

# Ad Hoc needs analysis

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## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the use of a technique which may be used at the beginning of a course for a variety of useful purposes. These purposes include the following:

- (a) conducting an ad hoc needs analysis so that, where a course design has sufficient flexibility, activities and materials can be aimed at needs identified by the students themselves;
- (b) hence, involving the students themselves in determining the main focus of the course;
- (c) raising issues of course content for class discussion and providing a structured forum for an assessment of matters directly involving the students;
- (d) graphically demonstrating to the students how their personal objectives differ from those of their colleagues and, therefore, how a teacher must compromise when planning for a group of students;
- (e) laying the groundwork for individual counselling of students at the beginning of a course; and

- (f) getting students involved with meaningful interaction with each other at a very early stage of the course.

The form which will be presented and discussed below refers to an EST (English for Science and Technology) course for university students; however, the technique can be applied elsewhere, simply by changing the inventory of items. Similarly, this form is intended for use by intermediate level students, but could be simplified for beginners.

## 2. The Form;

The technique is based on the form shown in *Diagram 1*. This consists of a number of possible objectives which students might have when they come to the course. The nature and number of these items can be varied according to the type of course concerned and the time available for the exercise. With the number of items given in the form here, about 75 minutes are required for the exercise.

DIAGRAM 1: A Sample Form for ad hoc Needs Analysis\*. The form is completed by the students individually (column 1), by small groups (column 2) and by the class as a whole (column 3).

In this course I want to:	1	2	3
1. understand English grammar better			
2. write English more fluently and correctly			
3. write technical and scientific English fluently and correctly			
4. be able to speak with British students and with my friends from other countries			
5. pronounce English properly			
6. understand the lectures at the university			
7. know more about British culture			
8. read scientific textbooks and journals in my field			
9. learn more vocabulary in general			
10. learn science and engineering vocabulary			
11. read literature in English			
12. write examinations at the university			
13. communicate with my professors at the university			
14. write term papers at the university			
15. understand British people when they speak to me			
16. take clear lecture notes in my classes			

\* In this case, for students in an EST (English for Science and Technology) course.

### 3. Method

The technique involves the following steps:

(a) The students read the objectives carefully and make sure that they understand them. They then complete column 1, ranking the objectives in the order of importance for themselves as individuals: thus, a number one is written in the box opposite the most important objective, a number two opposite the next most important and so on. Items in which the student has no interest will receive the highest numbers (13,14,15,16); students should be told not to agonise about the order at that point.

The teacher should walk around the class, making sure that this is being correctly carried out.

(b) In groups of three (a class of fewer than ten students might work in pairs; a large class in fours or fives), students show their choices and discuss them. Their task is now to produce a ranking which is as acceptable as

possible to all members of the group. This will involve compromise and negotiation as it is very unlikely that students will have made the same choices.

(c) The teacher, meanwhile, draws a grid on the blackboard. As is shown in *Diagram 2* below, there is space for each group to enter their decisions (groups should be encouraged to send a representative to report their ranking as soon as they have reached agreement). At this point, students, as they wait, should circle those objectives where their personal choice differs radically (say by 6 points or more) from the group decision (see *Diagram 3*, below). The teacher then draws the attention of the students to the differences between the groups — whose rankings, remember, already represent a compromise from the students' original decisions. The group ranking is written in column 2 on the form.

	GROUP				Total	Rank
	A	B	C	D		
1	3	13	3	2	21	5
2	1	4	1	1	7	1
3	6	1	6	4	17	3
4	10	16	10	12	48	15
5	4	14	4	6	28	7
6	5	7	9	5	26	6
7	16	12	15	11	54	16
8	9	6	13	15	43	10
9	8	3	2	3	16	2
10	2	2	5	10	19	4
11	15	10	8	7	40	8
12	12	9	12	11	44	11
13	11	11	11	13	46	13
14	14	5	14	8	41	9
15	7	15	7	16	45	12
16	13	8	16	9	46	14

DIAGRAM 2: A Completed Blackboard Grid showing group decisions and class total. Four groups have come to the blackboard and recorded their decisions. The group numbers are summed in the total column and the class objectives are ranked according to the result, with the lowest number being the highest objective.

INTERPRETATION: it is often useful to group objectives. For example:

IMPORTANT OBJECTIVES: Very High Priority: 2  
High Priority: 9, 3, 10, & 1

MARGINAL OBJECTIVES: Medium Priority: 6, 5  
Medium-Low Priority: 11, 14, 8, 12

UNIMPORTANT OBJECTIVES: Low Priority: 15, 13, 16, 4  
Very Low Priority: 7

(d) Finally, a class ranking is established. This can be done by discussion and compromise between groups but this can be a long and difficult process. The simplest way is to sum

the group totals and rank the objectives accordingly (the smaller the total, the higher the ranking).

The example in *Diagram 3* shows how this works. The students then write the class ranking in column 3 on their form. As before, they circle the

items which differ considerably from their original selections.

DIAGRAM 3: A Completed Form. The circles indicate points at which there is considerable disparity between the student and his group and between the student and his class. These points can form the basis for discussion in individual counselling.

In this course I want to:	1	2	3
1. understand English grammar better	9	9	5
2. write English more fluently and correctly	4	1	1
3. write technical and scientific English fluently and correctly	1	6	3
4. be able to speak with British students and with my friends from other countries	7	10	15
5. pronounce English properly	14	4	7
6. understand the lectures at the university	3	5	6
7. know more about British culture	16	14	16
8. read scientific textbooks and journals in my field	2	9	10
9. learn more vocabulary in general	13	8	2
10. learn science and engineering vocabulary	12	2	4
11. read literature in English	5	15	6
12. write examinations at the university	6	12	11
13. communicate with my professors at the university	15	11	13
14. write term papers at the university	8	14	9
15. understand British people when they speak to me	10	7	12
16. take clear lecture notes in my classes	11	13	14

This completed form can now be used in two ways. First, working with the class as a whole, the teacher can discuss their perceptions of their needs and how this matches her interpretation of the course. This can lead to a survey of the materials, textbooks, readers and other aids to learning which will be employed.

Second, individual variations from the group and class decision can form the basis of individual counselling sessions. The teacher can show a student how his needs are somewhat different from those of the group as a whole. This means that the student might spend more time outside class on a particular activity. Supplementary materials might be provided for students to work with in their own time in cases where they have needs (or perceive they have needs) which the class as a whole does not share.

Thus, for example, the student portrayed in *Diagram 3* is more interested in reading scientific textbooks and journals (item 8) and in learning to write examinations (item 12) than the class as a whole. Suitable materials might be provided for him to pursue these interests in his own time.

In fact, various degrees of fine tuning are possible. Thus, if there are possibilities for workshop sessions during class time, periods when students can work on different tasks either individually or in groups, then an early needs analysis of this type can help to identify such groupings and the kind of work they would enjoy.

#### 4. Advantages of the Technique

Two points are stressed here. The first is that this kind of exercise is of the type currently valued for its communicative aspects. The discussion stage, particularly in groups but also in the class session is a valid communicative activity because the

learner is well prepared to contribute. The making of personal decisions as a prelude to the discussion both forces the learner to consider the issue very carefully and in detail and then gives him plenty to say. The group discussion involves not only the reporting of individual decision, but also defending and justifying choices, finding out about the concerns of others and then compromising, negotiating and reaching agreement. Once the learner is involved, in other words, he must take part in a variety of different functional activities, using his proficiency in the language as best he can.

Secondly, I have found that it is helpful to openly engage in a discussion of course objectives with students. In many cases these days, language instruction is not cheap and where the student, as client or customer, feels that a considerable investment of both time and money is being put into the enterprise, he often feels some satisfaction in the knowledge that he is being actively involved in the setting of course objectives. In addition, he is given the realisation that the teacher has to provide relevant materials and activities for a group of learners whose perceived needs vary to a greater or lesser degree depending on their heterogeneity in terms of age, profession, nationality, and so on. For the teacher who wants to organise a flexible course and who is prepared to cope with individual needs to a certain extent, the activity is a useful source of information.

(i) I would like to thank *Jemela Macer* for her help in refining the items on the form and *Kathleen Kitch* for helpful suggestions for the paper itself.

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