A Needs Analysis outline & instrument

The learners and the purpose of the Needs Analysis

The object of this Needs Analysis (NA) is a group of 12 ESOL students in an Australian high school Intensive English Centre (IEC). They are primarily of limited or disrupted schooling background, and some have low levels of L1 literacy. First languages include Farsi, Arabic, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Dari, Burmese, Karen, and Spanish. They range in age from 16 to 24 and are heterogenous in terms of their vocational and academic needs, but mostly homogenous in their social needs.

The purpose of this NA is to identify real-world tasks that the learners need to be able to do in social contexts. These may include things like using a smartphone or desktop computer; find, apply and interview for, then keep, a part-time job; understand and complete a variety of physical and digital forms; understand and compose emails; find a house to rent; open a bank account, and so on. These real-world tasks that the learners need to do in their daily lives will form the Target Tasks (TTs), from which Pedagogic Tasks (PTs) will be derived and ordered in sequence according to factors such as task criticality, frequency, complexity/difficulty, and so on, to form the Task-Based Syllabus.

NA outline

The NA for this group will use a best-practice, mixed-methodology approach to gathering data. It will use multiple sources (e.g., domain experts, the learners, applied linguists, literature, etc.) of information and multiple methods (e.g., interviews, surveys, observations, language audits, journals, etc.) of acquiring this information to improve the validity and reliability of data collected. Increasing the credibility of the results in this manner is a process known as "triangulation", and is an important procedure used in research to increase the credibility of the interpretations of the collected data (Long, 2015).

It will broadly follow the NA procedure proposed by Serafini et al. (2015), which breaks it down into five main steps, as seen in the figure below:
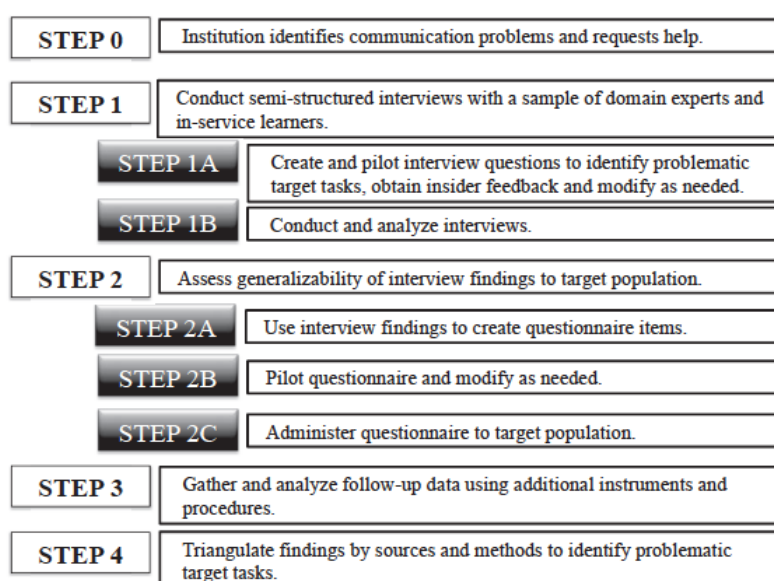

STEP 0	Institution identifies communication problems and requests help.
STEP 1	Conduct semi-structured interviews with a sample of domain experts and in-service learners.
STEP 1A	Create and pilot interview questions to identify problematic target tasks, obtain insider feedback and modify as needed.
STEP 1B	Conduct and analyze interviews.
STEP 2	Assess generalizability of interview findings to target population.
STEP 2A	Use interview findings to create questionnaire items.
STEP 2B	Pilot questionnaire and modify as needed.
STEP 2C	Administer questionnaire to target population.
STEP 3	Gather and analyze follow-up data using additional instruments and procedures.
STEP 4	Triangulate findings by sources and methods to identify problematic target tasks.

Figure 1. NA procedure.

Such an NA procedure moves from open, semi-structured methods of gathering data and information (Step 1) to closed, structured methods (Step 3). In order to capture as many aspects of the TTs as possible, it will also attempt to cover all seven dimensions of NA as outlined by Gilabert (in press).

For this NA, because 'domain experts' for social needs are both difficult to quantify and too various to identify specifically, I will consider government staff and staff at migrant settlement agencies to be the experts in this regard. Furthermore, because observations "in the wild" will be impractical, I will instead use an activity journal/log for students to complete in their L1 over a predetermined time period for them to record what they do in their lives outside of school and work. These will be translated with the help of Ethnic Education Assistants (EEAs). Finally, qualitative and quantitative methods will be used with both insiders and outsiders, and not just qualitative with insiders and quantitative with outsiders as the layout of the table implies. A summary of the sources and methods can be seen below in Table 1.

