

Exploration of needs analysis

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Applied Linguistics and the Identification of Real-World Problems: An Exploration into Needs Analysis Aaron Roach November 27, 2012

Introduction: Brumfit (1995) defines applied linguistics as “ the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue” (Brumfit, 1995, p. 27). This view of applied linguistics is demonstrated in Rebeca Jasso-Aguilar’s ‘ A case study of Waikiki hotel maids’ (2005). In her enquiry, Jasso-Aguilar critically explores a Waikiki hotel company’s approach to conducting needs analysis (NA) for its housekeeping staff.

She highlights the complex issues which can arise due to differing perspectives towards language needs when conducting traditional NA.

What is the Real-World Problem? The real world problem that Jasso-Aguilar discusses in the article regards the institutional implementation of NA for ESP curriculum development, and whether or not these actions result in the social engineering of the worker as it relates to social mobility and menial labour. Jasso-Aguillar attempts to find a balanced and cohesive solution to this problem by analyzing existing literature and her own research, then providing an alternative approach.

To introduce some of the concerns related to NA, Jasso-Aguilar draws on Auerbach (1995) and Tollefson (1989, 1991) who have found that NA and resulting ESP curricula is often solely determined and developed by outsiders hired by the institution or company. It is argued that because these outsiders work with information and clearly defined expectations set forth by the institution/company, the ESP curriculums that are developed solely function

to serve the needs of the institutions, sometimes ignoring the differing expectations of the employees.

This ‘social engineering’ of English as L2 employees can channel immigrants into minimum wage positions where they can perform adequately, but have little opportunity for advancement (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005).

Despite these complications, Jasso-Aguilar does not appear to argue against the use of NA in the workplace- but rather against the approach by which it is often determined. Rather than drawing on outsiders/institutional perspectives or employees perspectives on employee language needs, Jasso-Aguilar advocates the approach to NA as described by Long (to appear), who endorses the use of multiple sources, methods, and triangulation.

Long suggests that by using this approach, the main problems with traditional NA can be overcome. It is interesting to comment on the literature Jasso-Aguilar draws on to highlight the real world problem that is being explored. By acknowledging the research undertaken by Auerbach (1995) and Tollefson (1989, 1991), as well as noting Long’s (to appear) proposed approach towards conducting NA, Jasso-Aguilar accomplishes two things.

First, by recognizing the continuous exploration into NA over time, her enquiry is validated as a legitimate research niche; and second, it builds a case for continuing research by showing that research into this particular area can inform alternative theories and proposals for conducting NA. A Critical Review of Jasso-Aguilar’s Research Methods and Sources: Jasso-Aguilar uses multiple qualitative research methods; including tape-recorded participant observations, unstructured interviews, and written

questionnaires. Later, the results of these qualitative methods are triangulated.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) and Davis (1992) claim that triangulation can contribute to the trustworthiness of data and increase confidence in research findings in qualitative research traditions because it can help to validate data and increase the credibility of interpretations. It should be noted, however, that although Jasso-Aguilar emphasizes the importance of using multiple research methods for triangulation purposes, she fails to provide a risk analysis for the research methodology.

What obstacles/concerns did she expect to encounter when implementing these methods? What strategies were used to avoid or overcome these obstacles?

One obstacle, which seems very likely to have occurred, would be avoiding distortion of information through miscommunication when conducting interviews with English as L2 workers. For example, Jasso-Aguilar provides a brief transcript of an unstructured interview with Josy, a housekeeper. Josy replies to a question regarding the amount of English she uses at work; “ You have to (repeating [Jasso-Aguilar’s] words)...Ah! (Seems to suddenly remember) because talk the guest, yeah? But they don’t understand too English, yeah? They say ‘ Yes, yes, yes. ‘ You know, the Chinese, like that. ” (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005, pg 183)

It would appear from the above comment that Jasso-Aguilar would have had to rely on extensive interpretation of Josy’s answer and, in doing so, exposes a large degree of inference in her methodology.

What assurances does Jasso-Aguilar have that Josy understood the question correctly or that we, the readers, can trust Jasso-Aguilar's interpretation of her answer? The use of triangulation should also be approached critically. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state: " triangulation is not a simple test. Even if the results tally, this provides no guarantee that the inferences involved are correct.

It may be that all the inferences are invalid...[and can] lead to the same, incorrect, conclusion. " (Pg. 183) A Critical Perspective on the Data produced: Jasso-Aguilar notes that participant observation proved to be the most useful method because by conducting a task-analysis as a participating observer, she was able to have a first hand look at the differing perspectives between outsiders' predictions of employees' language needs and the language needs of the housekeeping staff in reality.

