Needs Analysis in the EFL Context: The Case of a Greek Secondary Class

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Abstract: Teaching foreign languages is considered to be a complex psycho-pedagogical phenomenon which needs to be examined taking into consideration a variety of factors which influence academic achievement in school context. Hence, illuminating these factors can be realized through needs analysis, which is an integral part of the educational process. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the needs of a specific target group of secondary education learners in the Greek English Foreign Language context. In this light, an empirical research, based on a questionnaire, was carried out involving thirty two participants, who attend the last grade of compulsory education.

The results of the study reveal that students learn English because it provides qualifications opportunities to pursue a career. The role of the family is influential as it encourages students towards this direction. Popular topics to cover are those which reflect the everyday life of students while students learn better when they are actively engaged in the learning process.

Teachers should be able to take into consideration the results from a needs analysis. Through these results, teachers become aware of their students' language competence, wants and interests. Thus, they can plan lessons effectively. Moreover, they can select useful material and design activities appropriate to suit their students' developmental needs. In this way, they contribute to their students' language proficiency.

Key words: motivation, needs analysis, TESOL, secondary education

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the needs of the learners of the 3rd Grade of Junior High School of Karatoula in the English Foreign Language context. As Jurisevic and Pizorn (2013, p. 179) pointed out, "Teaching foreign languages is a complex psycho-pedagogical phenomenon which presupposes understanding of different factors which influence academic achievement in school context." Hence, illuminating these factors can be realized through needs analysis, which is "an integral part of the educational process" (Richards, 2001, p. 51). In this light, an empirical research, based on a questionnaire, was carried out. Based on these results, teachers become aware of their students' language competence, wants and interests so that they can select useful material and design activities appropriate to suit their students' developmental needs.

1.1 Conducting a Needs Analysis

Teaching English as a Second Language to students who are advanced in the school based subject-matter but their level of English proficiency is not that advanced challenges the EFL teacher to make right choices (Jordan,

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1990, p. 46). These choices concern questions such as what to teach and how to teach in a limited time. Hence, as Jordan (1990) pinpoints "the students' needs are the starting point" (p. 46). Conducting a needs analysis serves to specify the needs of the students in a specific teaching context. It may appear in many formats and be carried out at different times throughout the school year. At the beginning of the program, the "a priori" needs analysis aims to determine the course content, to design the syllabus or the classroom practice. During the planned program the conducted needs analysis seeks to align the learners' goals and the program goals. The after the course needs analysis serves as an evaluation process (Richards, 2001, p. 54).

This needs analysis is conducted during the school year teaching practice. Hence, it ensures that learner goals and syllabus goals are being met and it allows for necessary changes. However, the primary aim is to find out what learners want and need to learn (National Center for Family Literacy, 2004, pp. II-7).

Needs in the EFL context are defined to be the most likely language forms students will have to use to express themselves and communicate in the foreign language (Manolopoulou, 2004, p. 82). Nevertheless, needs involve more aspects than that. They address the learners' individual differences and try to investigate issues such as the content of learning, the feelings while learning, the effort dedicated and the ability in learning process (Manolopoulou, 2004, p. 85).

Needs analysis has a twofold orientation, either towards product or process. Product-oriented needs are those needs determining target language behaviour or in other words linguistic behaviour. Objective needs such as language proficiency needs and specific purposes needs are under this scope. Process-oriented needs analysis reflect on "how" the knowledge is acquired considering factors such as the individual differences, known as subjective needs. In this category, the motivation, the aptitude, the learning styles, the learners' beliefs and the self-confidence are some examples (Manolopoulou, 2004, pp. 88–89).

1.2 Objectives

In this needs analysis albeit more emphasis is laid on process orientation, the purpose is to investigate both objective and subjective needs. Hence, a holistic perception of the actual educational needs of the students in the current Greek EFL teaching situation is aimed. Particularly, objective needs analysis reflects the current and desired language mastery and the use of language factors essential to "align course content to the learners' vocational goals (Manolopoulou, 2004, p. 88).

In addition, the basic factors contributing to learning a foreign language in Gardner' theory could not be neglected in this survey. These are the external influences from the environment, the learners' individual differences, the learning context formal and non, and the foreign language learning achievements (Gardner, 1985, 2001).

A parameter also taken into consideration is what Tudor (1996, p. 82) defines as the cultural/affective domain in needs analysis. These are the learning goals achieved by personal interest, enjoyment or self-advancement.

