Subjective Needs Analysis: A Vital Resource to Assess Language Teaching[1]

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Abstract

The present research paper reports the results of a subjective needs analysis applied in a foreign languages institute at a private university in Colombia. For these students, it is mandatory to take English classes and to pass all the required English courses. In that sense, and after some years of teaching English, the foreign languages institute (FLI) needed to be assessed. Thus the objectives of this research were to: Apply a subjective needs analysis in a foreign languages institute of a private university in Colombia in relation to their English classes; assess teachers' current roles and performances; and determine the students' needs and wants in relation to their classes. The methodology was based on qualitative research approach and on grounded theory. To collect data three instruments were utilized: A survey, a journal and an interview. The data analysis revealed that the subjective needs analysis was centered on class methodology, materials, and students' needs and wants. In general, the findings revealed that students felt comfortable in their English classes and with the way they were taught. Also they did not think that using textbooks was useful because the virtual work implied more work. They felt the need to enhance their speaking and listening and that improvement could be done by means of more communicative activities.

Resumen

La presente investigación reporta los resultados de un análisis de necesidades subjetivo que se aplicó en un instituto de lenguas extranjeras en una universidad privada en Colombia. Para estos estudiantes es obligatorio tomar clases de inglés y aprobar todos los niveles. Es así que, tras varios años de impartir clases de inglés el instituto de lenguas extrajeras (ILE) necesitaba ser evaluado en consecuencia, los objetivos de esta investigación fueron aplicar un análisis de necesidades subjetivo en el instituto de lenguas extranjeras de una universidad privada en Colombia en relación con las clases de inglés; evaluar el rol y el desempeño de los profesores en sus clases de inglés y determinar las necesidades y peticiones de los estudiantes en cuanto a sus clases de inglés. La metodología se basó en el enfoque cuantitativo y en teoría fundamentada, la recolección de datos se realizó por medio de una encuesta, un diario y una entrevista. El análisis de datos demostró que el análisis subjetivo de necesidades se enfocó en tres aspectos: metodología de clase, materiales y necesidades y peticiones de los estudiantes. En términos generales los hallazgos demostraron que los estudiantes se sienten cómodos en sus clases al igual que con la forma en la que se les enseña; ellos no creen que un libro sea útil puesto que las tareas virtuales implican más trabajo y tiempo; los estudiantes quieren mejorar sus habilidades de habla y de escucha y creen que esas mejoras se pueden dar por medio de actividades comunicativas.

Introduction

Needs analysis is a vital component for the designing and implementation of curricula in any language educational context. A needs analysis is the base for the construction of a language program,. It can also be used to assess the conditions of the current work. Its usefulness is rooted on the fact that education must be improved and transformed according to the context, resources available and students. Thus, this research applied a subjective needs analysis to determine what students' voices discussed about the English language education that they were receiving in a Foreign Language Institute of a private university located in Colombia. This type of needs analysis was applied to students of different undergraduate programs and they were inquired by means of a survey, a journal and an interview. Among the findings, it can be highlighted the positive feedback that students give to their teachers and the way they teach their classes. On the other hand, materials were an important factor for students, a textbook is required for their classes, but according to them, this book is not necessary. Finally, from their English classes, students expect to be able to communicate and to understand what other speakers say.

Problem

In a private university located in Colombia, students must take English as a mandatory subject. The degrees that this university offers are in the fields of international business, accounting, psychology, law, agricultural business administration, architecture, industrial engineering, mechanical engineering, civil engineering and environmental engineering. In order for all of the students to get their undergraduate degree, they must pass English levels one to six. In this university, the Foreign Languages Institute (FLI) is in charge of teaching the English classes.

The teachers in the Foreign Languages Institute (FLI) follow a specific curriculum for each level. Each level takes 16 weeks (one semester) in which students take four hours of English classes per week. Each curriculum includes grammatical content that students must learn. During the semester students take three exams, which are worth 35%, 35% and 30%, respectively. Likewise, each level and its corresponding curriculum is based on a textbook that students must purchase and that give them access to a virtual platform to do some virtual work.