In this position, she was able to ' confirm or disconfirm outsiders' predictions, as well as ' explain some of those predictions' (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005, pg. 78). For example, two conflicting experiences of the same situation were highlighted, in which one outsider was ' amazed at how much interaction goes on with the guests' while Jasso-Aguilar was ' amazed at how little interaction was going on between [the housekeeping staff] and the guests' (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005, pg 178). Another interesting finding from the participant observations was the extent to which the task force failed to predict interaction scenarios between the housekeeping staff and guests; in fact they had predicted only one scenario correctly and it had only occurred twice (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005).

These findings are relevant because they show the limitations that can occur by relying solely on outsider sources when conducting NAs and by highlighting the differing perceptions towards language needs between ‘ insiders’ and ‘ outsiders.

‘ These differing perceptions towards language needs highlight a need for better channels of communication between the institution and housekeeping staff when determining NA. Brumfit (n. d.) says “ communication is crucial because of our areas of misunderstanding and difference, not because of our shared comprehension of each other” (p. 59-60).

Through interviews, Jasso-Aguilar was better able to glean an idea of some of the various perceptions the sources had towards the need for English at work.

While most of the data from the interviews highlighted the differing views towards language needs between insiders and outsiders as discussed above, I wish to draw attention to some of the socio-communicative issues the interviews highlighted. Sandra, an HR representative (and an outsider) emphasized the institution’s need for the housekeepers to embrace the company policy and “ show their aloha” by being able to linguistically function enough to ‘ chit chat’ with the guests.

Other interviews with ‘ insider’ sources did not think this communicative ability was a significant requirement for their language needs; however, the idea that the staff should be able to gain and share knowledge about issues unrelated to work was a common theme. For example, Chris, the executive housekeeper, is often asked language questions by the other housekeepers

related to dealing with doctors or other situations which take place outside of the workplace; and Lao, a housekeeper, expressed a language need to answer guests' questions regarding the local community ex. Where's the ABC store? ", " What bus can I take? ", etc. These concerns are important because they show a communicative need for the housekeepers to be linguistically capable to function both inside and outside of the model for communication the hotel company proposed.

Bauman (1992) recognizes that there are limitations to viewing communication within a ' fixed communicative norm' and of using a ' grand model of communicative competence' as a tool for analyzing interaction and communication (E854 Study Guide).

Rather, he says that the reality of communication is " much more fluid, heterogeneous and underpatterned than anything sociologists have tried to grasp intellectually in the past" (Bauman, 1992, pg. 65 as seen in the E854 Study Guide). With this notion in mind, it can be suggested that Jasso-Aguilar is proposing an approach to NA which adheres to a " more fluid and localized model concerned with mutual adaptation [which may] capture the reality of communication in a richer way" (E854 Study Guide).

This idea is further supported when Jasso-Aguilar draws on Goldstein's (1992) suggested approach to NA of ' looking at the larger picture to find needs that must be addressed' as well as examining the ' social context in which actors live their lives critically' (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005, pg 188).

By highlighting these socio-communicative needs that fall outside of the institutionally mandated model for communication, Jasso-Aguilar uses her

data to argue for NA beyond the workplace. Conclusion: Jasso-Aguilar has done a satisfactory job of identifying and exploring the real-world problem discussed in the article.

She identifies the existing problem by drawing on previous research into NA as well as commenting on how ESP curricula resulting from NA can lead to social engineering. Next, by observing the conflicting perceptions towards language needs between differing stakeholders, as well as noting the role of power relationships in NA, Jasso-Aguilar is able to identify the language concerns which lead to the problems associated with NA. Finally, she proposes an alternative approach: NA beyond the workplace; a multiple-method/sources approach which takes into consideration the language needs of all stakeholders involved.

It is important to note that while Jasso-Aguilar highlights the repercussions of a traditional approach to NA, she fails to do so with her proposed approach. From a reader's perspective, it would have been interesting to see whether Jasso-Aguilar's proposal was able to overcome the concerns associated with traditional NA. Perhaps an enquiry which observes the linguistic and socio-economic effects of this post-traditionalist approach to NA can be conducted at a later date.

In an alternative conclusion, it would have been interesting to know if the Waikiki hotel company followed through with the NA as proposed by the hired outsider task-force, and if the resulting ESP curricula led to the social engineering of the housekeeping staff. References: 1.

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