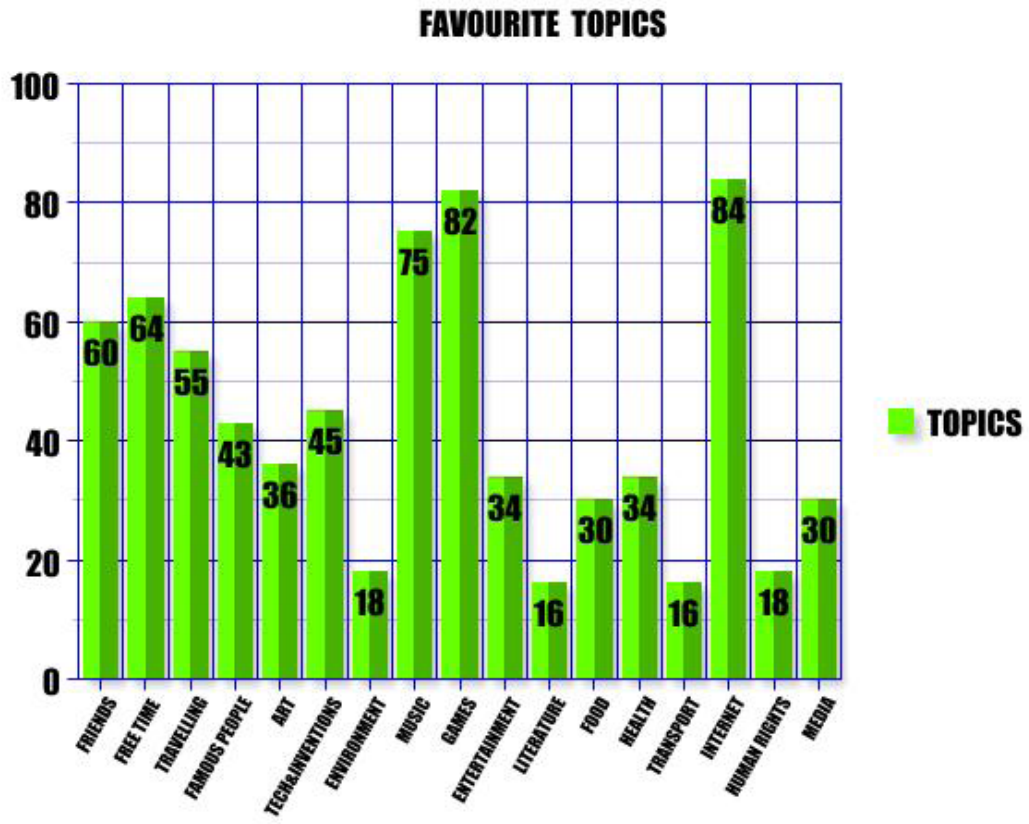
d. Do you express your ideas in the right way? always often sometimes rarely never

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE!

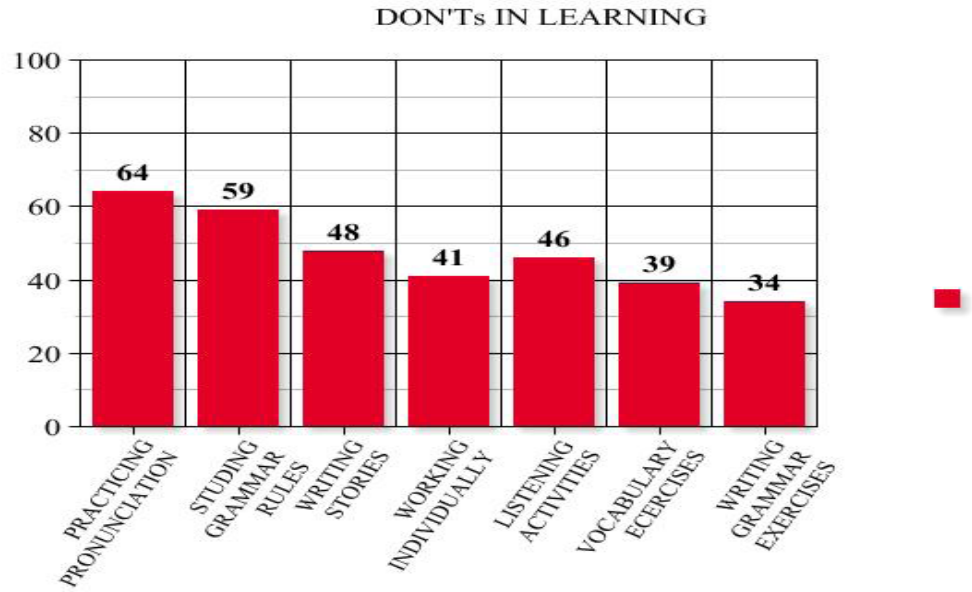
APPENDIX II

TABLES AND GRAPHS

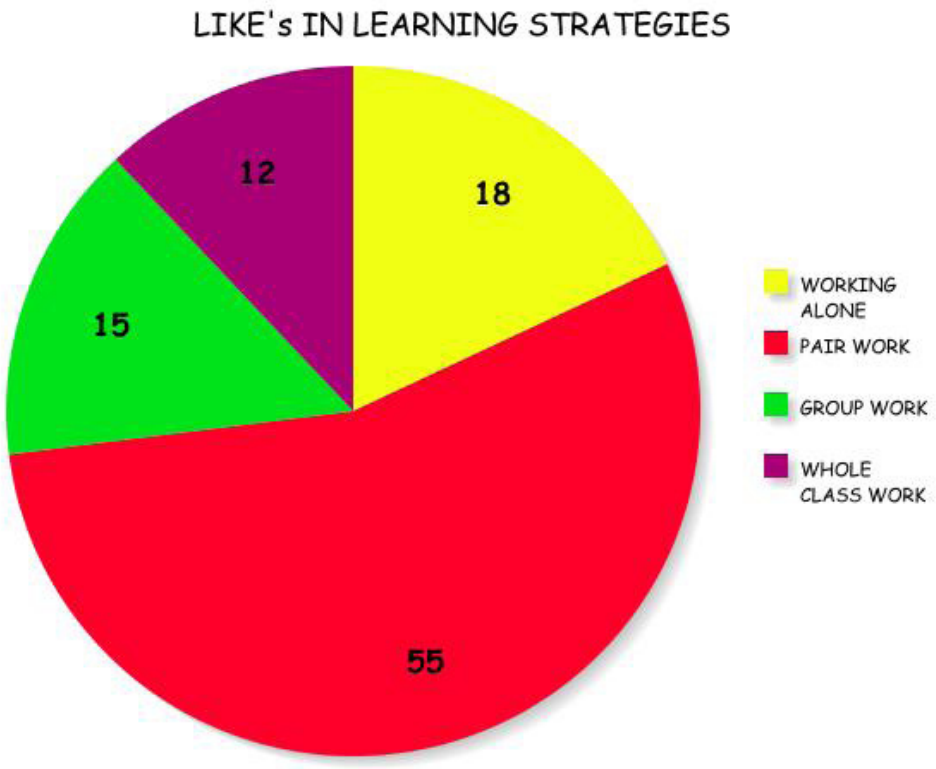
Graph 1



Graph 2



Pie 1



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