The FLI was opened in this private university in 2010 and it is in charge of administering the English classes for students. In the FLI there are some committees that must work on academic issues, for example virtual platforms, curriculum, research, students' academic performance and social work. The committee that has a direct impact on students' development is the curricular committee, this group of teachers is responsible for the designing of the syllabus and exams and textbook selection.

Despite teachers various duties, they do their best to achieve an optimum language level for students, their perceptions in relation to the education they receive have not been assessed. A needs analysis is necessary because since the establishment of the FLI, the teaching process has been carried out according to the institutional requirements, but so far the voices of students have not been heard. On the present paper, the following questions are posted: What do students' voices reveal about the methodology applied in their English classes? And what are students' wants and needs in relation to their English classes in a private university in Colombia?

Theory

Needs analysis is the base for selecting a teaching method, materials and objectives. Todea & Demarcsek (2017) implies that "curriculum content and developing teaching materials must be based on needs analysis, which, in turn, could be considered the foundation for developing tests, materials, teaching activities and evaluation strategies" (p. 2). Consequently, a constant needs analysis is required to know when an adjustment to the syllabus and curriculum must be made.

Needs analysis will always be a must for any language institute or program. This type of analysis serves as a self-evaluation of the processes that are carried out in relation to teaching, content or methodology. Most of the time, the needs analysis is carried out before a language program is designed, but it can also work as an assessment of the ongoing processes and to determine the relation between teaching and students' wants and needs. According to Brown (2006), cited in Ulum (2015),

> needs analysis is the systematic data collection and examining of all subjective and objective information required to describe and validate curriculum goals that support the language learning needs of learners within the context of the institutions that affect the learning and teaching situation. (p. 16)

This implies a very relevant point in teaching, needs analysis validates objective and subjective information. When a syllabus in a language institute or program is designed, teachers look for theoretical principles and teaching models to determine the methodology and the content. Only when the syllabus is being applied it can be possible to identify if the classes satisfy students' expectations, needs and wants. Students are the ones that provide the subjective information to shape and reshape a syllabus or curriculum according to contextual issues, Lepetit & Cichocki (2002) affirm that needs analysis enables educators and practitioners to shape the curriculum development that bases the content of language courses on the communication needs, wants and interests of the learners.

Any language institution must be aware that a curriculum or syllabus must be open to revision. Balint (2004) argues that "English language programs need to adapt their curriculum. Therefore, a process of reviewing an English language program needs to be implemented routinely to make the changes necessary to facilitate the desired outcome of the program" (p. 26). For the Foreign Languages Institute (FLI) in which this research was carried out, the main objective is that at the end of the six levels students reach a CEFR B2 level in language proficiency. By means of the application of a needs analysis it can be possible to determine if the current syllabus requires any adaptation or change in order to pursue and reach the mentioned aim. In this sense, Todea & Demarcsek (2017) declare that "needs analysis is a useful tool to use in order to assess what language points students need to master, as well as to meet their needs during the learning process" (p.1).

For the purpose of this needs analysis, students' voices are fundamental. The designing or assessing of a language program or institute cannot leave aside the expectations and views of the students. They are the ones who are able to provide vital data to identify teaching weaknesses and strengths. Balint (2004)

expresses that, wants, desires, demands, expectations, motivations, lacks, constraints, and requirements are important to build a wider concept of needs analysis, that way it can be concluded if curriculum and students' beliefs and assumptions are the same, similarly Cowling, (2007) states that needs analysis allow to obtain much information about the current and future needs of students, in order to make advised decisions on the objectives of a new curriculum.

When students' voices are involved in a needs analysis, it is called a subjective needs analysis. This type of analysis includes aspects that are relevant before and during the implementation of an English course that are directly related to students' perceptions. Todea & Demarcsek (2017) mentions that "subjective needs analysis, include: learners' wants, means, factors that affect the way they learn such as previous learning experiences, reasons for attending the course, expectations" (p. 4). For this research, students provide the most important information because after several years the FLI is asking them what they think about the linguistic education that they are receiving. Balint (2004) emphasizes that "due to ever changing learner, societal, and institutional factors, current English language programs need to include needs analysis as part of routine program review. Identifying and confirming the various perceptual needs and wants of the students' at one institution" (p. 36).