Table 1: sources and methods to be used in the NA

Sources		Methods	
Insiders	Learners Domain experts (government staff and staff at settlement agencies)	**Qualitative**	Interviews (structured and semi-structured) Journals/logs in L1 (in lieu of observations) Published & unpublished literature
Outsiders	Teachers Ethnic Education Assistants (EEAs)	**Quantitative**	Questionnaires (in L1 and English)

The NA will follow a 7-step process:

1. **Structured questionnaires in L1** for learners

    - to identify real-world tasks and to self-rate language proficiency

2. **Semi-structured interviews** of learners

    - to validate information from step 1

3. **Review of published/unpublished literature** from government and non-governments agencies and education providers

    - to validate information from steps 1 & 2 and to inform the development of questionnaires, surveys and activity journals/logs in steps 4, 5, & 6

4. **Structured questionnaires** for domain experts, teachers and EEAs

    - to identify factors such as participants and interaction, linguistics demands, technology, etc.

5. **Informal interviews** of domain experts, teachers and EEAs

    - to validate information from step 4

6. **Learner activity journals/logs***

    - to identify general aspects of tasks, physical space where tasks take place, cognitive demands, etc.

7. **Analysis of data** and determination of need for follow-up.

*outlined in NA instrument section below.

Step 7 will involve the identification of TTs and may include a final questionnaire using Likert scale-type questions for students to rate (or validate) in terms of frequency, criticality, importance, and difficulty.

NA instrument

The NA instrument outlined in **Appendix 1** is to be used in Step 6 of the NA. It is a learner activity journal/log for all students to complete as best as they can outside of school or work. By Step 6 it is envisaged that a selection of TTs have already been identified, so this instrument could be used to confirm the validity of these. As such, it may be pre-populated with the 'Target Task name', however this is not represented in the instrument that follows.

The instrument will be conducted over the course of a few weeks and with a varied selection of learners to try to capture breadth and depth of tasks. Furthermore, students who wish to complete more journals/logs than the requested number can do so. The learners will receive some initial "training" in how best to complete the journal/log and the minimum expectations for completing it.

The template is based on Gilabert's (n.d.) 'Target Task Description Document'.

Instructions

Ask the students to try and complete at least one (1) activity/journal log each day over the course of a 7-day week. Students can write in their L1 if they wish, however English is preferred.

References

Long, M. (2015). Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching. Wiley Blackwell.

Serafini, E., Lake, J., & Long, M. (2015). Needs analysis for specialized learner populations: Essential methodological improvements. *English for Specific Purposes 40*, 11-26.

Appendix 1 - NA instrument – learner activity journal/log – step 6

Name: _____

Day & date: _____

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1. Contextual information – what, where and when

What was this task? Where did you do it? When did you do it?

e.g., This task was asking how to buy a prepaid bus/train card, and how to add money. I did this at the train station in the morning on the way to school.

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2. Purpose of the task – how, how much, with who

How did you do this task? (give a brief description) How long did it take? Who else was involved in the task?

e.g., I did this task by first trying to buy a prepaid card at a machine. This was too difficult, so I went to the station office to ask for help. The lady asked me what I wanted and showed me how to choose and buy a ticket with the machine. It took about 10 minutes in total. One other person (a female staff member) was involved.

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3. Skills and language

What skills did you need for this task? Do you remember any language you used?

e.g., I needed to read the machine and ask the staff member for help. I also needed to follow her instructions. I remember trying to ask a question, and I used vocabulary related to transport and money.

Also, complete the information below:

Mainly receptive ☐   Mainly productive ☐   Both ☐

Any specific *terms*? (e.g specialized or technical vocabulary;)

Any specific *expressions*? (e.g. idioms or useful word combinations)

Any specific *grammatical features*? (e.g. use of highly complex questions)

Any particular *pragmatic/discursive moves* (e.g. use of commands or requests; persuasive language; rhetorical devices; control of conversational turns).

Style and *level of formality* of the language? (e.g. straightforward and to the point; strategically distant; convoluted and confusing; extremely formal and intentionally over polite, laid-back,...).

4. Difficulty and complexity

What was difficult about this task? And, what was easy?

e.g., Trying to explain what I needed to do was difficult. Listening to the instructions of the staff member was easy.

Also, complete the information below:

Think about the task that you did. Then rate the level of complexity/difficulty of this task on the following scales:

Low mental effort   1   2   3   4   5   High mental effort

Low difficulty   1   2   3   4   5   High difficulty

Low anxiety   1   2   3   4   5   High anxiety

Low stakes   1   2   3   4   5   High stakes

5. Performance rating

How successful were you doing the task?

Think about the task that you did. Then rate the level of success that you had on this task according to the scale:

I could understand everything I needed to.
Agree   1   2   3   4   Disagree

I was understood by others involved in the task (if any).
Agree   1   2   3   4   Disagree

I achieved the outcome that I wanted from this task.
Agree   1   2   3   4   Disagree

I understand how to do this task if necessary in the future.
Agree   1   2   3   4   5   Disagree

6. Reflection

If you did this task again, would you do it the same, or differently? Explain why below: