

Realistic Needs Matter: The Imperative of Learner-Centred Design in EFL Curriculum Development

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Abstract

This article contends that centring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula on learners' specific needs is not merely advantageous but essential for fostering meaningful language acquisition. By synthesising theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and practical applications, it underscores the necessity of systematic needs analysis (NA) to inform curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and assessment. The discussion bridges learner-centred theories, such as the communicative approach and task-based learning, with actionable practices for educators, emphasising the dynamic role of teachers as facilitators of contextually relevant instruction. Challenges in implementing needs-based curricula are acknowledged, yet the article posits that ongoing, adaptive NA processes can align educational objectives with learners' linguistic, academic, and professional aspirations.

Keywords: Learner-Centred Design, Realistic Needs, EFL Curriculum Development, EFL Curriculum Design

Introduction

In the diverse landscape of education, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, curriculum design plays a pivotal role in shaping learner experiences and outcomes. Curriculum design often operates from a

macro standpoint, grounded in broad theories, philosophies, and approaches that emphasise an idealised state of education. While these frameworks provide valuable insights and overarching goals, they can sometimes overlook the complex array of the specific needs of individual learners.

A fundamental debate within this field revolves around the extent to which educational programmes should be shaped by the specific requirements and goals of the learners they serve. This article argues forcefully that realistic learners' needs are not merely a consideration, but the indispensable foundation upon which effective EFL curriculum design must be built. By understanding and responding to these specific needs, educators can create courses that are not only more relevant and motivating but also significantly enhance the potential for successful language acquisition and application in real-world contexts. In EFL curriculum design, this oversight can be particularly detrimental. There is a growing body of arguments advocating for a more learner-centred approach that prioritises the realistic and specific needs of language learners.

A learner-centred approach in EFL curriculum design recognises that the context in which learning occurs is a fundamental cornerstone. This perspective shifts the focus from abstract ideals to the tangible realities faced by learners, including their individual differences, learning styles, linguistic competencies, mastery levels, and modes of language acquisition. By considering these factors as a point of departure, educators can develop curricula that are not only more relevant and engaging but also more effective in facilitating language acquisition and application.

Thus, this article argues that realistic learner needs must be the foundation upon which EFL curriculum design is built. By understanding and responding to these needs, educators can create courses that significantly enhance the potential for successful language learning. Through a detailed exploration of

learner-centred approaches, needs analysis, and practical pedagogical strategies, this discussion aims to illustrate how EFL curriculum design can be transformed to better serve the diverse and evolving needs of language learners.

Theoretical Mandate for Learner-Centredness

Modern language teaching approaches underscore the central role of the learner in the educational process. The communicative approach, for instance, is explicitly learner-centred, aiming to equip learners not only with grammatical competence but also with the social skills required to navigate daily communication effectively, considering what to say, how, when, and where (Richards, 2006). This perspective views language not as mere content to be learned in isolation, but as a tool for communication and action in meaningful ways.

More specifically, learner-centred language teaching fundamentally places learners and their needs at the forefront of curriculum design. This philosophical shift recognises that language learning is a deeply personal journey, influenced by individual goals, prior experiences, and learning styles (Nunan, 2013). Failing to align teacher goals with learner goals can be a significant source of dissatisfaction for students. Therefore, understanding and responding to learners' diverse needs is a theoretical imperative for any curriculum aiming for effective and meaningful language learning.

The idea that learners should actively contribute to decisions about what and how they learn, and how they are assessed, is a core tenet of negotiated learning, a concept within learner-centred teaching, although it can be controversial for some educators (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). Ultimately, for learning to occur, the learners must undertake the effort, making their engagement and motivation crucial, which is heavily influenced by the relevance of the content to their needs.

Deconstructing Learner Needs: The Core of Needs Analysis

The systematic collection and analysis of information necessary to satisfy the language learning requirements of students is known as Needs Analysis (NA) or Needs Assessment. This process is considered critical to the planning and ongoing refinement of language programmes, especially in fields like English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). NA provides data to inform decisions about course content, proficiency levels, exit levels, and the overall syllabus.

Contemporary approaches emphasise the active participation of the learner in identifying their needs. Needs analysis encompasses several dimensions. Target situation analysis (TSA) focuses on understanding the uses to which learners will put the language after instruction, including the types of language-based tasks, linguistic skills, and knowledge required in their future academic, professional, or vocational contexts (West, 1994). For example, TSA might reveal that engineering students need to read technical manuals or that business professionals need to write negotiation emails.

