



Needs analysis for specialized learner populations: Essential methodological improvements



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ABSTRACT

This study surveys the design, methods and procedures reported in needs analyses (NAs) conducted for specialized English learner populations in varying contexts over the last thirty years (1984–2014). While NA practice has evolved and undoubtedly improved over time, our survey identified several remaining shortcomings and a lack of consistency in the sources, the methods and the interactions between sources and methods that researchers use to gather data and interpret findings, problems which decrease their reliability and validity. To illustrate how methodological rigor in NA practice and reporting can be achieved, we detail the methods and procedure followed in a large-scale task-based NA conducted for non-native English speakers working at a national research institution in the USA. Based on the current NA and the findings of our methodological survey, we provide a set of practical recommendations that are intended to be adaptable for local contexts and useful to language program administrators, curriculum designers and teachers responsible for the design of ESP courses and programs.

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1. Introduction

Needs analysis (NA) has a strong tradition in the development of ESP programs (Brown, 2009; Basturkmen, 2013; Hyland, 2009). Indeed, a well-conducted NA can lead to courses designed to ensure that students will learn precisely what they need. Despite the centrality of NA to ESP course design, comparatively little attention has been paid to the practice of NA itself. Here, we will not recount the history of NA, which will already be familiar to readers of this journal and for which detailed accounts are available elsewhere (see, e.g., Hyland, 2009; Long, 2013a, 2015a; Norris, 2009). Instead, we survey the methodological characteristics of ESP NAs conducted over the past 30 years, and argue for the potential relevance of procedures developed in research on NA practice in task-based language teaching (TBLT). In addition to outlining methodological improvements to NA following TBLT principles, we argue that the consistent application of relevant techniques, adapted to local contexts, can improve the reliability and validity of NA practice. Such an improvement is essential for ESP learners who require a certain level of English proficiency to succeed in their chosen occupational or academic pursuits.

We begin with a methodological review of NAs conducted from 1984 to 2014 with learners of English who have occupational or academic communicative needs. Following this review, we describe the approach utilized in a recent large-scale

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NA conducted with non-native speakers (NNSs) of English who need to function in field-specific discourse domains at a large U.S. scientific research institution. Finally, we consider methods used in previous studies and those in the current large-scale NA and offer practical, step-by-step recommendations that can be adapted by language administrators, curriculum designers and teachers who must design and implement language for specific purposes programs and courses. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the methodological rigor and consistency of NA practice and reporting, as well as course design.

2. Background information

2.1. Needs analysis in task-based language teaching

While the identification of learner needs has its beginnings in ESP, both task-based researchers and ESP specialists argue that the use of *task* as the unit of organization and analysis in all phases of TBLT (genuine *task-based*, not *task-supported*, programs) has increased the theoretical and practical utility of NA (Long, 1985, 2005a, 2005b, 2013a, 2013b; Norris, 2009; Skehan, 1998; Van den Branden, 2006; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). Among other reasons, scholars argue that *task* is a unit that is meaningful to domain experts, a unit around which to organize lessons whose obvious relevance is motivational for students, and a unit that is compatible with what is known about the psycholinguistics of how adults learn additional languages (Long, 2015b). That is, adult learners do not sequentially learn a language in isolated parts (e.g., words, target structures, functions), but rather, in a nonlinear fashion, as parts of complex mappings of groups of form-function relationships (Long & Crookes, 1992). The idea is that tasks provide an ideal context in which the need to link form and function arises naturally during communication.

Using task as the key unit of analysis, a thorough task-based NA draws on data gathered from multiple sources of information, using multiple methods, to inform course content. Long (2005b) summarizes and evaluates potential *sources* of information, *methods* of collecting that information, and *triangulation* of data obtained from the same source via different methods and using the same method to consult several sources (i.e., *source* × *method* interactions) to help validate the data obtained.

- **Sources:** **Insider and outsider**
Published and unpublished literature, learners, applied linguists, domain experts, triangulated sources
- **Methods:** **Qualitative and quantitative**
Expert and non-expert intuitions, interviews, questionnaire surveys, language audits, participant and non-participant observation, ethnographic methods, journals and logs, language proficiency and competency measures

To increase reliability and validity, data should ideally be collected from two or more sources using two or more methods. Although difficult in practice due to time and access constraints, consulting a stratified random sample, rather than a convenience or purposive sample,¹ increases the chances that findings will accurately reflect the needs of the larger population from which the sample is drawn. To identify valid tasks, consulting learners only – whether they are pre-experience, pre-service (e.g., international medical students) or in-service (e.g., medical residents) – is insufficient and unlikely to produce a reliable inventory of the tasks that are consistently required of them to function successfully on a daily basis in their target discourse domain. Rather, domain experts (e.g., experienced physicians) should be consulted to access insider knowledge of what successful performance in a specific job or occupation entails. Domain insiders, however, are not able to provide complete information as they are less likely to have accurate intuitions about the language required to perform successfully; for that, applied linguists and other ESP educators are better equipped and can analyze genuine discourse samples from the target domain(s).

However, it is important to consider the potential influence of English as a global lingua franca, especially in the context of international universities, and the native or non-native speaker (NS/NNS) status of domain insider sources on the language that is expected in different tasks. While English is spoken by more non-native than native speakers around the world, the traditional assumption continues to be that “good” English means a “standard” English variety spoken by native speakers (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010). Despite a growing awareness and critical perspective of the distant native speaker norm among researchers and practitioners, the expectation that learners acquire a standard English variety remains pervasive (Jenkins, 2006). Thus, NA researchers and ESP specialists should be aware of any mismatches in expected target language use in data obtained from NS and NNS informants and critically consider the language expected in target tasks and outcomes.

Domain insider sources should ideally be investigated using two or more methods, both qualitative (e.g., interviews) and quantitative (e.g., questionnaire surveys), or inductive and deductive in nature (Berwick, 1989). For example, unstructured interviews or non-participant observation are qualitative, inductive procedures from which initial categories of needs emerge.

¹ A convenience sample consists of informants available and willing to participate, whereas a purposive sample is a group that the analyst deems to be ‘typical’. In both cases, samples may not actually be representative of the target population. The ideal sampling procedure is a stratified random sample, in which each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected and proportionally represents each sub-group of interest (see Long, 2005a, pp. 34–35).

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