Subjective needs analysis is as important as objective needs analysis. Both types of analysis include not only the regulations, theoretical principles and expertise of teachers, but also the background and opinions of students. When all the previous aspects are taken into account a language program or institute can reach its objectives following a clearer path, Juan (2014) writes that, "subjective needs are inferred from the 'affective and cognitive factors' of the learners. These factors include the learners' personality, self-confidence, personal cognitive styles, expectations: and self-esteem during the learning process" (p. 13).

This research wants to give relevance to the opinions that students might have in relation to their English language education. There is much that can be stated in relation to the regulations and institutional goals that an English institute or program must follow and accomplish, but also students can participate as critics and fabricators of their own education. They are who take the classes and recognizing and identifying their subjective educational needs is also part of the teachers' role.

Methodology

This needs analysis research was based on the qualitative research and case study approach. Three instruments were applied, a survey [See Appendix], a journal and an interview [See Appendix 2]. The three instruments were addressed towards collecting information in relation to assess the current class methodology, to determine the impact of the material used, and to stablish the students' needs and wants.

In the piloting phase, 120 students were surveyed and from their answers, the survey was revised. After correcting the survey, it was applied to 105 students. After one month the journals were gathered, students were asked five more questions which they answered in narrative form. Finally, an interview was carried out in which students responded to four more questions. At the end of the data collection process twenty students had completed the responses of all three instruments, some of the others students did not provide information or responded to only one instrument, and they belonged to fields such as civil engineering, law and accounting.

The process of data analysis was done under the principles of grounded theory. After analyzing each instrument and finding the common patterns it was possible to determine that the needs analysis was correlated to three aspects. Students assessed their English classes methodology, the materials used for carrying out the classes and their expectations, needs and wants. Finally, the participants could provide rich data to infer the subjective needs analysis proposed in this research.

Findings

The results of the data analysis were derived from the triangulation of the three instruments. The survey, field notes and interview were vital to know the students' needs and wants and also to assess the current teaching labor that has been done within the FLI in Colombia. Consequently, class methodology, materials and students' needs and wants will be developed according to the data analysis.

Class methodology

Class methodology is important for students' self-motivation and development. The data showed that 41% of the participants argued that they felt that classes were appealing, 29% considered classes as fun and 17.7% thought that the content given in classes was repetitive. Also, students mentioned that their classes

should include more speaking and listening activities. At this point it is necessary to discuss that because the exams taken by students in each term are based on grammar topics, the teachers must include this component in classes which means that little time can be invested in listening and speaking skills.

Another aspect related to the methodology in the English classes has to do with the language level and progress that students show. Forty three percent of the participants mentioned that their language level improved. The reasons that they gave for supporting this assertion are that they have learnt topics that they had not previously at school. An important aspect mentioned by students is the fact that the examples and exercises provided by the teachers allowed them to understand better how the English language works and to know how to use the grammar rules. Some other students argued that time is an important factor for learning English, it means that if the teacher takes time for explaining and revising students' work, they can be able to demonstrate positive results. A final comment about the methodology is that some other students see that English can be useful for their professional development and thus, they pay attention and feel curious about the classes and explanations.

On the other hand, 12.9% of participants asserted that they had not improved their language level. They stated that their classes did not meet their expectations, they want to learn about speaking and pronunciation, but their classes are focused on writing and grammar. Another key aspect is that some students felt that their teacher focused their attention on the ones that had a higher level and leave aside the ones with lower level. The previous assertion implies that some students that have a low proficiency level felt demotivated and isolated in class. Furthermore, students thought that classes were repetitive, for example they expressed that *To Be verb* was studied semester after semester and it caused that students got bored and that they did not pay attention in class.