Present situation analysis (PSA), conversely, assesses learners' current knowledge and linguistic competency relative to the target level required (Richards, 2001). Learning situation analysis (LSA) delves into the subjective and affective needs of the learners, such as their motivation and self-esteem. It also considers their preferred learning strategies and expectations of the course. Means analysis examines the opportunities and constraints within the teaching context, including available time and teacher expertise (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Beyond these traditional components, modern NA has broadened its focus to include learners' current deficiencies, preferred learning strategies, wants, and expectations, as well as understanding the environment in which learning

takes place. A critical approach to needs analysis, for instance, assumes that institutions are hierarchical and seeks areas where greater equality might be achieved by giving more power to those at the bottom (Benesch, 2001). This highlights that needs analysis is not a purely objective exercise but can involve considering social and political contexts.

While TSA can provisionally specify language content, PSA and LSA are also vital in curriculum development, allowing for syllabus and methodology modifications through ongoing negotiation between teachers and learners. This process can also raise learners' awareness of their own needs and goals, fostering autonomy. Ultimately, assessing needs provides the data that serves as the basis for developing the curriculum, tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies, and for re-evaluating the initial assessment. All stakeholders in vocational education and training agree on the necessity of data from needs analysis as a solid basis for developing foreign language courses (Long, 2005).

The Multifaceted Nature of Needs Across Contexts

Learner needs are highly variable, depending on the learning situation, context, and purpose. A key distinction exists between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. ESL students are typically living within an English-speaking community and require language skills for daily life interactions, such as banking or accessing health services, often needing to learn a specific local variety of English (Ellis, 1994). Their motivation is usually high due to the immediate need to integrate into the target culture.

EFL students, on the other hand, learn English in their home country, often for travel, communication with other non-native speakers, or for academic/professional purposes. For these learners, especially those pursuing academic goals, speaking proficiency might be a priority in the long term, but

the focus might be more academic, requiring skills for writing projects and theses (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). The global status of English means it is taught everywhere, but the specific relevance of learning English differs from other languages based on local context.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts particularly highlight the importance of specific needs. ESP course development assesses needs to determine content and proficiency levels. Descriptions of language use in specific professional or academic fields provide content for these courses (Robinson, 1991). Debates exist within LSP/EAP regarding the level of specificity required. Some argue for teaching generalised academic writing skills to diverse groups, hoping for transfer to specific disciplines. Others contend that learners need instruction tailored to the norms and genres of their particular disciplines, arguing that learners will ultimately be evaluated on their ability to write within their field, not in 'general' academic prose (Hyland, 2006).

Highly specific courses, while potentially meeting precise student needs in depth, are costly in terms of preparation time and research. More general courses are more practical but may offer descriptions that are too broad. Despite the difficulty in fully capturing the broad range of language use in any specific domain, needs analysis is fundamental for defining LSP domains and informing test development (Douglas, 2000).

Adult learners, such as adult ESL learners, often have specific learning goals tied directly to their life goals, including access to housing, employment, and participation in their children's education. Intensive language courses for adults, particularly professional courses, need to meet their specific requirements, as they involve a significant investment of time and energy (Basturkmen, 2010). Vocational education and training (VET) language courses also underscore the necessity of data from needs analysis to

understand learner needs and the communication events they will participate in. However, obtaining data from companies can be challenging due to confidentiality concerns.

Globalisation also influences needs, creating a perceived need for command of international English in many states, which can impact the learning of other languages. Conversely, in dominant English-speaking countries, there might be less motivation to learn other languages. The needs of language teachers themselves also require assessment (Freeman, 2009).

Translating Needs into Curricular Frameworks and Content

The results of needs analysis serve as the essential basis for developing a curriculum, defining its goals and objectives. The design of a syllabus, which is part of curriculum development, is a complex process that ideally begins with a needs analysis. This analysis determines why learners need the language, including the situations and domains of use, relevant topics, required skills, attainment levels, preferred teaching methods, and learning styles (Graves, 2000). Input for this analysis can come from students, teachers, or employers through questionnaires, interviews, or other research.

Based on identified needs, an ESP syllabus can incorporate various units such as skills, genres, functions, grammar, vocabulary, conceptual content, cultural content, and strategies (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). For example, an EAP syllabus might focus on specific academic writing and speaking skills based on needs analysis results. For air traffic controllers, an ESP course might adopt a functional syllabus including speech acts like requesting clarification. The choice and grading of text types to include in a course depend on needs analysis, learners' proficiency, and background knowledge. Learners with academic purposes need to engage with text types relevant to scholarly communication, while those needing English for daily life require text types suited for intimate interpersonal interaction and information exchange.