Another facet, this survey aims to delve into is motivation. There are two motivational orientations. The internal motivation is when students feel an impulse to achieve competence. The external motivation is defined as the environmental influences such as rewards to achieve competence (Jurisevic & Pizorn, 2013, p. 181).

2. Methodology

The purpose of this empirical study is to collect data concerning the educational needs of the 3rd Graders in the EFL teaching context in the secondary high school of Karatoula.

3. Participants

This needs analysis addresses the students of the 3rd Grade of Junior High School of Karatoula, a school situated in a semi-rural region of Ilia, Western Greece. The 3rd Grade class consists of thirty-three students at the age of fifteen.

At the time the research was performed a student was absent, so the information of the collected data comes from thirty-two participants. The majority of the students come from monolingual families and share common socio-cultural background. However, there are two cases in which one parent of the student is not a native speaker of Greek and one case in which both parents are not native speakers of Greek.

As a foreign language, apart from English, they also learn French. The course book and the syllabus for the 3rd graders make no distinction between advanced learners or beginners. Thus, the average Common European Framework of Reference level is B1 (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24). The majority of the students achieve high performances at school.

4. Research Instrument

The tool used for conducting the survey is a questionnaire handed out to the students of the 3rd Grade gauging their educational needs. This tool is valid for drawing examples which illustrate the research effectively, for tabulation and analysis. However, the information deriving from it "may be fairly superficial or imprecise" (Richards, 2001, p. 60). It was built after reading the literature on the topic and created with the Survey Monkey tool (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was firstly piloted and then revised before it was administered. It consists of 17 questions of various forms and it is divided into five sections. The Likert scale was used in the question formation most of the time. Multiple Choice Questions, closed types and open-ended types of questions are also included. For the purposes of this study only part of this survey is presented here.

The research was carried out as an activity performed in class to ensure that everybody understands what is asked and cover questions that might arise. Some questions needed to be explained in more detail for low-level learners. The teacher also simplified the target language when giving explanations or explained in the learners' mother tongue in some cases. The data gathered were subjected to statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Studies (SPSS17) to extract the results.

5. Results

The study focused on the investigation of the 3rd Graders of Junior High School of Karatoula perception of foreign language instruction and learning. The students' self-concept of their competence in English mastery, their preferences on learning styles and working activities in class were also analyzed.

The reason they learn English was an opened ended question so that the answers were not controlled either standardized given answers were not opted. Students were free to express their opinion. At this age, they have the vocabulary to express themselves and different opinions. The two important reasons were communication and job opportunities. The importance and usefulness of the language comes then, followed by traveling abroad either for studies or work. Whereas among other reasons were to learn a second language which is international, because it is obligatory or because they love it, and of course for playing games (Figure 1).

Figure 1   The Reasons Students Are Motivated To Learn English

In Figure 2, the findings reveal that most of the times parents encourage their children to learn English. Students of a scale from very good to weak competence of English use, based on their self-image perception agreed that they get encouragement from their parents to learn the language. On the contrary, very weak students are not encouraged from their parents to devote themselves to learn English.
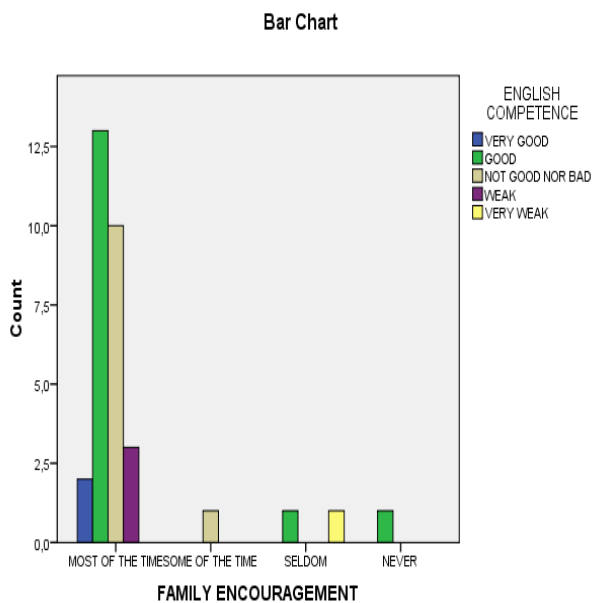

