Narrative frames and needs analysis

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Abstract

Needs analysis plays an important role in curriculum design. In particular, needs analysis largely determines the goal and content of the course being designed. When selecting among the many tools available to analyze needs the course designer must consider practicality as well as validity and reliability. In this paper, I report on the novel use of narrative frames as a needs analysis tool in the design of an EFL curriculum for trainee seamen in Kiribati. The frames proved to be a practical tool for gathering information from a large group of serving seamen, and provided insights that would not otherwise have been possible. Furthermore, the seamen’s stories could be adapted for materials design, meaning that trainees were engaged with authentic situations in their language learning. Thus narrative frames were found to be a valuable tool in the needs analysis for the new EFL curriculum and are a tool that could be used more widely in curriculum design.

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1. Introduction

In the field of language curriculum design, needs analysis plays an important role, for needs analysis largely determines the goal and content of the course being designed. Without needs analysis, in fact, a teacher may end up involved in what West (1994) has described as Teaching English for No Obvious Reason, or TENOR. The importance of needs analysis is therefore, and unsurprisingly, reflected in various models of curriculum design. In Murdoch’s (1989) model, for example, two important factors are: determining learners’ present level of competence, and their reasons for studying English and long-term learning aims. As other examples, assessing needs is part of the dynamic process presented in Graves’s (2000) model, leading to the formulation of goals and objectives, and needs analysis forms one of the outer circles that determine the syllabus in the model proposed by Nation and Macalister (2010) (Fig. 1). As in the Graves’ model, needs analysis here is clearly intended to play an important role in determining the goal of the course.

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There are, however, different levels of need. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) differentiate between target
needs and learning needs, and their target needs — which describe what the learner needs to do in the target
situation — are what are captured in the outer circle of Nation and Macalister’s model of language curriculum
design, where the needs analysis circle is divided into three segments — lacks, necessities, and wants. Lacks
identify what the learners can and cannot currently do, whereas necessities describe what is necessary in the
learners’ use of language in the target situation. A well-designed course should bridge the gap from lacks to
necessities, always of course allowing for environmental constraints such as the length of the course (see the
Environment outer circle in Fig. 1). The third segment of the needs analysis circle, wants, tells us what the
learners wish to learn. As an example, in a 12-week university writing course a necessity that could be reflected
in the course goal might be that students need to write effectively within an academic environment whereas
students’ desire to write like a native speaker would remain a want (Macalister, 2011). Similar divisions of
needs are contained in other models of curriculum design. In Murdoch’s model, for instance, the learner’s
present level of competence equates with lacks, reasons for studying English with necessities, and long-term
learning aims with wants.

Recognizing the importance of needs analysis, curriculum designers have developed and employed a wide range of
tools. These tools have been very usefully described by Long (2005) and include traditional methods such as
interviews, questionnaires and surveys as well as tools that emerge from more recent developments in applied
linguistics, an example being corpus analysis. Other interesting recent examples include the use of discourse analysis
in the development of a course for Turkish pilots and air traffic controllers (Sullivan and Girginer, 2002), and the
adaptation of an aid project approach to develop a negotiated reading course (Holme and Chalauisaeng, 2006).
Absent, however, from the wide range of tools employed is the narrative frame, which consists of a number of
sentence starters with space for respondents to tell their own story. The aim of this article, then, is to discuss the use of
a narrative frame as a needs analysis tool, the way it can contribute to defining learner needs, and provide input to
materials development.

2. Narrative and narrative frames

The importance of narrative in language education has been recognized for some time. It has been particularly
useful in teacher education, often taking the form of diaries or journals as a tool for professional development (e.g.
Bailey et al., 1998) or for gaining insights into teacher beliefs (Borg, 2006, pp. 249–269 in particular). The potential contribution of narrative has also been recognized in curriculum design, notably by Connelly and Clandinin (1988). Although their focus was firmly on the teacher, their idea of curriculum did not exclude the possibility of student narratives, as the following make clear.