The debate regarding specificity in LSP/EAP curriculum design is directly linked to how needs analysis outcomes are interpreted and applied. Whether to teach general academic writing or discipline-specific writing depends on the designer's stance on how best to meet learners' needs for Translating Needs into Curricular Frameworks and Content discipline-specific writing depends on the designer's stance on how best to meet learners' needs for writing within their specific fields.

Practical Pedagogies Informed by Learner Needs

A curriculum designed around realistic learner needs translates into practical teaching approaches and material selection that resonate with students. Using the internet for language learning, for instance, should consider pedagogical criteria, such as whether online activities provide an adequate learning stimulus and fit within the general learning environment, and whether they improve learning outcomes (Chapelle, 2003). If the activities align with learners' needs and goals, and teachers provide support, internet use can be very helpful.

Authentic materials are a prime example of how needs inform practice. These are materials designed for native speakers, not language learners. Sources include newspapers, magazines, TV programmes, movies, songs, literature, and especially the Internet (Gilmore, 2007). Using authentic materials allows learners to interact with real language and content, rather than just form, helping them feel they are learning English as it is used outside the classroom. This is particularly relevant for learners whose needs require them to use English in real-world situations.

When selecting authentic materials, suitability of content is crucial – the material should interest the students and be relevant to their needs. Exploitability (how the text can be used to develop reading competence) and

readability (linguistic difficulty) are also important considerations. The difficulty of authentic texts can be addressed not just by simplifying language, but by employing pre-reading activities to activate prior knowledge and using tasks like skimming and scanning that align with real-world reading purposes (Nuttall, 1996).

Task-based activities, pair/group work, and peer correction used with authentic materials can increase learner motivation and make the material more stimulating and interesting than traditional textbooks. Utilising online authentic language materials and professional resources is a literacy skill needed by EFL student teachers for effective web employment in language learning (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007).

Content-based instruction (CBI) is another approach directly linked to learner needs and interests. CBI assumes people learn language better when using it to acquire information rather than as an end in itself. It provides a coherent framework to link and develop all language skills (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). When CBI uses the Web, learners engage in tasks that expand both language/literacy skills and knowledge of content areas relevant to their lives. Examples include researching topics of interest online and using information from different genres for tasks like writing an argument essay.

Task-based learning aligns well with needs-based curriculum, designing instruction around tasks learners need to perform in target situations. This can involve identifying regular tasks and designing instruction around them (Ellis, 2003). The "deep-end strategy" in task-based teaching has students perform a target task first, with teacher input and feedback following as needed. This approach is particularly applicable for learners who already possess conceptual knowledge in their first language but need to express it in the target language. The increased need to communicate in a task-based

environment promotes language acquisition and activates previously partially acquired language elements.

For secondary school EFL students, a standards-based communicative approach focuses on equipping them with language, thinking, and study skills for effective communication and comprehension. This approach introduces topics and situations relevant to students and integrates language skills in meaningful contexts, using realistic tasks potentially needed in future academic, professional, or vocational situations. Student-to-student interaction is necessary for this approach (Savignon, 2002).

Addressing the specific needs of EFL learners in academic contexts, such as those needing to write papers and theses, requires focusing on the demands of academic writing. This challenging form of writing necessitates handling vast information, complex ideas, and data with clarity and understanding. It demands accuracy, evidence, logical structure, and proper referencing. Mastering formal tone and terminology, and maintaining academic integrity through citation, can be particularly difficult, especially for non-native speakers (Swales & Feak, 2004).

Developing advanced writing skills, especially with computers and IT, is a key topic in advanced language teaching strategies. The Web can facilitate writing practice, provide authentic audience, peer evaluation, and feedback, and offer motivating features for EFL student writers. Academic writing involves explaining, arguing, and interpreting. It requires learning about a subject thoroughly. Explanatory writing answers questions like "What is it?" or "Why did it happen?" and often takes the form of research essays or reports. Argumentative writing aims to create belief or change minds. College writing frequently involves research, using expert testimony and documentable information. The goal is often to present information beyond common knowledge. Effective academic writing requires synthesising ideas from

multiple sources, using others' work to build or substantiate arguments and acknowledging existing thinking through citation (Hyland, 2002).