A third group of students claimed that their English language level had not improved, these students represented 27.4% and 9.7% of the participants and they believed that classes focused on writing were an obstacle for students to improve their listening, also they considered that this skill was the one in which students needed more practice. Some other comments were related to the influence that teachers can have on students' development. For example, some students suggested that the English classes were similar level after level, teachers focused on grammar and the exercises were always about filling in blank spaces. Likewise, students had the perception that exams were done by memorizing words or structures and this way of learning was similar to what they had previously used in schools. Another argument about not improving language proficiency was related to its functionality. Students were required to build phrases based on specific grammar rules that did not have any relation to their actual lives, also most of the time, in this kind of exercises, learners used Google Translate to do the assignments and the repetition of activities did not allow them to learn more vocabulary.

A pedagogical concern emerged from some students who expected more support from their teachers. Some students commented that it is not enough to be a good professional or to have a lot of knowledge, it is also necessary to be comprehensive and supportive with students. The participants stated that not all of them had the same level of language knowledge or proficiency, it meant that they liked when their teachers take their time to explain and to revise students' assignments. The students valued the application of pedagogical precepts because teachers that were not educated to be teachers (accountants, engineers, physicist, etc.) teach without bearing in mind learning styles, motivation or pedagogy, some students ended their classes confused because explanations were not clear and theory was not reinforced by examples. It is to say that the pedagogical knowledge applied in the English classes is well seeing from students.

At this point it can be seen that students felt that their English classes could be better. Most of the students claimed that their English language level improvement. However, there were some others that asked for different activities and different content. This percentage of students were asking for support and for more practical language. For these students, teachers could include more materials different from grammar exercises and they should help student develop other abilities in students such as listening and speaking. This is an important finding because it indicates that students were able to assess their teachers and also, they can suggest changes in order to improve their teaching.

Materials

In the FLI teachers use textbooks to teach their classes, these textbooks must be followed because they are the chosen path for students to learn the language. The topics of the book are the ones that are included in the exams. The textbook is mainly based on grammar and the teacher reinforces the topics with extra

activities. An important issue is that these textbooks are sold to students and with the purchase they also obtain an access code that can be used to access virtual content. The students have access for two or three semesters (depending on the editorial).

The textbooks used in the FLI gained relevance in this research because they were sore point in the discussions. Along the instruments and the data collected in this research students were inquired about the textbooks and they expressed their opinions about its usage and suitability. 63% of the participants mentioned that the book is not necessary. There are several comments from students in all three instruments to support this point of view. Most of them affirmed that the cost of the book was too high and that the virtual platforms made the textbook a requirement not a resource. Also, students considered that learning a language is done by interaction, speaking in classes, and by listening to real life issues. According to the participants, when a teacher leaves an assignment from the book, they copied one another and no one cared about learning, they just cared about the grade.

Students were aware that the textbook they used was not helpful for their language development and that doing their work on the platform caused them some stress. They asserted that teachers' activities were more interesting and meaningful than the ones provided in the book. Besides, they perceived that not all the pages or the activities included on the book were developed in class. There were some exercises that were not done because teachers do not ask students to do them or because they felt they did not have time enough. Furthermore, the university has its own platform (Moodle) and it was enough for students. Using Moodle and doing homework created some pressure for the students and it caused them to look for the easy way out, copying from one another.

For some students the activities applied by their teachers were adapted to the students' proficiency level, necessities and capabilities on the contrary, the activities of the textbook were out of their reality. According to the participants, their weaknesses could be better corrected if the teacher creates his/her own materials, that way students' learning can be more appropriate. Also, apprentices argued that the exercises proposed in the virtual platform were confusing and they did not have their teacher to ask questions. Because of the previous situation students believed that all the exercises were the same and that their work was repetitive and boring, which led them not to pay attention and or use Google Translate to do their homework.

Another argument has to do with other materials that can be applied inside the classroom. Students mentioned how important and useful the activities done by their teachers were. However, there are some other resources that they thought were better for teaching, for example PowerPoint slides, movies, videos, music, online games, presentations, debates or theater plays that can demonstrate that students were using and applying their knowledge in the foreign language. Besides, for students English is not like mathematics or any other subject, English language teaching allows the teacher and students to work on any topic or subject or to apply different strategies and different ways to practice it.

