

The 'What', 'Why', and 'How' of Needs Assessment for Adult EFL Learners

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Many in the EFL profession believe that they understand in advance what their learners' needs are in regards to their EFL education. However, when this notion is questioned, and challenged by one's own students, because of dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning input, one can end up with quite a predicament. In the ever-evolving field of EFL, there has been a move over the past 10 years towards considering what EFL learners need in the classroom through the use of needs assessment. Many have come to realize its necessity in order to meet and support students' learning goals and objectives. Others, not knowing what it is and how to do one, find it difficult. In this article, the what, why, and how of needs assessment are addressed, and explored. In addition, examples of needs assessment and the research surrounding it, as well as questions for reflection are provided and discussed to reveal how EFL teachers can consider and incorporate student needs into the learning environment.

Needs assessment is and remains a fundamental part of EFL instruction and learning. It serves as a prominent ingredient in helping personally relevant language learning thrive in a language-learning environment. It depends on the cooperation of students and teacher and a complete re-evaluation or reinvention of what is considered core and essential for meaningful learning. To understand this, it is useful to take a bottom-up perspective of the 'what', 'how', and 'why' of needs assessment. This will make its relevance clearer

and hopefully motivate EFL practitioners to strive to meet the objectives of the learners first and foremost, and in doing so, make their learning experience personal, relevant and practical.

WHAT IS A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The word 'Assessment' is derived from the word 'Assess' and originates from the Latin term 'Assidere', meaning to 'sit beside' (Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997). It implies that process-minded and participatory-oriented adult educators 'sit beside' their learners to find out about their proficiencies, backgrounds, educational goals, and expected outcomes, immersing themselves in the lives and views of their students. However, there is more to this than just having the teacher 'sitting beside'. The second language learner also has a say in the process, which will be explored later in greater detail.

The word 'needs', in my own personal interpretation, refers to the notion of 'filling in the holes' in one's learning. However, it is not simply a process that involves addressing the 'wants' related to language learning, but rather more about mediating the 'necessities' that a language learner perceives if he or she is to achieve personal success in language learning. A needs assessment, then, constitutes the analysis, and evaluation of what a language learner perceives and requires individually, in order to reach personal success in learning a foreign language. Moreover, needs assessment involves working towards fulfilling the language learning needs of the learner by taking the necessary steps to raise the learner's awareness of needs that may not be perceived in and beyond the language-learning environment.

Essentially, a needs assessment for use with adult learners of English is a tool that examines, from the perspective of the learner, what kinds of English, native language, and literacy skills the learner already believes he or she has; the literacy contexts in which the learner lives and works; what the learner wants and needs to know to function in those contexts; and what the learner expects to gain from the instructional program. Furthermore, it "focuses and

builds on learners' accomplishments and abilities rather than on deficits, allowing learners to articulate and display what they already know and can do" (Auerbach & Holt, 1994).

A needs assessment should be a continual process, which takes place throughout the duration of a course, influencing student placement, materials selection, curriculum design, teaching approaches and methodology. The curriculum content, concepts and learning experiences should be for the most part, negotiated between learners, teacher, and the course coordinator from the beginning and then, if need be, renegotiated regularly during the duration of the course. At the beginning of a course, a needs assessment determines the direction of instruction. During the course, it checks that the language learner's goals are being met and determines any necessary changes. Finally, at the end of the course, it can be used for assessing progress and for planning future directions for the language learner and the course.

If all of the above is implemented, the teacher and his or her language learners should have a clearer idea of the language that is required to fulfill any language-learning needs.

WHY DOES ONE DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A second question arises: "Why do it?" Byrne (1984) suggests that a needs assessment helps get the right balance between teacher/learner input. Helmer (1998) adds that it also could explore and validate the language learner's "heritage, culture, language, life experiences, knowledge and not to mention their sometimes traumatic experiences...." Weddel & Van Duzer in 1997 said that it is essential to do a needs assessment "to determine what students need to learn." Moreover, they claimed that it aids administrators, teachers, and tutors with learner placement/directives and in developing materials, curricula, skills assessments, teaching approaches, and teacher training. It can assure a flexible, responsive curriculum rather than a fixed, linear one that was determined ahead of time by instructors. Finally, they also state that it

“provides information to the instructor and learner about what the learner brings to the course (if done at the beginning), what has been accomplished (if done during the course), and what the learner wants and needs to know next.”

