

Adult Learners' Perceptions of Needs as a Factor to Lifelong Learning

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Abstract. This paper describes the investigation of the perceptions of needs by adult learners. Learners have their internal needs in addition to external demands imposed by teaching institutions. Timing of language courses is scheduled, and teachers are not authorized either to prolong or shorten the scheduled course. What teachers can do is foster learners' language skills by employing more effective techniques, encouraging learners to plan their learning by setting realistic aims and training learners for the lifelong learning and personal development.

For successful language learning, the incorporation of learner 'real world' needs, the development of learner ability to transfer language knowledge to novel situations and the usage of acquired skills in real life communication are considered to be vital parts of course syllabus. Needs analysis plays an important role in designing course syllabus, selecting appropriate materials and teaching learners how to learn.

*"Live as if you were to die tomorrow,
Learn as if you were to live forever".
Ghandi*

Introduction

Needs analysis has figured abundantly in language teaching for over a quarter of a century, and has been focused on learners' communicative needs. It has generally been accepted that an initial pre-course needs analysis has an aim of establishing the structure and content of a language course. Needs analysis is a complex process which is linked with syllabus design, selection of course materials, teaching and assessing a course.

Learners often find it difficult to define what language needs they have, and their answers are rather vague. Teachers have to find ways of interpreting the data, so that follow up course is relevant to learners' real needs and wishes. Another aspect of applying the data for effective learning is adjusting the ongoing course to changing learners' needs, which implies the significance of ongoing needs analysis throughout the course, and can serve as a valuable tool to anticipate learners' future demands.

The data of this investigation were obtained by administering questionnaires and interviewing adults. The respondents were students whose language learning experience was diverse and remote. The research aimed at determining the foreign language needs of adult learners' at university level and the ways of fostering successful lifelong language learning.

Literature Review

An initial pre-course needs analysis is a conventional classroom approach to teaching a new language course to novice learners. The word *need* describes an ability which is important to a person and which he does not have or not very good at.

Some authors distinguish the conceptions of *target needs* and *learning needs*. *Target needs* are understood as what

the learner needs to do in the target situation, and *learning needs* are what the learner needs to do in order to learn. The analysis of target needs involves identifying the linguistic features of the target situation or learners' *necessities*, i.e. what learners need English for, *lacks*, i.e. what learners do not know, and *wants*, i.e. what learners feel they need (Hutchinson & Waters, 1996:55). Therefore, an analysis of target situation needs is concerned with the important area of language *use*, while learning needs cover circumstances of language learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1996:62).

There are slightly different definitions elsewhere, although majority of researchers agree that it is essential to distinguish between needs, wants and lacks. '*Needs* are those skills which a learner perceives as being relevant to him; *wants* are a subset of needs, those which a learner puts at a high priority given the time available; and the *lack* is the difference a learner perceives between his present competence in a particular skill and the competence he wishes to achieve' (Dickinson, 1991:91).

The contemporary attitude to the needs analysis poses the following requirements: it must be 'interrelated with course design, materials, teaching/learning, assessment/evaluation' and be on-going (Dudley-Evans & Jo St John, 1998:121). A very thorough description of needs analysis is presented in (Dudley-Evans & Jo St John, 1998:125).

The term 'needs analysis' began to broaden in the past decade (Harshbarger, 2002): learner motivation, learning styles and strategies, multiple intelligencies, critical thinking became important, and cooperative learning and learner autonomy were promoted as effective ways to meet learners' needs.

The main data collection methods for needs analysis are questionnaires, discussions, interviews, observations, and

assessment (Dudley-Evans & Jo St John, 1998:132). In other words, the main sources for needs analysis are the learners themselves.

Questionnaires are thought to be the least consuming ways of collecting information, and this is why learners needs are usually specified through questionnaires which enable researchers to determine long-term aims and short-term objectives and can generally be used for quantitative presentation of collected data.

An important aspect of needs analysis is concerned with learning styles and strategies. A learner-centered approach is considered to be a cornerstone for successful learning. A current trend in teaching is to take into account learners wants: they might want or need to carry out a variety of communicative tasks in the target language. For this reason, information on the ways in which learners prefer to learn must also be obtained through the needs analysis.