What is the central idea of our view? It is simply that all teaching and learning questions — all curriculum matters — be looked at from the point of view of the involved persons. (p. 4)

Once we recognize that understanding our students is an important task, we also recognize that no amount of test-giving will tell us the important things. (p. 31)

Although narrative has been less used in needs analysis and curriculum design than in teacher education, Long (2005, pp. 44–45) draws attention to studies that show how diaries and the like can “be potentially rich sources of insights into learner (and teacher) needs”. He points out, however, that they can be “time-consuming both to write and to analyze”, and this is a criticism that can be made of other available tools, such as the discourse analysis example mentioned above. As Nation and Macalister (2010, p. 30) point out, it is important to evaluate practicality as well as validity and reliability in needs analysis.

In terms of practicality in narrative inquiry, a tool developed by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) for investigating the experiences of language teachers was the narrative frame. As New Zealand-based researchers involved in a teacher education programme for tertiary teachers of English in China, and recognizing their own lack of knowledge about that context, they developed the narrative frame as a means of learning from the teachers about their own experiences in the Chinese context, with this learning then informing their work as teacher educators.

3. Methodology

3.1. The language learning context

The decision to apply a narrative frame in needs analysis was taken during a curriculum design project at the Marine Training Centre (MTC) in the central Pacific island republic of Kiribati in 2010. For almost 40 years MTC has trained young i-Kiribati, mainly young men, to work as seafarers in the international shipping industry. Remittances from the seafarers form an important source of income in Kiribati, but this was threatened by the global economic crisis that followed the subprime mortgage collapse in the US in 2007. There was less demand for i-Kiribati (and other) seafarers, and a consequent reduction in trainee intakes at MTC. In 2010, for instance, there was a single intake of 75 trainees. As a response to this fall in demand, consideration was given to increasing the employability of i-Kiribati with the result that a six-month English as a foreign language course was to be added to the existing twelve-month programme, the rationale being that improved English language proficiency would increase the attractiveness of i-Kiribati seafarers to international employers. This EFL course was in addition to an existing Maritime English course — Maritime English is an internationally adopted “simplified and technical version of English adapted for use by seafarers” (Sampson and Zhao, 2003, p. 32), although whether it is actually used on ships is a moot point (Sampson and Zhao, 2003, pp. 37–38). While Maritime English at MTC was taught through a commercially available resource, there was no intention of taking the same approach for the new EFL course and adopting a commercially available coursebook. The curriculum design project was intended to tailor the course to the specific needs of the target learners who were, after all, distinctive in a number of ways — almost exclusively young men from culturally and linguistically homogenous villages on coral atolls in the Central Pacific, preparing to join a multilingual, multicultural, globally mobile workforce in a transnational workplace.

A needs analysis was planned as part of the initial scoping visit, and different sources of information were identified in advance. These included, for example, the current trainees, whose language proficiency would be tested, MTC documents, which could provide details of schooling prior to entry at MTC, and school curricula

1 A native of Kiribati.
and examinations, to provide an indication of expected language proficiency at different levels. All these would build a picture of learners’ lacks. Information about necessities was expected to come primarily from interviews with MTC trainers, all of whom had served on ships and all of whom were non-native speakers of English, and from a locally-based representative of the shipping consortium which was the chief employer of MTC-trained seafarers. Multiple measures and multiple sources were, therefore, envisaged which, as Long (2005, p. 32) has noted, “will increase the quality of information gathered”. However, there was no intention to investigate wants.

During the scoping visit, an additional, unexpected source of information was discovered as around 70 serving seamen were attending various refresher courses at MTC. The opportunity to become informed, at least to some extent, about their experiences and their perspectives was a valuable one, but an appropriate tool was needed. Practical considerations ruled out some possibilities, such as interviews, and as the focus was on situations of use others, such as language proficiency measures, were not appropriate. Developing a narrative frame for use with these seamen seemed to offer a solution.

3.2. The narrative frame: preparation, implementation and analysis

The intention was to create a frame that would allow the seamen to tell their own story of learning and using English, identifying different challenges and successes at different points of time. A frame was developed and given to the two English teachers at MTC for feedback. The nine sentence starters that were agreed are shown in Fig. 2. The frame given to the seamen was two pages long; the first page is reproduced in Appendix 2.

The seamen attending refresher courses at MTC were in different locations around the campus, and so different people introduced and demonstrated the purpose and the use of the frame to them. This was done in English. The frames were collected and read for initial impressions. A second reader, the senior English teacher at MTC, read the frames independently. When our initial impressions were compared, we found they were very similar. At the conclusion of the initial scoping visit the frames were read again and analyzed more closely to identify commonalities in the seamen’s stories, applying qualitative content analysis techniques as also demonstrated by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008, p. 376).