These are key points and worthy of noting, as they are easily forgotten among the perceptions of some teachers, who see themselves as knowing just what a language learner needs. This is not to say that they do always know, but in some cases unknown needs are overlooked. This then, in turn, contributes to learner attrition in adult literacy programs. Overlooking language learners' needs can result in inappropriate placement, instructional materials and approaches that are not relevant to learners' needs and lives (Brod, 1995). Moreover, as Maslow (1968) stressed, "...if needs are not met, then there is little chance for developing a desire for recognition or to reach one's full potential." When adult learners know that educators understand and want to address their needs and interests, they are motivated to continue and learn. When educators understand that language learners have needs related to their current life situations, progress is made.

Valdez, in 1999, agreed, stating that "to ensure some success for EFL learners, teachers need to determine what each learner needs and wants to learn." Shank and Terrill (1995) reinforce the importance of doing a needs analysis to "...ensure success for EFL/ESL learners. The needs assessment helps in the analysis of the learning styles, skill levels, and specific learning objectives." Likewise, those teachers who took part in the Arlington Education and Employment Programme (REEP) in 1994 found that by using an in-class needs assessment "both the learners and the teacher become aware of the goals and needs represented in the class."

A needs assessment benefits the design of a curriculum. As Valdez (1999) suggests, "a good syllabus then is designed after a needs assessment has been done to set out the learning objectives which will guide the teacher." A needs assessment further allows for "goals, which are generally stated from the teacher's perspective and provide direction for the teaching and learning, and objectives, which spell out what learners will actually be able to do." Valdez

accepts Nunan and Lamb's (1996) statement "that all language programs should take their form of departure from the goals and objectives that have been derived from an analysis of learner needs."

A needs assessment offers an opportunity to reinvent and improve the language-learning environment through the use of a negotiated syllabus. This implements Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of a "participatory approach" towards language acquisition. By taking the time to assess the needs that are relevant to adult language learners' lives, the teacher then creates the opportunity for language learning that aims to voice these. Language learners then become liberated (through interaction with the teacher) from the oppressive social conditions that would otherwise continue to govern a curriculum. Auerbach (1992) agrees that the 'emergent curriculum' that evolves is based on needs assessment that involves the learners themselves, targeting the issues and problems they feel need solving.

Needs assessment can also serve to exemplify what learner strategies language learners use. Based roughly on Willing's (1988) grouping of types of learners, it has been proposed that during a class a teacher is more than likely to encounter those who are concrete learners: those who like using games, pictures, films, video, cassettes; talking in pairs, and practicing English outside the class. On the other hand, there are analytical learners: those who like to study grammar, and English books, and read newspapers, and who like to study alone, find their own mistakes, and work on tasks and problems set up by the teacher. Others may be communicative learners who learn by watching (visual), listening (aural) to native speakers, talking to friends in English, and watching television in English. They also learn new words by hearing them and by conversing. Others are authority-oriented learners who prefer that the teacher explain everything, and who write everything in notebooks, study grammar, learn by reading, and learn new words by seeing them. Perhaps some learners use tactile (touch and feeling) or kinesthetic (gestures and movement) as a means to access and negotiate meaning. This goes along in principle with what Florez and Burt (2001) suggest when they talk of getting to know your learner by getting to know

their needs. They suggest that English language learners' abilities, experiences, and expectations can affect learning. Moreover, knowing the strategies learners will use can suggest how they might be grouped according to their strategies and skills.

Needs assessment also appeals to and exemplifies Multiple Intelligence Theory (MI Theory). MI Theory (Christison, 1999; Gardner, 1993) provides a way of understanding intelligence, which teachers can use as a guide for developing classroom tasks that address various ways of learning and knowing. The theory of multiple intelligences (MI) broadens the traditional view of intelligence as solely composed of verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities. MI theory proposes that all humans possess at least eight different intelligences:

Linguistic Intelligence: The ability to use language effectively both orally and in writing

Logical/Mathematical Intelligence: The ability to use numbers effectively and reason well

Visual/Spatial Intelligence: The ability to recognize form, space, color, line, and shape and to graphically represent visual and spatial ideas

Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence: The ability to use the body to express ideas and feelings and to solve problems

Musical Intelligence: The ability to recognize rhythm, pitch, and melody

Naturalist Intelligence: The ability to recognize and classify plants, minerals, and animals

Interpersonal Intelligence: The ability to understand another person's feelings, motivations, and intentions and to respond effectively

Intrapersonal Intelligence: The ability to know about and understand oneself and recognize one's similarities to and differences from others

These intelligences represent a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate understanding and can be applied to the learner of English as a foreign language, especially adults. By doing a needs assessment, language learners and teachers are able to tap into particular intelligence and skill areas. For instance, an adult EFL learner from a culture where intelligences—such as

interpersonal or musical—are highly valued, may find the MI classroom a productive learning environment. This, in turn, helps the teacher and his or her language learners to plan and negotiate what learning styles are needed and what needs are perceived as important.