Research Methodology and Background Information

Adult learners' needs, wants and lacks were studied by administering a needs analysis questionnaire and interviewing individual learners during teacher's weekly counseling hours.

The basic results of this investigation were gathered from the students' self-reported data. The gathered information can be viewed as unbiased because the questionnaire was anonymous, and learners were free to express their views and opinions. The survey consisted of six questions, 5 of which were open-ended and generally related to learners' perceptions on their interrelated needs, wants and lacks, and one multiple-choice question (on various teaching styles) suggested a diversity of answers to choose from.

The respondents were extra-mural students, who study law at the Law University of Lithuania. There were five groups of students, 74 people altogether. Students' were in their thirties and forties. Overall, adults had a very limited number of English lessons a term – just 16 hours, and studied English for four terms.

Data and Discussion

In this section, each question of the survey is followed by the findings and discussion.

1st question. What do you need English for?

This is the most essential question in any needs analysis. The responses to this question shed light on learners' current needs and are as follows:

<i>Learners' responses</i>	<i>%</i>
For communication	65
For a job	24
For personal development	14
To speak fluently	5

Adults did not specify what they meant by communication. In the interviews learners clarified this as a future need. A small minority of adults mentioned other needs: for traveling, using a computer, watching TV, and business trips abroad (1.4% for each of these responses).

2nd question. What kind of English course do you anticipate?

Learners' current wants are reflected in their responses to this question and presented below.

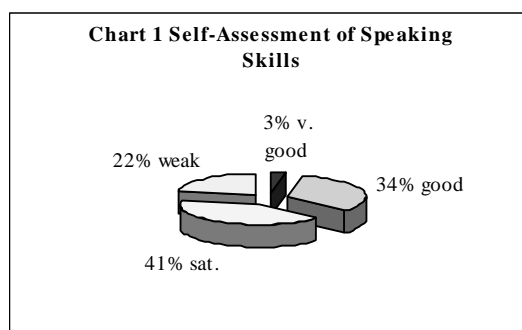
<i>Learners' wants</i>	<i>%</i>
To learn ESP vocabulary	46
To improve English	59
To improve speaking skills	41
To learn grammar	16
To improve listening skills	10
To improve reading skills	11
To improve translation skills	7

More than half adults (59%) want to improve their English. Slightly few than half express priority for learning professional vocabulary and improving speaking skills (46% and 41%, respectively). Surprisingly, request for grammar has been revealed, although when asked verbally what learners dislike in studying English, an almost unanimous answer is 'grammar'. Listening and reading skills are not in a great demand – just 10% and 11%, respectively. However, a wish for improving translation skills seems rather unusual. Particularly, referring to the pre-independence techniques of teaching foreign languages by means of grammar-translation method. In interviews, some adults clarified their wish for translation – learners encounter serious difficulties in understanding legal documents.

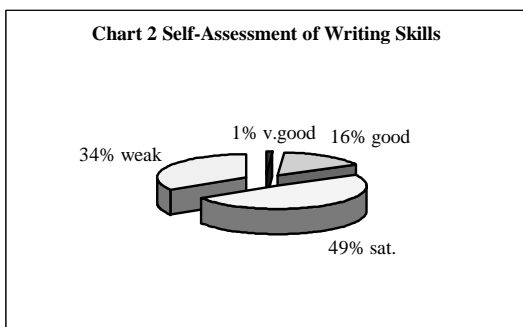
3rd question. How do you assess your proficiency in language skills?

Adults' lacks are reflected in their self-assessment of language skills on a five grade scale and shown below in pie charts 1, 2, 3 and 4.