To illustrate both the quality of the responses and three of the common themes that emerged, three unedited examples are provided below. Each comes from a different person, with the starter sentence in italics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My English story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I first started learning English …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first time I remember speaking English to an i-matang2 was …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I started at MTC I felt my English was …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then I left Bonriki3 and started work as a seaman. When I started on my first ship I felt …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One time I had problems because of language was when …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However I have been able to achieve many things in English. For example, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I think about learning English at MTC the most useful things were …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the same time, I wish I could have learned …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are still things I need to be able to do using English. For example, …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2. Sentence starters on the narrative frame. 2An i-matang is a fair-skinned foreigner. 3Bonriki is the country’s international airport.
3.2.1. Example 1: Adequate English proficiency

Then I left Bonriki and started work as a seaman. When I started on my first ship I felt that I must speak English because everywhere I go they speak English like Fiji, Australia, England and join my vessel in Amsterdam, Europe. But when I stay at ship all officers are German and they speak English like me as simple English.

3.2.2. Example 2: Understanding other varieties of English

One time I had problems because of language was when I was working with my 2nd Engineer. The event began when he asked me to take a barrel of chemical. I didn’t quiet understand his words but later I found my 2nd Engineer was much worse than me.

3.2.3. Example 3: Future needs

At the same time, I wish I could have learned some English jokes and words. I can speak English but I lack vocabulary.

These three themes that the examples above illustrate also provide an opportunity to exemplify how common themes influenced the course that was designed (the inner circle in Fig. 1). The fact that respondents felt they had adequate English proficiency (which was supported by diagnostic language testing among the trainee population) contributed to a fluency focus in the curriculum; the issue of understanding other varieties of English was addressed through the creation and use of listening input materials, drawing on a range of different speakers; the future language needs of the seamen were addressed through strategy training, independent learning activities, and extensive reading.

It is tempting to slip into a wider discussion of the curriculum at this point, but that would divert from the primary purpose of this paper: consideration of the potential of narrative frames in needs analysis.

4. Discussion

4.1. The narrative frame: benefits

Reflecting on their use of narrative frames Barkhuizen and Wette (2008, p. 381) identified several strengths, and similar benefits were found in this situation. They allowed information to be gathered from a relatively large number of people in a structured and time-efficient manner, and to provide information that could be relatively easily analyzed and that was needed to design a curriculum for seafarers. While the frame restricted what was written, it also allowed each person to write what Barkhuizen and Wette call “a storied snapshot”.

At the same time, it is important to note that I was positioning myself less as a researcher and more as a curriculum designer in my use of narrative frames. Consequently, I was less interested in the individual stories than in the commonalities the stories revealed (Polkinghorne, 1995); in Barkhuizen’s (2009) expressive phrase, in my analysis of the frames I was “ripping stories apart”. As a result, however, in terms of the needs analysis, the frame provided information about lacks, necessities, and wants that may not otherwise have been gathered. In particular, they revealed that most i-Kiribati seamen felt their English language training was adequate to their professional needs (Example 1), but that understanding different varieties of English was sometimes difficult (Example 2), and that many had a desire to continue to improve their English language proficiency (Example 3) but were not sure how to learn independently. This information about wants became important in the curriculum design as it was the catalyst for giving attention to learner autonomy and independent learning. It is worth emphasizing that this information would not have been captured without the use of the narrative frame.

Analyzing and interpreting the seamen’s stories also drew attention to what was not said. This was most striking in responses to the sentence starter. While understanding other non-native speakers of English was commonly mentioned, the impression was that the problem lay with the speaker, not the listener. The seamen tended to imply that their level of English was adequate, it was the other person’s whose was not (Example 2). The implications of this insight for the curriculum design was that, not only did the trainees require regular exposure to other spoken varieties of English, but also that they needed to develop communication repair strategies so that problems did not arise.
Another, unanticipated, benefit was that the frame provided inspiration for materials design. This occurred in two main ways. First, using the frame as a structure, teacher-created stories were recorded to give the trainees listening practice. As the learners gained familiarity with the form of the frame, they were better able to focus on the content and listen for meaning. Second, issues that serving seamen reported having encountered in their work became the basis for problem-solving worksheets (see an example in Appendix 1). In both cases, trainees were working with authentic responses from experienced seamen, and were being encouraged to think critically about coping in unfamiliar situations. In this way the curriculum was able to respond to a necessity raised by more than one party during the initial needs analysis which was, essentially, that trainees should have the language and the background knowledge to deal with difficult situations that may arise on- or off-ship.

