SOME RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OBJECTS AND NEEDS IN AN ESP NEEDS ANALYSIS

Por:
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Abstract

This study explores the possibility of using objects, as described in activity theory, as a measure of "needs" in an ESP needs analysis. The objective is to determine the value of a methodological approach which connects the needs of second language learners with the objects of their work. A single ESP user in a multinational company in Colombia was interviewed and the interview data was subjected to qualitative data analysis procedures. The information was then analyzed through the prism of activity theory to determine the user's objects. In total, the user completed at work many tasks in English which can be summarized by the three objects of Head Office Tasks, Worker tasks, and Brazil Tasks. Activity theory provided rich information in the analysis by focusing on the user's tasks and personal motivation. This study shows that activity theory can be a tool in an ESP needs analysis procedure but is limited to its description of the user's perception of their activities.

Keywords

English for Specific Purposes, Activity Theory, Analysis Tool.

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Resumen

Este estudio explora la posibilidad de utilizar objetosdescritos en la teoría de la actividad, como una medida para el análisis de las necesidades en English for Specific Purposes (ESP). El objetivo es determinar el valor de un enfoque metodológico que conecta las necesidades de un segundo idioma del estudiante con los objetos de su trabajo. Fue entrevistado un usuario ESP de una empresa multinacional en Colombia y la información recogida fue sometida a procedimientos de análisis de datos cualitativos, donde fue analizada a través del prisma de la teoría de la actividad para determinar los objetos del usuario. En síntesis, el usuario completó bastantes tareas en inglés, que se pueden resumir en tres objetos como: tareas de jefe de oficina, tareas de los trabajadores y tareas de Brasil. La teoría de la actividad proporciona una rica información en el análisis, centrándose en las tareas del usuario y la motivación personal. Este estudio muestra que esta teoría puede ser una herramienta en una necesidad de análisis ESP, pero se limita a la descripción de la percepción del usuario frente a sus actividades.

Palabras clave

Inglés para fines específicos, Teoría de la actividad, herramienta de análisis.

INTRODUCTION

Needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) helps to determine the communicative needs of a target group of learners in a specific language-use situation.

The research area of ESP and needs analysis has been helpful in a number of settings. For example, Bosher & Smalkoski (2002) used needs analysis to garner information for an ESP course for foreign nursing students in a higher-education setting, focusing on communicative spoken skills.

Due to the intensive nature of qualitative research, a case study approach was taken. Case studies provide useful information by obtaining rich data using a specific methodological approach. They are able to be replicated quite easily, and with each case study published, our knowledge of the specific needs of ESP users expands.

This paper contributes to the fields of ESP and needs analysis by approaching the topic of language "needs" through the lens of activity theory. This is a methodological approach that places the subject's objects, or focus of activity, as the starting point for investigation into their language needs. A methodological option using an ESP user's own actions is presented, applied, and discussed in relation to the field as a whole. Individual purpose forms the basis of analysis and perspectives usually out of sight for needs analyses are uncovered.

First, a background review of needs analysis in second language learning is presented. The current state of the art is then questioned by the research question of this study. Activity theory as a theoretical approach is discussed briefly along with its use as a methodological option in needs analysis. Finally, the results of the case study investigation are presented alongside a discussion of their significance in line with activity theory and ESP needs analysis.

1. BACKGROUND REVIEW

Target language needs have been classified as linguistic features (West, 1997), genre and discourse features (Bhatia, 1993; Zhu, 1997), and task features (Long & Crookes, 1992; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). While genre-based and task-based needs analyses have gone further in their descriptions of the target situation than grammar, vocabulary and performance-based studies alone, what they still fail to uncover is the underlying behavior of EFL users while performing tasks in English, and what learners bring to each task or activity they encounter.

Even through triangulated needs analysis studies such as Jasso-Aguilar (1999) and Long (2005) we do not see the relationship between the learner, their motivations, and the job they are doing. Such studies provide options for "correcting" learner language without addressing what the learners are doing in each task.

Benesch (1996) takes a critical look at needs analysis by examining just what exactly a "need" is. She quotes Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) "[language needs are] identifiable elements" of "students' target English situations". By contrasting this with Robinson's (1991) view that all categorization of needs is subjective and therefore subject to researcher ideology, the point is made that learners are viewed as deviants from the target and the ESP course's objective is to get them into line.

In response to such criticisms the research area has expanded. Drawing on recent trends in the field Basturkmen (2010) outlines the following considerations taken in needs analysis procedures:

- Target situation analysis
- Discourse analysis
- Present situation analysis
- Learner factor analysis
- Teaching context analysis

The definition of "special purposes" in ESP is also currently changing. In a comprehensive report by Fitzpatrick & O'Dowd (2012) we see a shifting perception of the role of English in the working lives of EFL users. English is not viewed as a separate skill that workers employ sporadically in specific situations, but rather it is viewed as being intertwined with other workplace skills such as computer literacy. Consequently, a multitude of occupational skills makes specification of a typical target situation difficult to quantify.

With the learner being a constant across activities, their personal needs and motivations play a vital role in contributing to a researcher's understanding of the ESP environment. A study which takes this into account is an appealing solution to the issue raised regarding a common link across varying work actions.

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND GOALS

The hypothesis for this case study project is stated as that by using an empirical methodological approach such as activity theory we can contribute to the identification of relations and common characteristics between objects and language needs.