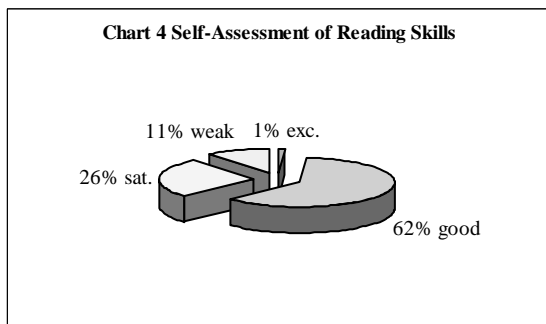
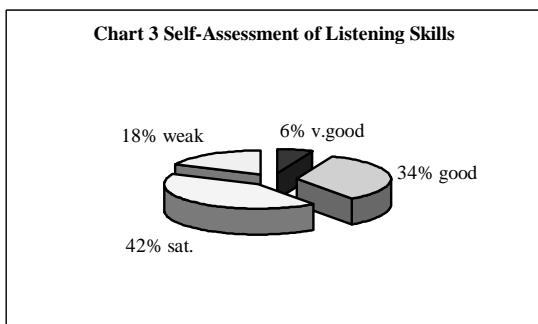
Self-assessment of learners' productive skills is shown in Chart 1 and Chart 2.



The respondents are realistic in their self-assessment of productive skills: speaking and writing is graded as satisfactory by 41% and 49% of adults, respectively, and weak – by 22% and 34%, respectively. Only the third of learners consider their speaking skills good, and 16% - writing skills good. On the whole, speaking is problematic to 63% of respondents (either weak or satisfactory), and writing – to 83% of respondents.



Learners' self-assessment of receptive skills of reading and listening is shown in pie charts 3 and 4. 42% of learners ranked listening as satisfactory, and 18% - as weak, which makes it problematic to 60% of respondents.



Surprisingly, 62% of respondents claim they possess good reading skills (Chart 4), although, while being tested, learners' reading comprehension skills proved to be satisfactory rather than good. Generally speaking, limitations in reading skills are easier to conceal, and majority of learners are not aware of their reading weaknesses until encountering comprehension problems.

4th question. What are your strengths and weaknesses in a foreign language?

Learners' weaknesses are ranked in a descending order – from grammar to listening skills.

Adults' weaknesses	%	Adults' strengths	%
Grammar	49		–
Speaking	20		4
Vocabulary	16		–
Writing	12		1
Reading	8		5
Listening	3		–
Do not know	–		90

The grim reality of perceptions on learning a foreign language is revealed by students' self-assessment of current strengths and weaknesses in various language areas. The findings are staggering – just 10% of adults are aware of their strengths, while the majority of 90% do not know what strengths they possess in language skills. However weaknesses are quite definite and more accurately defined. Inasmuch as learners denoted more than one weakness, the overall percentage in the first column exceeds 100%.

5th question. What are your preferences for teaching styles?

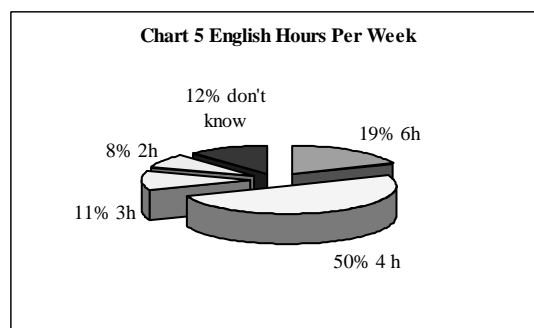
This question was formulated as a multiple-choice inquiry and several answers were suggested: independently, in small groups, in a large group under teacher's guidance, privately, individually.

Learners' priorities in teaching styles	%
Independently	14
In small groups	81
In a large group under teacher's guidance	35
Privately	–
Individually	1

It can be seen that adults' preferences for teaching / learning styles have been rather variable and ambiguous – learners have chosen several answers. That is why their final response exceeds 100%. Individual learning is out of favour (1%), and private is out of question – learners cannot afford it. Majority of respondents have chosen learning in small groups (81%) and either in a large group under a teacher's guidance (35%) or independently (14%).

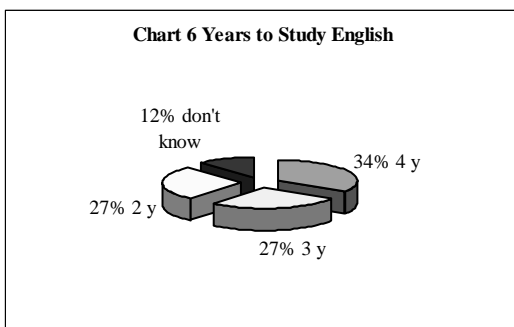
6th question. How many hours a week and how many years do you want to study English?