On the other hand, 29% of the students considered that the textbook was necessary for their learning. To support this point of view students argued that the textbook had many activities and knowledge. Another aspect mentioned by students was that the book explained the topics clearly and there were no doubts about what it was being studied. Another point was that the book could help the teacher to design material. It suggested activities and exercises that enriched the teachers' job. For another participant the book was necessary for learning the hardest topics and to practice reading. This means that sometimes the notes that students took in class were not enough to study, then the book was important to solve doubts.

As it has been seen in the samples, for most of students there are reasons for not having an English textbook. The FLI institute has changed the textbooks and the editorial, sometimes because of the price or for the time that students have access to the platform. An issue that is frequent is that sometimes, the editorials take time to open the platforms and sometimes students do not buy the book. Not having a textbook affects the students' overall score, and not doing the virtual works affects grades negatively. On the other hand, there are students that think that the textbook is the guide that teachers need to teach and that it contains the activities and materials that teachers can use to enhance students' language proficiency.

Students' needs and wants

The third aspect found in the data was related to the needs and wants of students in relation to their English classes. Students thought that classes were more focused on grammar exercises and that there were some other skills that are not practiced frequently. In this case, 40.1% of the participants considered that classes should be addressed towards enhancing speaking skills. For students, communication is important as well

as grammar, but they expressed that they needed to apply those grammar rules by means of speaking. Additionally, 30% of the students believed that classes should be focused on listening. For these participants understanding a dialogue or an audio in English is complicated, and sometimes when teachers give listening quizzes, students are predisposed since they do not expect to be able to perform well. Thirteen percent of students mentioned that writing should be the focus of the classes, and 10% prefer working on reading activities.

In relation to the needs that students mentioned, their comments show that they want to have more communicative activities in the English class; 32% of the participants argue that communication can help them to improve their language proficiency. In this aspect students support their comments by mentioning that communicative activities turn theory into practice. Grammatical classes are boring and few students pay attention to them. Also communicative activities demand that teacher be more creative and dynamic. Through communication, students that have a low language level can improve by speaking.

Additionally, 30.6% of the participants would like to study vocabulary in general ,and 19.2% prefer vocabulary specific to their field of study. This relates to the fact that some students want to work or study abroad once they graduate. This internal motivation influenced the perception that students have about their English classes and what they expected from them. For these students the need to learn English comes from their desire to work outside Colombia and because of it their needs were very specific.

Besides, the participants did a comparison between English language native contexts and their classroom. They mentioned that when a person is in a foreign English speaking country, the context forces him/her to understand and use the language. This necessity promotes the knowledge of new vocabulary and the improvement of pronunciation. Another key aspect is that students argued that learning English should have the same process as learning the mother language. They compared English and Spanish and mentioned that they did not need theory for learning Spanish, they first listened and later acquired vocabulary. Teaching English through grammar required that students to translate in their minds what they wanted to say and those translations were inaccurate and produced communicative inconsistencies.

Students wants are a relevant feature in this research. Their wants facilitated to have an assessment on the teachers' job done in the FLI. Definitely, most of the comments remarked communication as a skill that should be included in the English classes. Those activities are fundamental to improve apprentices' listening, pronunciation and to lose fear to talk in a foreign language. In terms of communication, teachers are the models to follow and the ones that have the knowledge to determine the progress of students.

Additionally, students agreed that real life issues are better to learn English. When language is connected to their lives, students can feel more attracted to learn and the content makes more sense for them. In this aspect, students also highlighted that when activities are useful, and meaningful vocabulary is easily remembered. Therefore, students' wants are related to improving listening and speaking by means of using contextualized content.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study are addressed towards three points, the value of the work done by the teachers, the dissatisfaction in relation to the textbook and the way students would like to be taught. The students of the FLI value the work done by their teachers, they said they felt good in class and that their teachers are very creative and innovative. The methodology applied allowed some students to feel that their language proficiency was getting better every semester. Nonetheless, some percentage of the students argued that they did not feel that they were improving because classes were monotonous and based on the same grammar topics. The previous assertions are vital, because they mean that despite teachers doing their best to teach, there are some key aspects to improve and change.

