

Peer Needs Analysis: Sensitising learners to the needs of their classmates

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What is peer needs analysis?

Peer needs analysis can be defined as the act of raising students' awareness of the needs of their co-learners in a class. It 'aims to turn needs analysis into a social event' (Anderson 2014). Within the communicative classroom it's likely to be beneficial for several reasons:

1. It provides an opportunity for meaningful communication between 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 learners to see ways in which they can help their classmates to learn
4. It helps to raise 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

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. Here are 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 learners to complete needs analysis questionnaires on their own, or interviewing and completing them yourself, most needs analysis questionnaires can be adapted so that each learner can interview a partner and complete the questionnaire for them. Any difficult vocabulary can be pretaught, 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 discussion activities

Useful for initial and ongoing needs analysis

This involves providing 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 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 these are provided in Figure 2 for you to photocopy and try out with your learners. They should work with classes from B1 to C1 level.

Figure 2: Needs Analysis Discussions

Discussion 1: The qualities of a good English teacher

Working in groups of 3-5, make a list of 6 qualities of a good English teacher. Try to agree on the order of importance (1 = most important). Example:

1. *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 5 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 2 tasks:

Task A

Brainstorm a list of 10 areas of grammar that all of you would find useful to study.

Task B

From your list of 10, choose the 5 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 it yourself?
3. Who do you like to correct your errors? Only the teacher, or are you happy for classmates to correct you?

Needs analysis surveys

Useful for initial needs analysis

Create a list of questions that will provide useful needs analysis input (see Figure 1). Give one to each learner and ask them to survey the whole class with the same question, taking notes as they do.

Afterwards, each can give a brief presentation on the findings and you can take a copy of their notes.

Figure 1: Possible questions for a needs analysis survey

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. What kind of accent do you want? Do you want to keep your first language accent, to sound like a native speaker, or to be understood internationally?
 4. When do you think the teacher should and shouldn't use L1 in class? What about the students?
- etc.

Needs analysis chat room

Useful for ongoing needs analysis

If your learners have access to the Internet (either in class or at home) it's possible to set up a needs analysis chat room where both you and your learners can post questions (e.g. 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 (e.g. 'Does anyone have any advice for Maria?'), learners become willing to offer suggestions to each other.

Using peer needs analysis 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 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 in the UK (3 hours a day, Monday to Friday), I usually devote part of Friday's lesson to looking at the suggested material for next week (e.g. the next unit in the coursebook) and getting 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.

References (including those mentioned in the talk)

- Anderson, J. (2014) *Speaking Games*. Delta Publishing.
- Anderson, J. (2017) *The Trinity CertTESOL Companion*. Delta Publishing.
- Graves, K. (2000) *Designing Language Courses: A Guide*