Figure 2   Family Encouragement in the Process of Learning English

The most reported topics of interest are concerned with social media and internet, sports and dances, and music industry. The less interesting domain for them is literature in form of novels or poetry (Figure 3).
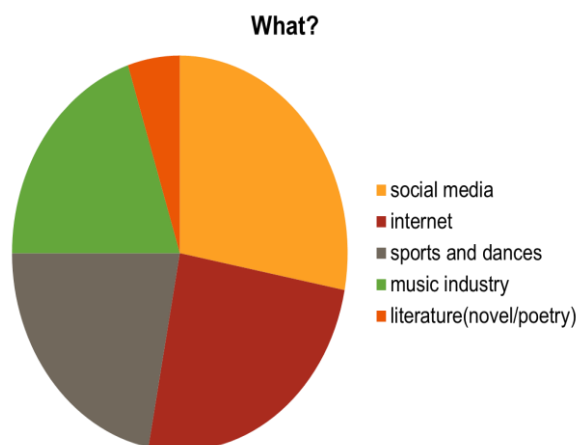
Figure 3   Students Interests to Cover in the EFL Class

In the figure, the findings reveal that students learn better when they are actively engaged in the process of learning. The next learning strategy adopted by students is that of puzzle solving, students are interested in learning when they have to figure out a solution to a mystery or a problem. Keeping notes and brainstorming of ideas are some other strategies students find useful and helpful in learning.
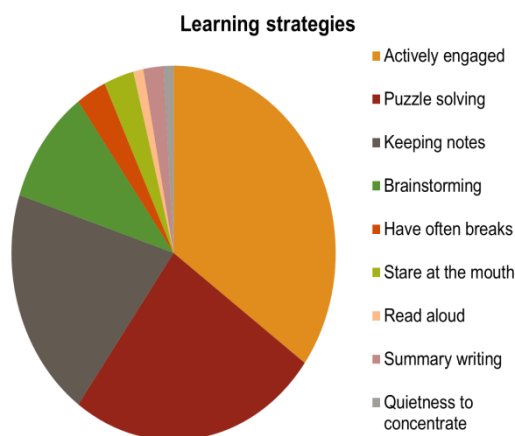

Figure 4   List of the Students' Learning Styles

6. Discussion

The findings presented in this paper are expected in relation to the recent developmental and pedagogical-psychological discoveries. The research results show that most of the students understand the meaningfulness and usefulness of learning the English language, a finding which is confirmed by the literature (Jurisevic, Pizorn, 2013, pp. 191–192).

As far as the reasons they learn English, it is because it provides qualifications for job-seeking and opportunities either to work or travel. In a case, it was noted as a motivational factor the games they play. Tudor (1996, p. 82) argues that students achieve their learning goals because of personal interest, enjoyment or self-advancement, something which is verified by the findings of this research. As an external factor to boost

learning is the role of the family which encourages students towards this direction.

In general, popular topics to cover are social media and the internet, sports and dances and the music industry. As it seems, this reflects the everyday life of students, and they offer realistic situations for teaching through a communicative approach. Hence, lessons could be designed to encompass students interests and skills.

Students tend to like working in groups. This can be verified by the literature as Ur (1981) notes students in small groups overcome their shyness and express themselves in front of their classmates, moreover "the motivation of participants also improves when they work in small groups" (p. 7).

The data analysis leads to the conclusion that students learn better when they actively engaged in the learning process and the problem-solving activities.

Learning activities should be planned to reach an "optimal match between the learning situation and the students' individual learning characteristics" (Jurisevic, Pizorn, 2013, p. 193) and that EFL teachers should opt for "subject matter and teachings methods which are sensible and suitable for the students" (Jurisevic, Pizorn, 2013, p. 193).

7. Conclusions

Needs analysis is the cornerstone of teaching English, and its importance cannot be underestimated. This analysis is essential to design the activities conducted in class, and use techniques and methodology covering topics of interest to meet the exact educational needs of the specific target group. The ultimate goal of this procedure is to make the learning of English an attractive process, and turn the pursuit of knowledge into a joyous activity. Moreover, this needs analysis serves to design more effectively lesson plans, to seize students' attention and revise teaching methods as students, particularly the good ones, get easily bored. A suggestion to overcome this, is to involve them actively in the learning process adopting teaching practices or methods.

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