A needs assessment however, recognizes the principle of ‘androgogy’, a word coined by Malcolm Knowles (1984) for teaching adults. As Knowles indicates, adults are not simply mature children and do learn differently. Adult EFL students, even those who may not be literate in any language, bring many skills and much experience to the classroom. In many cases, they know what they want and need, and they want to learn quickly using cooperative tasks that allow them to be active participants in their own learning. If adult EFL learners do succeed in interacting in a cooperative manner, they are likely to experience a multicultural democracy. This will in turn assist them if they do decide to go abroad someday. When learners, teachers, and volunteers work and collaborate together they form a community, which supports all.

However, in some cases, some learners do not perceive a language need and are not aware of ‘a hole’ (a need) in their learning that requires ‘filling’. Moreover, it becomes difficult at times to determine what a learner’s needs are when he/she lacks the appropriate communication skills, motivation or confidence to explain them. Consequently, the teacher ought to assess and test for the needs of certain language constructs and concepts. However, there are many cases where a teacher is, in fact, guilty of not assessing a need before teaching a language point. As a result, he/she soon comes to realize that the students can already do the required task successfully. As a result, precious time is wasted and no new learning transpires, which can de-motivate, disengage and disenchant language learners from the language-learning process.

HOW DOES ONE DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In order to effectively bring about significant and beneficial changes in the

adult language-learning experience, EFL teachers should choose assessment tools that successfully reveal and bring the learners needs to the surface. These tools should promote the role of the language learner as a problem solver and the teacher as a guide and a problem poser in order to foster learner autonomy, motivation, confidence and the ambition to individually succeed independently and in groups. Such needs assessment tools come in a variety of forms and there are various ways these can be implemented. Auerbach (1994) provides some examples:

Surveys/Questionnaires: These are essential tools in that they ask language learners to indicate their particular needs and interests and can prove most effective in revealing much about the learner and his/her knowledge and experience.

Open-Ended Interviews/Informal Observations on Language Performance: This can prove to be most effective in coming to understand language learners' personal and relevant needs. Interviews can be conducted on a one to one basis or in small groups.

Learner-Compiled Inventories of Language /Literacy Use: These tools aim to elicit the same information as survey questionnaires, but language learners keep the lists of ways to use language and literacy and update them periodically when necessary.

Examining /Reviewing Reading Materials: By displaying various types of reading materials (newspapers, magazines, comics, books, greeting cards, etc.) on a table, language learners can be encouraged to indicate which materials they would like to use in the classroom.

Class Discussions: Regularly posing questions such as, "What do you need to learn in this class?" and "Why do you need to learn that?" permits adult learners to express their preferences and desires about the kind of language they want to learn and how it is relevant to their lives.

Personal/Dialogue Journals: By getting adult learners to engage in 'freer' forms of writing that express their opinions, insights and beliefs, independently or through written dialogue with the teacher or peer, they come to actively form their own "voice" on what they see as relevant and important to them in their language learning experiences.

All of the tools that Auerbach (1994) suggests offer insights into how to

bring about social changes in the class. Moreover, these tools allow for a 'reinvented curriculum' to emerge that aims and strives to satisfy the needs of adult learners.

Christison's Multiple Intelligence or "MI" Inventory (2001), based on Gardner's MI Theory (1993) is another tool. As he points out, the MI Inventory is especially effective "as a tool to help students develop a better understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and learning preferences" while at the same time raising the teacher's awareness of his/her learners. This is key to doing a needs assessment, for it can reveal much about what and why a language learner needs to learn certain aspects of language, and also offers an attempt to show how they perceive themselves to learn best. The rhetoric and a sample section of the inventory illustrate this:

Multiple Intelligence Inventory for ESL/EFL Adults

Directions: Each learner is to rate each statement 2, 1, or 0. A score of 2 means that the learner strongly agrees with the statement. 1 means that learner is in the middle. 0 means that the learner disagrees. After completing each statement within an intelligence section, the learner's scores are then totaled together. Following that, each intelligence score is then compared with the other scores for the different intelligences. High scores are indicative of strong areas of intelligence.

Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence

- _____ I like to read books, magazines, or newspapers.
- _____ I often write notes and letters to my friends and family.
- _____ I like to talk to people at parties.
- _____ I like to tell jokes.
- _____ I like to talk to my friends on the phone.
- _____ I like to talk about things I read.

Logical/Mathematical Intelligence

- _____ I can do arithmetic easily in my head.
- _____ I am good at doing a budget.
- _____ I am good at chess, checkers, or number games.
- _____ I am good at solving problems.
- _____ I like to analyze things.
- _____ I like to organize things.
- _____ I like crossword puzzles.

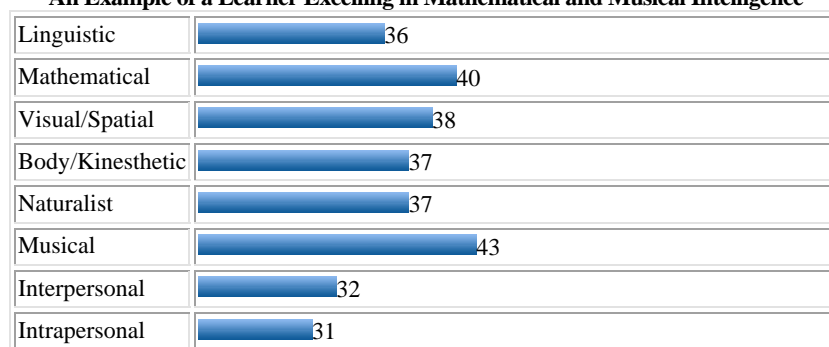
Naturalist Intelligence

- _____ I like houseplants.
- _____ I have or would like to have a pet.
- _____ I know the names of many different flowers.
- _____ I know the names of many different wild animals.
- _____ I like to hike and to be outdoors.
- _____ I notice the trees and plants in my neighborhood.

The more extensive 80 statement online MI Inventory following Christison’s (2001) format can be found at: <http://www.ldrc.ca/projects/miinventory/miinventory.php>

This inventory is an especially useful and efficient way for the teacher to help his or her adult students come to know their own learning styles or preferences. By accessing the Internet to do this, adult learners can receive their results immediately after completing the 80 statements. The scores are then compiled and represented for each intelligence in a bar graph (See Figure 1 below for an example).

FIGURE 1
An Example of a Learner Excelling in Mathematical and Musical Intelligence



What is most interesting about this inventory is how “indirectly” functional, yet effective it is. It comes to show what elements of intelligence exist within

the mental framework of adult learners. Furthermore, it provides insight into what adult learners appeal to and helps the teacher and learners coordinate tasks, activities and exercises that can serve to meet language learner needs. It is indirect in that it does all of these things without asking the language learner for a direct answer that may be uncomfortable in the presence of the teacher and classmates. It also allows for the presentation of more authentic examples of intelligence that one would find in everyday life and applies these to the classroom in a non-confrontational, diplomatic, and comfortable manner.

Others ways to elicit the needs of students can be found in some teaching methods and approaches. Take the use of K-W-L Charts (Ogle, 1986) for example. Such charts are quite useful for noting, displaying and validating adult learners background knowledge (K= What I know), their needs and wants (W= What I want to know/need to know) and what they have come to understand and acquired in some way or form (L= What I've learned) about a particular topic. Briefly, what learners first do is to write what they know about a topic under the K category. Then, for the W category, learners formulate and write questions about what they want to know about that same topic. Finally, learners move to the L category, and write down what they learned. They then go back to the K category and see if any of their prior knowledge was accurate.

Using K-W-L Charts, can serve to open up the opinions and ideas of the learners and act as an ongoing measure to indicate whether their needs are being met. By simply making note of learner responses and reactions in and during K-W-L Chart Tasks, socially and educationally relevant changes can be made to make the language learning process more meaningful, productive, personal, and easily relatable to the learners lives (See Figure 2 for an Example of K-W-L chart).

