To What Extent Can Learners Be Actively Engaged in Language Needs Analysis and Program Design?

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Abstract

In describing their approach to ESP language needs analysis, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) distinguish target needs from learning needs. But what they describe as learning needs can, in fact, be seen as instructional logistics needs. They focus on target needs and, thus, view learners as being "short of the mark" rather than as people who bring their own experience to a program.

This paper describes an approach to needs analysis and program design that actively engages the learners. It was carried out with a group of aquaculture field researchers in Udornthani, Thailand.

After a one-day site visit in which the teachers met the learners to discuss with them their work-related needs, a two-day program planning workshop was set up at the Asian Institute of Technology for representatives from the outreach project. During this workshop, the participants were asked to carry out work-related tasks alongside AIT counterparts and then to report back to the group on what they did.

Two advantages of this approach are that by observing the participants using English, teachers are more clearly informed about participant needs and the participants themselves are better able to talk about their abilities.

Introduction

In their approach to ESP language needs analysis, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) distinguish target needs from learning needs. In doing so, they move beyond the categorizing of linguistic features which results from instruments such as Munby's Communicative Needs Processor (1987). However, what they describe as learning needs can, in fact, be seen as instructional logistics needs. For example, the learning needs relate to questions of the purpose of the course, background of the learners, types of instructional resources, and location and time of the course. When

Hutchinson and Waters focus on target needs, they view learners as being short of the mark, or lacking, rather than as people who bring their own experience and expectations to a language program.

It was this neglect which prompted us to develop an approach which would more actively involve learners in the needs analysis and design of the language program. Jacobson (1986 : 173) approached needs analysis "in terms of the strategic competence that students need in order to successfully carry out the work required in the [university physics] lab. "His task-based approach, which included observations of what the learners actually had to do with language, marked a major addition to what had typically been put forward as methods for

collecting information about language learning needs (see, for example, Mackay, 1978). However, in the end, what ensued was the delivery of a prescribed syllabus whose purpose was to fill in the gaps identified.

Widdowson's discussion of needs analysis wends its way through the inadequacy of register-based analyses to arrive at the desirability of considering "aspects of discourse" (Widdowson, 1983 : 85). What we need to do, he argues, is to devise ways of engaging learners in "procedural work" which will convert items of knowledge about language into "actualized communicative behavior" (Widdowson, 1983 : 87). Kenny's (1985) review of Widdowson's *Language Purpose and Language Use* added this:

> An analysis by the teacher of the learner's conceptual requirements in the defined field will point us in the direction of the required discourse... the selected discourse becomes in the lesson the object we respond to, dissect and discuss, and the communication we share. How is it conceptually organized? Is it all right? What exactly is meant? Do we agree? Might we add to it? Should we elaborate this point? Can someone explain this? (1983 : 177)

Inherent in these questions is negotiation and through such a process, an understanding of learners' language needs can begin. At the same time, we are forced to consider methodological issues as being at one with finding out what learners know and what they need to know. Does the methodology allow for previously unidentified needs to be addressed or is the content of the program set in stone beforehand? Does the methodology allow for future needs to be handled by the learners "to achieve their own aims after the course is over by applying the procedures they have used in learning to the continuation of learning through language use" (Widdowson, 1983 : 91)?

This concert of needs analysis and methodology is central to the approach presented in this paper; by engaging the learners (here, staff on the AIT Aquaculture Outreach

Project) in these concerns of program design, the learning experience is readily accessible to the participants in terms of the content and their ability to participate. Needs analyzed concurrently with the program and embedded in the methodology must be of immediate relevance. A methodology which fosters learner autonomy sustains momentum to continue learning; it becomes the "catalyst for learning" (Foley, 1991:69).