The textbooks used in the FLI was a significant point in this research. Aspects such as the price, the virtual work and the content influenced the students negative perception of students. First, for students the price is too high. They mentioned that not having money meant not having the book and consequently it affected the final score and from that point of view the book was not a guide it was a mandatory condition. The virtual platform of the book was another controversial topic . Students felt stressed because they had too many assignments and they did not feel that the virtual work helped them to improve, eventually they copied from one another. Finally, the content of the book was not contextualized and did not relate to the actual needs of students. For example, teachers could design activities based on music, pronunciation or

communication according to students' level and context, instead of doing the decontextualized activities of the book.

The third conclusion is that students would like to learn English in the same way they learnt Spanish. They mentioned that grammar is important, but communicative activities should be done in class too. Some students mentioned that they preferred to be trained in English by means of listening and speaking activities and therefore they could enhance their communicative abilities. Students wanted to learn English based on real-life issues, and that teaching was more focused on helping to learn rather than just reporting grades.

These three conclusions are fundamental to making future decisions within the FLI. The subjective needs analysis proposed several items to bear in mind. The FLI has talented and dynamic teachers, but at the same time some topics are taught traditionally. This caused students to lose concentration and motivation which also caused that they forget the content and affected their exam scores negatively . Furthermore, it is important to assess the role of the textbook in this private university. It is necessary to analyze its content, the virtual work and the costs for students. A point of discussion should be whether the book is a guide for leaning or a mandatory requirement for the final grade. The needs and wants of students support the idea of having more communicative classes. They want to learn the language, but they would like to learn it spontaneously, or in the same way they acquired their mother language. This want can be achieved by teaching grammar implicitly and including more functional language instruction in class.

The subjective needs analysis applied in the FLI of a private university in Colombia proved to be an essential assessment tool even during the development of a languages program. A needs analysis can be applied before designing a language syllabus, but it is also meaningful to assess the work done to apply the necessary changes and to be better every time. From the current subjective needs analysis, it can be inferred that despite students liking their classes and their teachers, sometimes materials did not suit their needs and wants. The main conclusion from this subjective needs analysis is to bear in mind students' voices and the internal objectives and regulations of the university in relation to the English language policy to create a *dialogue* between the administration and the actual students' needs and wants.

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Appendix 1

Survey

Estimado estudiante, la presente encuesta tiene fines investigativos y quiere establecer su percepción en relación con el quehacer pedagógico del Instituto de Lenguas Extranjeras (ILE) sede Villavicencio, por lo tanto, le solicitamos responder a las siguientes preguntas honestamente, muchas gracias.

1. Con base en su experiencia como estudiante de inglés, en sus clases usted…
   a. Ha mejorado su nivel de lengua
   b. No ha mejorado su nivel de lengua
   c. Su progreso es mínimo cada semestre
   d. Ha seguido igual
   e. Ha tenido que buscar ayuda externa

2. En términos generales sus clases de inglés son:
   a. Amenas
   b. Divertidas
   c. Aburridas
   d. Repetitivas
   e. Otro: _____

3. En su concepto las clases de inglés debieran enfocarse más en (puede marcar más de 1 opción si así lo prefiere):
   a. Leer
   b. Escribir
   c. Escuchar
   d. Hablar
   e. Otro: _____

4. Para usted el libro de inglés que se usa es:
   a. Vital
   b. Necesario
   c. Innecesario
   d. Otro: _____

5. De acuerdo con sus gustos, las clases de inglés debieran tener más:
   a. Gramática
   b. Actividades comunicativas
   c. Vocabulario general
   d. Uso del idioma en contexto
   e. Uso del idioma específicamente para su carrera
   f. Otro: _____

6. ¿Cuál sería su sugerencia para que sus clases de inglés sean mejores?
   _____

Appendix 2

Journal

1. ¿Por qué afirma que su progreso ha mejorado? ¿Qué cree que lo ha causado?
2. ¿Qué hace que las clases sean amenas?
3. ¿Por qué el libro es necesario o innecesario?
4. ¿Por qué necesitamos vocabulario general en las clases de inglés?
5. ¿A qué se refiere con clases más dinámicas?