Peer needs analysis

Jason Anderson sensitises his learners to the needs of their classmates.

t was a typical Tuesday morning in the staffroom, on day two of a new course. The conversation went something like this:

Director of studies: OK guys, don't forget to collect in the needs analysis questionnaires from your new classes this morning.

Teachers *(in subdued unison)*: Yeah, yeah.

Me *(whispering to colleague)*: *What* needs analysis questionnaires?

Colleague: We were meant to give them out for homework yesterday. Did you forget?

I nodded, sheepishly. She handed me the document and I quickly scuttled off to the photocopier.

I was a new teacher at the school. On my way to class that morning, I glanced through the questions on the still-warm photocopies, wondering how I could get the job done quickly. I knew needs analysis was important, but at that moment the questionnaire seemed like just another piece of 'admin'. My first instinct was to get the students to fill it in before starting the lesson, but then it struck me: Why not get them to do it in pairs? They can interview their partner and take notes on the questionnaire. Wouldn't that be the *communicative* way of doing it?

It went much better than I could have expected. To my surprise, not only did I get a set of nicely detailed questionnaires, but the lesson had started with nearly half an hour's speaking practice. What's more, the students seemed to be really interested in sharing and comparing their needs and interests. And I learnt lots about them too, just from monitoring the activity and listening to the discussions.

This event, three years ago, was a critical incident for me, which taught me something I'd missed in my 20 years or so of teaching. As I began to make sense of what had happened, I searched online for evidence of other teachers doing something similar. I couldn't find any, so I christened it 'Peer needs analysis', and continued to develop the idea further. Since then, I have developed a range of activities and ideas that I have found useful in my own classroom (adult, multilingual, general English in the UK) and I would like to share them here, in the belief that they may be useful to others.

What is peer needs analysis?

Peer needs analysis can be defined as the act of raising the students' awareness of the needs of their co-learners in a class. It aims to turn needs analysis into a social event, and within the communicative classroom it is likely to be beneficial for several reasons:

1 It provides an opportunity for meaningful communication between the learners, whether this be through spoken or written interaction.

2 It fosters patience and understanding of their peers' challenges, needs and interests.

3 It enables the learners to see ways in which they can help their classmates to learn.

4 It helps to raise the learners' awareness of the challenges that the teacher faces in planning courses and lessons for groups of learners with diverse needs, interests and preferences.

5 It can serve as a useful tool on the path towards a more negotiated curriculum.

While the literature on needs analysis makes clear reference to the importance of the participation of the learners in the data collection process, there is very little reference to peer needs analysis *per se*. David Nunan mentions the importance of training learners to set their own objectives, in order to have a more realistic idea of what they can achieve, and Kathleen Graves suggests that in very large classes, for practicality's sake, groups of five learners can work together to complete a single questionnaire. However, neither reflects on the potential benefits that getting the learners to find out about each other's needs may have on the rapport, peer-understanding and sense of community within the classroom itself, which for me has made needs analysis less of an admin chore and more a vital ingredient in getting classes to gel and work well together.

Peer needs analysis (PNA) can be done *pre-course*, in the early phases of the course (*initial*) or as an *ongoing* process throughout the course. It is adaptable to both closed courses and courses where continuous enrolment means new learners may join at any point. Below, you will find several ideas that you can try out if you want to start experimenting with PNA in your classroom.

1 Peer interviewing

Useful for pre-course and initial needs analysis

Rather than getting your learners to complete needs analysis questionnaires on their own, or interviewing and completing them yourself, you can adapt most needs analysis questionnaires so that each learner can interview a partner and complete the questionnaire for them. Any difficult vocabulary can be pre-taught, and is likely to come in useful for ongoing needs analysis and study skills. Such peer-interviewing can be followed by an activity in which larger groups of learners compare the needs of their partners, identifying areas of similarity and difference. When appropriate, presentations can even follow this and precede syllabus planning sessions (see below).

2 Needs analysis surveys

Useful for initial needs analysis

Create a list of questions that will provide useful needs analysis input. Examples might be:

1 *Which of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) do you need to improve most and least?*

2 *What kind of homework do you find useful, and how much do you want after each lesson?*

3 *Which is more important for you to do in class: grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation, and why?*

4 *When do you think the teacher should and shouldn't use your L1 in class? What about the students?*

Give one question to each learner and ask them to survey the whole class with the same question, taking notes as they do so. Afterwards, each can give a brief presentation on the findings, and you can take a copy of their notes.