I. The AIT Aquaculture Outreach Project

Funded by the Overseas Development Agency of the United Kingdom, the Aquaculture Outreach Project of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) is based in Udornthani, Northeast Thailand. The project's main objective is to determine sustainable aquaculture strategies for small-scale farmers

using inputs (feed, nutrients and materials) which are readily available. A delicate aspect of the project concerns the manner in which farmers are recruited and participate in the project. Thus, project staff, being from the northeast region themselves, are crucial to the project's efforts in that they are of the same culture and speak the same first dialect as the farmers. The project staff in the Udornthani main office and two sub-offices in other northeastern provinces were the group of learners for whom a language program was requested.

Our initial contact with the project's manager, a native English speaker, highlighted several general reasons to learn English. The project regularly receives visitors from funding agencies, as well as English-speaking researchers who often stay for weeks or months at a time. Access to aquaculture research information is essential for many staff members and all the data which is collected in the field is ultimately reported in English. Finally, the project is soon to be extended to other countries in the region, ideally drawing on the expertise of the Thai staff.

These reasons established the motivation for a language program but did not give much information about what needed to be learned. To that end, a one-day visit to Udornthani was arranged during which one of the two teachers met the learners to discuss with them their work-related needs.

II. The One-day Site Visit (Udornthani)

During the site visit, the teacher met with the project staff. Through discussion, they were able to identify the following work-related needs:

1. EXPLAINING
   a) the work of the project (methodotogy and recommendations) to visitors
   b) figures and graphs
2. DESCRIBING experiment results and analyzing data
3. REPORTING from farmer data collection forms
4. SPEAKING & LISTENING
5. WRITING
   a) monthly reports of work progress
   b) summaries of the monthly reports
   c) sub-project reports
6. READING & WRITING
   a) scientific project reports
   b) office memos
   c) farmer report forms

Yet to us, this information was inadequate as it merely prescribed a set of content to be taught. (Should we now offer a course called "Writing Office Memos"? It did not tell us what the learners could already do in English or what language learning concerns they thought needed to be addressed. This led us to the two-day planning workshop.

III. The Two-day Planning Workshop (AIT campus)

The site visit information defined the tasks for the two-day planning workshop at the AIT campus in the northern outskirts of Bangkok. Seven representatives of the staff carried out work-related tasks alongside seven counterparts who had participated in language programs at the AIT campus. A typical task sheet looked like this:

Chuanpit

This morning, you will meet your partner from AIT.

You and your partner will be given a task to carry out.

You and your partner can discuss the task together and and then work together on the task.

In the afternoon, you will have to report back to the whole group about what you have done.

Your partner is Supong. Supong is a field supervisor in the aquaculture section of AFE.

This is your task:

Look through the photos in the envelope.

Talk about the photos with Supong.

Choose 3-5 photos that you think are interesting.

Decide what you want to say about the photos.

This afternoon, you will report back to the rest of the group about what you have done.

Other tasks concerned writing (monthly reports, summaries of monthly reports and translating reports from Thai to English); describing and presenting information about field work; preparing captions for project extension media; and describing office procedures.

The report back saw each staff member speaking to the whole group about the task, with the partners stepping in to help out when necessary. Because the partners' work also related to aquaculture, there was a great deal of support and sharing of ideas. For several of the seven, it was their first occasion to use English to discuss their work. During the report back session, the teachers were able to observe the participants using English and were thus better placed to comment on their needs; the participants themselves were better able to discuss their learning needs. Mr. Vorapong, for example, finished his report back by announcing "We want to write (the farmer report forms) in English. "When asked why he did not do so, he began to talk about his limited vocabulary and his lack of experience in constructing sentences. That is, he began clarifying his needs for himself and for us.

On the second morning, the AIT campus staff spoke of work they had done while studying English, expanding on language

learning concerns expressed by the project staff the previous afternoon. Once again, the focus of the discussions moved from simply talking about work-related needs to more specific learning concerns. For example, Mr Pirat said: "I want to use English every day, but I [am] shy. Do you have this problem?" Mr. Supong, one of the AIT partners, answered by talking about how he had overcome his shyness when he first began to learn English ; he went on to explain about strategies he had developed for learning vocabulary. The final afternoon was devoted to a spoken evaluation of the two-day planning workshop, during which each participant elaborated on areas they thought needed development.