This use of some of the responses did, inevitably, raise ethical issues, made more complicated perhaps by the fact this was a design rather than a research project. Ethical standards were, however, applied. The use of the frames themselves was approved by the training institution, and completing the frames was both voluntary and anonymous. In adopting a small number of the responses for classroom use, anonymity was addressed through standardizing the language and removing any identifying details. Furthermore, the selection was of professionally-related issues, rather than the individual or personal. The guiding principle throughout was one of benefit to the trainees; by thinking about and discussing these professional, communication-based issues trainees would be better prepared to respond appropriately if they encountered similar situations in the future.

4.2. The narrative frame: limitations

Two of the limitations identified by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) had particular resonance in this application of narrative frames. The first was a desire for more information than was often provided, or than the spatial constraints of the frame allowed. An instance of this can be seen in Example 2, where the reader is left wondering what happened after the second engineer asked the seaman to fetch the barrel of chemicals.

The second limitation was the lack of “opportunity to explain what was intended by each starter-sentence prompt” (Barkhuizen and Wette, 2008, p. 382) because of the numbers of seamen involved, their distribution over different sites on campus, and the use of English rather than Gilbertese as the language of explanation. This may explain why at least some of the sentence starters were misunderstood at least some of the time, as seems to have occurred in Example 1.

The language issue may also have contributed to a further limitation. On the evidence of the narrative frames it is likely that writing in English was an unfamiliar and unpractised activity for at least some of the men. This can be seen by the occasional copying of the sentence starter rather than writing a continuation, and the proportion of unfinished frames. This may in turn raise the question of when narrative frames as a needs analysis tool can be used effectively with learners, because of the literacy prerequisites. This consideration is worth noting, as it may be overlooked by course designers who are themselves highly literate.

5. Conclusion

This paper has reported on the use of a research tool for needs analysis in the design of an English language curriculum, and the way in which it informed the curriculum design. Narrative frames proved to be a practical tool in this context for needs analysis with a large number of people. They provided a collection of ‘storied snapshots’ that allowed the serving seamen to write about their experiences in a way that traditional instruments such as questionnaires and surveys would not. The stories could then be analyzed for their commonalities and gave the course designer insights that would not otherwise have been gained, particularly about learner wants. This not only had implications for what was included in the curriculum, but also contributed to the design of materials to support the new curriculum. Drawing on the experiences of serving seamen, trainees were able to engage with authentic situations and therefore, it is to be hoped, embark upon their new careers better prepared than would otherwise have been the case.
Appendix 1. Problem-solving worksheet

**ADVICE TO SEAMEN**

Here are some comments made by i-Kiribati seamen. What problems did they have? What would you do in their situations? What advice would you give them? Work in pairs.

I’m a helmsman. Once I had taken the wheel and we were on our way to berth in Yokohama. The pilot gave an order about the ship’s way. But I had a problem with his pronunciation. It was very hard for me to understand.

When I started working on my first ship I was very shy because there were so many different kinds of people on board. I always hid myself when I saw the Captain or Chief Mate coming. I didn’t want to talk to them.

Once our boss gave me a job to do, but I didn’t understand so I asked him to repeat it. He got very angry and said I had poor English and that he would report me to the Captain immediately.

My officer told me to take something from the cargo office. I said ‘okay’ but when he had gone I didn’t know what he had wanted me to get. When he came back I asked him what he had wanted me to get. He shook his head and went to get what he wanted.
Appendix 2. Narrative frame

My English story

This is a story about your experience of learning and using English. Please write as much as you need to tell your own story.

I first started learning English

The first time I remember speaking English to an i-matang was

When I started at MTC I felt my English was

Then I left Bonziki and started work as a seaman. When I started on my first ship I felt

References

