



Do Needs Assessments Enable More Effective English Language Teaching?

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Project Description

In the qualitative research project we investigated how the administration of needs assessments to English language learners affects the quality of the instruction given to the students following the assessment.

We conducted case study/diary study with 10 Spanish-speaking EFL high school age volunteers in Bagaces, Costa Rica for three weeks in January 2011.

The process included:

1. creating and proctoring a needs assessment to gather information about learners' abilities and needs
2. analyzing the results to determine the students' needs
3. creating a curriculum based on their needs for instruction. We then used that curriculum to instruct the EFL students two hours daily for three weeks. During instruction period, a final assessment was developed to assess their improvement in the targeted areas.



Research Questions

1. How does the administration of needs assessments to English language learners affect the quality of the instruction given to the students following the assessment?
2. What instructional choices does it influence?
3. Does it help us see learners' linguistic progress?

Research Methodology

Data Collected:

- Needs assessment results
- Daily instructional journal
- Lesson plans
- Final assessment results

Coded and Analyzed along these Themes:

- How the needs assessment informed instruction
- Which other instructional choices were made that were not influenced by the needs assessment
- What was learned about the use of needs assessment
- What progress was perceived when comparing and contrasting the qualitative, linguistic data from the pre and post assessments.

Findings

Finding #1: How does the administration of needs assessments to English language learners affect the quality of the instruction given to the students following the assessment?

Use of the needs assessment influenced the quality of the instruction by:

- Focusing the instructors' attention on the learners' goals and learning outcomes
- Narrowing the range of possible needs, topics, and goals
- Making the instruction more meaningful and relevant to the learners
- Helping a newer instructor know where to begin instruction in a new location and with an unfamiliar population

Finding #2: What instructional choices does it influence?

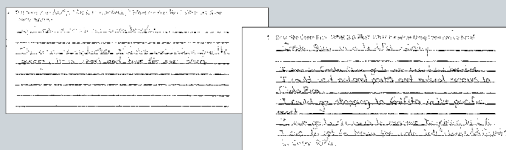
The needs assessment guided the following instructional choices:

- Choice of instructional theme based on the learners' interests
- Choices on grammatical areas for instruction that the learners needed
- Focus on specific language skill (i.e., four skills) needs and complementary activities
- Examples:
 - On the Interest Inventory many of the students expressed interest in travel and culture; therefore, the unit theme chosen was 'Travel.'
 - Communicative activities to practice word order and the use of prepositions in meaningful ways as opposed to memorization and repetition.
 - Emphasis on listening and speaking

Finding #3: Does it help us see learners' linguistic progress?

The needs assessment helped the instructor see the learners' linguistic progress more clearly by:

- Making the instructor aware of the students' abilities at the point when they entered the class
- The needs assessment serves as a reference point.
 - The instructor could then analyze the students' abilities at any point during instruction, compare them to what they were at the beginning, and see if there has been progress or not.
- This is the classic pre/post test scenario.
- Example:
 - The first image is an item from the needs assessment, the second is an item from the final assessment.
 - Juanita's performance in writing improved in the final assessment, and the differences can be seen by comparing similar items from the assessments.



Discussion

The evidence revealed interesting insights, direct and indirect, about the influence of needs assessments on the quality of instruction. For example, we know that meaningful focus on form activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998) as well as communicative, learner goal-oriented instruction yields better results in terms of learning (Nunan, 2006; Rivers, 2000).

- "Learning is goal-oriented... Teaching therefore becomes an active thinking and decision-making process in which the teacher is constantly assessing what students already know, what they need to know, and how to provide for successful learning." (O'Malley, 1990)

The findings show that the use of a needs assessment is a very worthy use of teachers' limited time. In this case it enhanced the use of instructional time, allowing the teacher to use time more effectively.

- Many of the instructional choices made were based on information gathered in the needs assessment
- The use of the needs assessment allowed the instructor to "rule out certain options," so time could be used more effectively

The needs assessment helped the instructor to be aware of and able to focus on the students' needs and wants in regards to language learning.

Implications

All teachers need to be using some classroom based form of needs assessment and analysis to improve the focus of instruction and instructional quality.

Publishers should consider developing needs assessment tools that are classroom based and possibly electronic in order to improve the reliability and validity of the assessment tools as well as the frequency of their use.

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