FIGURE 2
An Example of K-W-L Chart

K What I Know	W What I Want To Know	L What I Learned

Another method that has proven useful in assessing learners' needs is the Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T) Approach (Harmer, 1998). Teachers often embark on teaching their students new grammar structures or vocabulary items only to find out in the middle of their lesson that the students already knew the target items. The Test-Teach-Test Approach starts by checking what students know about the new items. By initially testing the students on what they know, the teacher allows the opportunity for a need to present itself. If the learners in fact cannot do the initial task, a need is created, which fulfills the necessity for learning. Here is an example to iterate this case:

Assume that you want to teach the names of several types of buildings. Using T-T-T, you might start by giving students an exercise where they have to match up the names of buildings with the correct pictures. This will show which names are already known and therefore do not need teaching. The teacher and students can then usefully spend class time working on the names, which were unknown. However, if students indicate that they do not know the names of buildings, then a need is created, which in turn, provides a reason to be teach.

The T-T-T Approach is especially effective for situations where students do not initially recognize a need or are simply not aware of one. The approach serves to not only raise their awareness of a need, but can also serve to humble the learners with its initial test stage. It is this initial test stage that serves to show respect for their knowledge and experience by requesting them to display it. If the learners cannot do what is asked of them, then they themselves become aware of it. Finally, the T-T-T Approach adheres to the principle of androgogy, in that it acknowledges that learners come to the classroom with a wealth or knowledge and experience. It respects that knowledge and allows ample opportunity for it to manifest itself and be used.

Similarly, another method known as the 'Deep-End' Approach has implications for classroom needs assessment. In using this method, learners are given a task that the teacher hopes they can do with little initial input. In a sense then, learners are thrown into the deep-end with the teacher anticipating that they will either 'sink or swim'. What is most interesting about this method is how deliberate it is. What it aims to do is directly assess what language learners can do and need to know in order to complete a task. In some respects, considering Krashen and Terrell's (1983) comprehensible input + 1 ($i+1$), where it is theorized that learners should receive input that is slightly above their level in order to challenge and motivate them, the 'Deep-End' Approach takes this another step forward, in directly assessing and coordinating what will constitute as a need for the learner. It puts the learner again, in a problem-solving position and the teacher in a problem-posing one. As a result, the teacher becomes free of doing extra time-consuming research to identify the needs of his/her adult learners and is able to take on a guide-like role, while learning along with the students. Moreover, the 'Deep-End' Approach shows the learners themselves what they can do and creates a need and a reason to learn, while at the same time, respecting the knowledge and experience they bring to the class.

CONCLUSION

Adult learners are able-bodied individuals with exceptional insights into their own lives. Unlike children, who have learning needs related to developing organized patterns for understanding future experience, adults have learning needs related to their current life. Allowing the opportunity for adult learners to exemplify and make use of their knowledge and experiences in the class and draw upon their experiences as a resource (Imel, 1998), promotes the dynamic of respect and appreciation within the learning environment. By allowing adult learners to have input into what will be taught and addressed, their personal relevant learning needs surface and in

doing so, spark the opportunity for an emergent curriculum to transpire. Learning a foreign language thus becomes reinvented, accommodating the needs of the adult learner first and foremost.

However, at the same time there will be occasions when the adult learner may not know, perceive or even be aware of what constitutes as a need. Consequently, the teacher must employ the tools listed here within to ascertain what those needs are and more importantly measure their relevancy and importance to the learner. A needs assessment is not just a one-time event, but rather, an ongoing process that requires the insights of both learner and teacher to negotiate and make meaning of.

As EFL professionals, our presence in the classroom is to help mediate these issues by posing the problems language learners face and offering them a chance to make sense and resolve them through the guidance we are professionally trained to provide. Continually providing solutions for them however blocks the independence, autonomy or perhaps even interdependence they so hope to strive for. By taking the time to let them voice their needs and concerns, we provide an enriching experience for them. It will make them feel valued, respected and motivated to learn, because they know they have a say and a place within the learning environment. Adult language learners, then, are an inseparable, invaluable part of planning that can make language learning a relevant and rewarding experience.

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APPENDIX

Reflecting On Your Own Practice: Questions on Needs Assessment

- (1) Do you do a needs assessment? If "Yes" go to question (2). If not, why not?
- (2) What is your rationale for doing it? When do you do needs assessment?
- (3) What is the value in doing a needs assessment? How important is doing a needs assessment for you?
- (4) How do you do a needs assessment? What tools do you use?
- (5) How much input do you allow your adult learners to have in relation to the curriculum?
- (6) What types of knowledge and experience do your learners bring to your class?
- (7) How important is it for you to address your learners needs?
- (8) How much freedom do you have to include your learners' needs as part of the curriculum?
- (9) How has your thinking changed upon reading this?
- (10) What do you feel needs consideration, when it comes to needs assessment?