During the planning workshop, the participants and teachers were able to clarify and elaborate on the needs that had been identified during the one-day site visit. Some needs had been immaturely defined, for example, the reading and writing of farmer report forms.

While the teachers understood that the report forms had to be written in English, the participants made it clear that:

Participant 1:

The quantitative data on the forms are not translated into English but are coded and then entered into the data base.
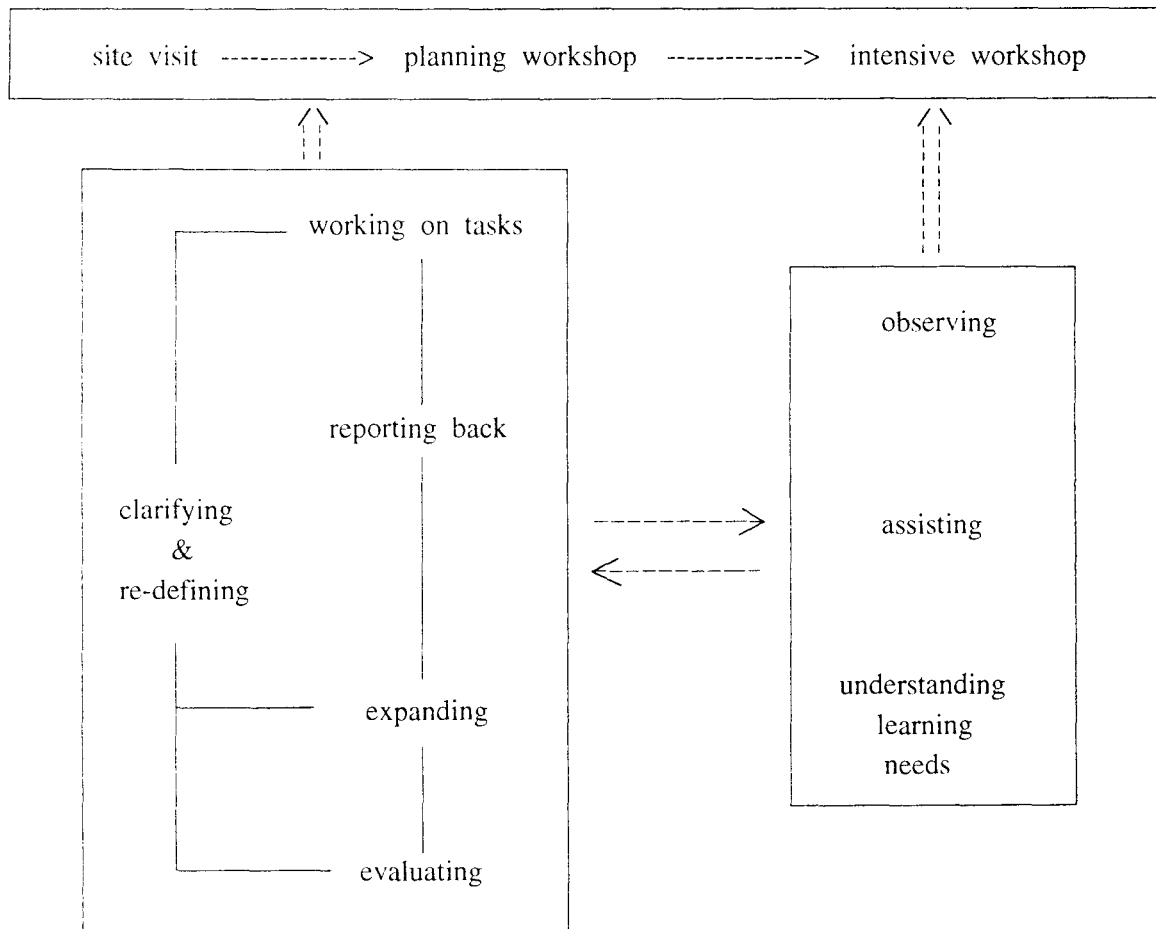
Participant 2:

The qualitative data on the forms can be in note form, not complete sentences.