3 Needs discussion activities

Useful for initial and ongoing needs analysis

This involves providing the learners with opportunities to discuss aspects of their needs, preferences and interests together, usually in small groups. They can discuss preferences with regard to error correction, differences in reasons for learning English, the qualities of a good teacher or they can rank areas of grammar in order of importance. Activities that encourage the learners to come to some agreement or consensus tend to be more successful for PNA, as they force them to notice, consider and balance any differences that they find. Examples of some discussion activities are provided on page 51 for you to photocopy and try out with your learners. They should work with classes from B1 to C1 level.

4 Needs analysis chat room

Useful for ongoing needs analysis

If your learners have access to the internet (either in class or at home), it is possible to set up a needs analysis chat room where both you and your learners can post questions (eg *What do you find most difficult about learning English?*), describe challenges (*Can anyone help me to pronounce the word 'latte' so that the guy in the coffee shop understands?*) and propose ideas for future lessons (*I'd like to do something*

on CV writing). *Facebook* or *Yahoo* groups are usually good for this. While many learners will naturally expect you to respond to their comments, I have found that with gentle encouragement (eg *Does anyone have any advice for Maria?*), the learners become willing to offer suggestions to each other.

5 PNA as part of a negotiated curriculum

Useful for ongoing needs analysis

While many of us like the idea of negotiating a curriculum or syllabus with a class of learners, the practicalities involved often make it very difficult. We may also be concerned that the learners may perceive a weakness in the teacher: *'Why are you asking me? You're the teacher!'*

PNA can help us to make ongoing formative decisions about what to study, based on the feedback we get. We can either do this without telling the learners, or we can consult them in short syllabus planning sessions. For example, when I'm teaching intensive courses here in the UK (three hours a day, Monday to Friday), I usually devote part of Friday's lesson to looking at the suggested material for next week (eg the next unit in the coursebook) and getting the learners to discuss in groups which bits they think will be most useful, most interesting and which (if any) they would prefer to miss out. Not only does this help me to plan the next week's lessons over the weekend, it also raises each learner's awareness of what the class as a whole want to do, which can reduce dissatisfaction and complaints. Two further benefits are that it helps them to prepare for future learning (particularly useful for the weaker and less confident students), and provides a meaningful, communicative task with real future consequences. I have found this effective with learners at levels from A2 to C1, and with both teenagers (14+) and adults.

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More ideas are possible. I have got my learners to create a classroom poster entitled 'Our Needs', and have even developed a board game called 'Needs Analysis Challenge' that involves a combination of discussion questions and surveys. It's a great way to end the first day of a new course. Never will I look upon needs analysis as simply admin again!

Graves, K *Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers* Heinle & Heinle 2000

Nunan, D *The Learner-centred Curriculum* CUP 1988

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Needs Analysis Discussions

Discussion 1: The qualities of a good English teacher

Working in groups of 3–5, make a list of six qualities of a good English teacher. Try to agree on the order of importance (1 = most important). For example: *A good English teacher gives the students lots of speaking practice.*

Discussion 2: Reasons for learning English

Discuss the following questions in groups of 3–5. Choose a secretary to take notes, so you can report back to the class afterwards:

1   What are our reasons for learning English?
2   What do we see ourselves doing with English in five years' time?
3   What goals do we share as a group with regard to learning English?
4   What goals are different?

Discussion 3: What grammar should we study?

Working in groups of 3–5, complete the following two tasks:

Task A

Brainstorm a list of ten areas of grammar that all of you would find useful to study.

Task B

From your list of ten, choose the five that you all agree are most important, and put them in order of importance (1 = most important)

Discussion 4: Correction of spoken errors

Discuss the following questions in groups of 3–5. Choose a secretary to take notes, so you can report back to the class afterwards:

1   When do you like your spoken errors to be corrected? Immediately, or after the activity has finished?
2   How do you like your errors to be corrected? Direct correction, or do you like to get a hint, so you can correct an error yourself?
3   Who do you like to correct your errors? Only the teacher, or are you happy for your classmates to correct you?