A needs-based EAP curriculum would therefore explicitly address these skills and challenges, preparing learners for the specific communicative demands of their academic environment. Critical EAP goes further, interrogating current conditions for greater equity and democratic participation (Benesch, 2001). The need for digital literacies is also increasingly relevant in EFL curriculum design, reflecting the demands of the 21st century and potential job requirements. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), web-mediated language learning (WMLL), and virtual language learning (VLL) are strategies that address these new literacies. Information literacy, a key component of digital literacy, involves skills like finding, evaluating, analysing, and synthesising information from various online sources, requiring added critical reading skills (Leu et al., 2004). Assisting learners in acquiring computer skills is important, especially for migrants and refugees who may need them for employment. Even in the context of traditional literacy, computer tools like word processors can facilitate the writing process by easing revision and redrafting.

Assessment Aligned with Needs

For a curriculum to be truly needs-based, assessment must also align with the goals and outcomes derived from needs analysis. In LSP, for instance, test development often uses needs analysis as a point of reference for drawing up test specifications (Douglas, 2000). However, translating the broad range of potential communicative demands identified in needs analysis into a feasible assessment framework can be challenging. Ultimately, assessment should measure learners' ability to perform the specific language tasks required in their target situations, as identified by the needs analysis.

The Teacher's Indispensable Role

In a learner-centred, needs-based EFL curriculum, the teacher's role extends far beyond simply delivering content. Teachers must be able to closely attend to the needs and goals of their learners and engage them in the learning process. They act as cultural brokers, mentors, and designers of learning experiences, helping learners manage their attention and providing well-mentored learning opportunities (Richards & Farrell, 2005). While teachers possess professional expertise in language teaching and learning, the ultimate responsibility for learning rests with the students, necessitating a collaborative approach where teachers guide learners to take control of their own learning.

Understanding how TESOL/TEFL should be approached within a specific context, considering new technologies, literacy challenges, and evolving language theories, is crucial for teachers designing needs-based courses. Teachers need the knowledge and skills to choose appropriate language learning strategies, approaches, and techniques based on the specific requirements of their teaching situations. This requires ongoing professional development (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Teachers also need to be open to feedback and integrate it effectively, reflecting the process of revision common in academic writing. Engaging in research, such as action research, can help teachers identify and address problems and needs encountered in actual teaching situations. Critical language teacher education encourages teachers to reflect on the social and political contexts of language education and their role within it (Hawkins & Norton, 2009).

Challenges and Navigating Complexity

Implementing a truly needs-based curriculum is not without its challenges. Conducting a comprehensive and accurate needs analysis can be complex and time-consuming. The range of "allowable contributions" in any specific domain of language use can be vast, making it difficult to capture fully in a syllabus or test. Prioritising and packaging the identified language skills can also

be challenging, especially when data is difficult to obtain. Balancing the need for highly specific instruction that precisely targets individual needs with the practical constraints of time, resources, and group heterogeneity is a constant negotiation (Brown, 2009). Learners themselves may have conflicting wants or expectations, and their stated needs may not always align with what they truly require for effective communication. Institutional constraints, such as available time, resources, and the prevailing educational philosophy, also influence the feasibility of a needs-based approach. However, even within constraints, teachers can adapt and design tasks that align with learner needs.

Conclusion

In sum, the arguments for building EFL courses on realistic learners' specific needs are compelling and deeply rooted in effective pedagogical principles. Learner-centred approaches and the communicative paradigm fundamentally position the learner's goals and requirements at the heart of language education. Needs analysis provides the systematic means to uncover the multifaceted dimensions of these needs, spanning target situations, current proficiency, learning preferences, and affective factors. These identified needs offer indispensable guidance for curriculum developers and teachers in selecting relevant content, choosing appropriate methodologies, structuring learning experiences, and designing meaningful assessment. From selecting authentic materials and implementing content-based instruction to designing task-based activities and addressing the specific demands of academic or vocational communication, responding to learner needs translates directly into practical strategies that enhance motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. The teacher plays a critical role in this process, acting as a skilled facilitator, assessor, and ongoing learner themselves. While challenges exist in the comprehensive implementation of needs-based design, the evidence strongly supports the contention that a curriculum genuinely focused on the realistic needs of its learners is paramount for fostering effective, relevant, and ultimately successful

English language learning in diverse global contexts. Needs analysis should not be seen as a one-off event, but an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation, ensuring the curriculum remains responsive to the evolving needs of the learners it serves.

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