In this way, there was a continual build up of information from the site visit through the planning workshop to provide the content for the 2-week intensive workshop.

IV. The language program framework

We view the program and its development as three-phase: the one-day site visit, two-day planning workshop and two-week intensive workshop.

The role of the participants and the teachers in this framework are not distinct; in some instances the teachers worked alongside the participants as they carried out the tasks and both learners and teachers were involved in identifying needs. Identification of needs was not confined to one phase, but occurred throughout.

Let us now turn to placing the framework's aspects into a background:

Working on Tasks: The use of tasks allows teachers to establish "the rules [the learner] is using and the systems and categories he is working with" (Corder, 1981 ; in Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991:41). The advantage for the learner is that it allows him to focus on what he can do, to locate his starting point. It is important that the first task be appropriately set up so that, on reporting back, language and content are generated to allow the participants to proceed. This was achieved by pairing the participants with counterparts who could advise and assist them.

Reporting back: A report back session involves a "sharing of information and reciprocal curiosity about what others are doing or have done" and the narrowing down of a topic to one which is "both manageable and of personal interest to the students" (Hall & Kenny, 1988 : 21-22). In our approach, the learners are dealing with work-based tasks so that the method for doing the task during the language program and for doing the task for work are one and the same.

Expanding: An increased ability to deal with the content of the task at a more challenging level using language just beyond the current level of ability comes about through expanding what the learner has to say during a report back. The participants' current knowledge of language use is manifested in the accomplishment of the task, upon which can be built a greater ability to report back. Thus, our understanding of expansion of language is that

it occurs because of a need to discuss expanded content.

Evaluating: Evaluating is seen as a regular and continuing process integral to both learning and teaching (Rea, 1987). In practice, this means that the learners and the teachers question how a given task was accomplished and how it might be improved. As Waters points out, negotiating what is required to work on a task provides an actual situation to discuss what is to be communicated and how it will be done. Participatory evaluation highlights the jobs to be done in the ESP classroom and the best means of carrying them out (Waters, 1987).

V. Concluding Remarks

This paper has not dealt with the two-week intensive course (see Savage & Storer, 1991). However, it extended the process described here. The first task was decided on by the teachers and the groups were pre-formed; in the second task, however, the participants were asked to select an area from the office's weekly sub-project sheet to talk about and were encouraged to form their own interest groups. This movement from teacher-defined tasks to tasks identified by the participants themselves is integral to the program approach. By the second week, the participants were forming their own groups and defining areas of interest to work on for the final poster session.

Some will argue that the way in which we proceeded is singular to the situation and not transferrable. Certainly, we were helped by the fact that the aquaculture project staff were already a cohesive team before we began working with them and that they shared the same first language (though some may view a homogeneous first language mix as a disadvantage). The major constraint was that the participants were at widely different levels of ability in English, from beginners to those who were reading (and writing) research papers in aquaculture.

It is important that the first task be appropriately set up so that, on reporting back, language and content are generated to allow the participants to proceed. This was achieved byu pairing the participants with counterparts who could advise and assist them. We see the major advantages of our approach as:

1. The learners are dealing with work-based tasks so that the method for doing the task during the language program and for doing the task for work are one and the same.
2. The tasks are of interest as they are defined by the learners and involve the attainment of work goals.

3. During report back sessions, the teachers are able to observe the participants using English and are thus better placed to comment on their needs; the participants themselves are better able to discuss their learning needs.
4. Both the learners and the teachers clarify and elaborate on the learning needs.
5. The learners are able to focus on what they can do. That is, they locate their starting points.

In concluding, we turn to Clarke's discussion of the negotiated syllabus:

The "negotiated syllabus does not in fact exist before the learners meet with the teacher in a particular environment in order to establish its parameters. Design is therefore no longer external to, or prior to, the implementation of the syllabus and in fact becomes its most essential pedagogical component, being itself part of the learning process."
(Clarke, 1991:14).

This sums up our view of our work with the staff of the AIT Aquaculture Outreach Project.

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