Chart 5 depicts respondents' attitude to the amount of time they would like to study English per week. Interestingly, half of students prefer 4 hours a week, slightly fewer than the fifth (19%) – 6 hours, and the same number – between 2h or 3h. 12% of respondents have no opinion on this question.



34% of learners prefer 4-year course, and the same percentage of students (27%) either 3 or 2 years.

The interpretation of these findings is very straightforward. At present adults have a very limited number of hours – 64 hours extended over two years. It is highly unlikely that learners will be able to attain their goals of improving language skills during such a short course. The data on the amount of time for language learning highlight learners wants for better education.



Learner Training

Since 2001, the International Year of Languages, the Council of Europe has been promoting learning of foreign languages by organizing wide information campaign to celebrate Europe's linguistic diversity. The motto of this campaign is 'Language learning is a lifelong process'. To ensure the longevity of language learning, learners, independently of their age, need to be trained how to learn effectively.

This approach of learner training is particularly important to adult learners who might have had some negative learning experience in the past, do not feel confident about their ability to master languages later in life or develop a variety of dislikes to contemporary learning / teaching techniques. Obviously, such attitudes hinder processes of learning. Therefore, education programs need to place more emphasis upon continuous adult's development throughout their careers.

According to C. Lovelock (2002:27), it is worth the trouble to reform students' approach to learning by systematically reinforcing the adoption of following attitudes and strategies:

- Firstly, learners need to learn that they can improve their own learning by adoptive learning strategies;
- Secondly, learners' active involvement is essential for learning, i.e. they must internalize (make part of one's

personality) skills in ways that are meaningful to them;

- Thirdly, consciousness raising is essential for effective learning, but in a non-intensive program there is little time for implementing it;
- Finally, social and communication strategies are indirect aids to learning (Lovelock, 2002:27).

Conclusions

The needs analysis is a valuable tool to anticipate learners' future needs. The analysis of adult learners' current needs, wants and lacks allows teachers to adjust English course syllabus to students' demands by providing meaningful experience with language and placing emphasis on tasks and activities that benefit learning.

In short courses for adults, teachers can foster students' language skills by employing more effective techniques and encouraging learners to plan their own learning by setting realistic aims. Teachers must encourage and motivate learners to transfer language knowledge to novel situations and the usage of acquired skills in real life communication, which eventually help promote lifelong learning.

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Poreikių suvokimas –mokymosi visą gyvenimą veiksnys

Santrauka

Užsienio kalbos įgūdžių ugdymas betarpiškai susijęs su besimokančiųjų komunikatyvinių poreikių analize, kurią atlieka užsienio kalbų dėstytojai prieš pradėdami naują kursą. Tokia analizė leidžia nustatyti užsienio kalbos kurso struktūrą bei turinį ir apsprendžia programos sudėtį, mokymo medžiagos pasirinkimą, mokymo procesą bei kurso vertinimą.

Suaugusieji dažnai nesugeba apibūdinti savo poreikių ir teikia ganėtinai miglotus atsakymus. Dėstytojų pareiga yra surasti gautų duomenų interpretavimo būdus tikslu pateisinti besimokančiųjų lūkesčius. Sėkmingam mokymui/si įgyvendinti yra būtina koreguoti suplanuotą kursą su besikeičiančiais suaugusiųjų poreikiais kurso eigos metu.

Tyrimo rezultatai buvo gauti atlikus suaugusiųjų anketavimą bei individualiai kalbant su studentais konsultacijų metu. Respondentai buvo Lietuvos teisės universiteto neakivaizdinių studijų įvairaus amžiaus studentai, kurių užsienio kalbų lygis bei mokymosi patirtis buvo skirtingi.

Tyrimų tikslas buvo nustatyti suaugusiųjų poreikius mokantis profesinės užsienio kalbos, įvertinti jų pagrindinių užsienio kalbos įgūdžių, išsiaiškinti mokymosi kliūtis bei ieškoti būdų kalbos mokymosi efektyvumui didinti.

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