3. THEORETICAL APPROACH

A well-developed theory of motivation and human work is activity theory (Leontiev, 1978). Activity theory posits that every human activity is motivated by a biological or cultural need. This need often refers to a lack of something that must be satisfied, for example the lack of food. Motives represent the movement from needing something to doing something about satisfying that need. In our example of satisfying a lack of food, hunger would be the motive. Finally, all human activity is directed towards an object, which may be a situation, idea, physical tool etc., and the impetus for action comes from the necessity to transform an object into a successful outcome, which satisfies the need. This transformation is affected by an individual's or group's understanding

of what they are doing. A person or society assigns meaning to acting on an object by associating it with the outcome. Sense is how a person interprets this process of transformation at a specific moment. (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The right-to-left relationship between needs / motives and object and how the outcome of acting on the object is filtered through both the subject's sense and meaning of an action.
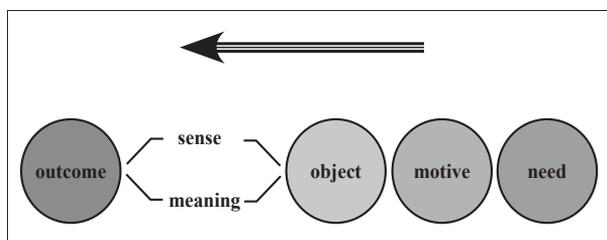
Source. By the author.

Purposeful human activity, such as writing an email asking for information, is based on motives (Wertsch, 1979). These motives are representations of a learner's personal needs, and determine the orientation of their activities and actions. According to Leontiev (1978), an action's true motive is its object. Therefore, by determining an ESP learner's object we might be more likely to address their fundamental needs throughout all their English language actions at work. The diagram in Figure 1 represents motivation as several but inseparable distinct parts. It is the smallest unit of analysis to be considered when looking at needs by way of activity theory.

Finally, the object of a user's activity can only be determined by analysis of their perceptions of their activities. A useful method of doing this is by way of qualitative data coding of the subject's words and actions. Through analysis and checking of themes that emerge in the subject's discourse, and by categorizing those themes, the researcher is able to approximate that which the subject attends to i.e. the object.

The needs and motives of an ESP user's actions are theoretical derivatives that come from his/her objects. By viewing the object as a representation of the user's professional English language activities, both needs and motives are included therein. The object, therefore, is the true focus of a needs analysis focusing on learner factors and motivation.

By quantifying the language learning needs based on a set of principles and the gap that learners have between the target situation and their current knowledge course, designers are better able to provide materials and make curriculum decisions (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

4. METHODOLOGY

Activity theory in the field of needs analysis sees each activity, and object, as the starting point for research. An individual subject's activity is always interpreted by the subject from its point of view. Therefore, a methodological approach that begins with the subject's perspective is appropriate.

Given the broad nature of the research hypothesis, an in-depth interview was considered the most appropriate method of data collection. The interview took a semi-structured design. First, the interviewer explained the reason for the interview as being related to their use of English at work. Second, the interviewer asked a set questions. These questions were informed by activity theory and are listed below:

- Why do you do your job the way you do?
- What motivates you to achieve certain outcomes?
- What do your daily actions mean for you personally?

Based on the responses to the questions, follow-up probing questions related to the manager's use of English and work environment were asked. At all stages the interviewee was allowed to develop her own narrative.

After the interview sessions the researcher transcribed the interview from beginning to end. The transcription was checked by a colleague to ensure accuracy.

In order to organize the data obtained from the interview, the transcript was read through thoroughly on various occasions and through typical deductive qualitative analysis the inherent themes were allowed to emerge. Over various readings, the number of themes contracted and expanded until those reported in the Results section of this article were identified. The manager's themes were then grouped into categories, which came to represent her culturally constructed objects.

Biographical details of the participant are summarized below:

Female, 29 years old, Colombian national living in Colombia. Organizational Training Manager at a multinational food and beverage company with head office in the USA and regional head office in Brazil. Code name Manager A.

Manager A had been working in the company for two years prior to the interview. Previously, she was the Human Resources Manager at a clinical research company whose head

office is located in the USA for three years She has five years' experience working for multinational companies where the operating language for managers is English and the local company's language for internal operations is Spanish.

4.1 Results and interpretation

The coding procedure used on the interview transcripts yielded the themes and categories shown in Table 1. Each theme reported represents a sequence of ideas found in the manager's interview. For Manager A, the majority of her utterances dealt with the topic of "development", which turned out to be a major factor in her work practices. For example:

- programs (Development)
- "…the global model is from USA…"
- goals achievement (Development)
- "If I have the right person in the right position and I develop the right skills, I will ensure a company with better results, more sales."

- translation (Development)
- "… I have to translate because not the whole population of the company speaks English"
- tasks (Head Office Tasks)
- "… at the global conferences, listen and read."
- community (Head Office Tasks)
- "[the programs are] sent out, rolled out"
- English theme (Head Office Tasks)
- "… here, I need English for some teleconferences, and to understand all the development information of the company."
- tasks (Brazil Tasks)
- "In some cases the Brazilian conferences are to repeat or confirm the information from the global [conferences]"
- community (Brazil Tasks)
- "Sometimes the Portuguese is not easy, so we prefer to speak English with the Brazilians."

Below, the themes were organized and grouped together to form categories. (table 1)

Table 1. Themes and categories that emerged in the analysis of Manager A's interview transcript

Manager	Themes	Category / Object
A	Programs Goals Achievement Translation	Development
A	Tasks Community English (Theme)	Head Office Tasks
A	Tasks Community	Brazil Tasks

Source. By the author.

The core of her work, according to the interview, appears to be "development" and "providing". That is, she provides training for the company's workers, and she provides good workers for the company through worker development. The good workers then provide "good results" for the company, which results in a feedback to the manager. The main object of her activity is quite clearly defined as the worker, "If I have the right person in the right position and I develop the right skills, I will ensure a company with better results, more sales. That is our focus."

Working back towards the motive to find the reason for the way things are done, we may extrapolate that the reason for acting on the workers is not a personal connection to making them better workers, but development in the company policy sense. That is, in her role as Organizational Training Manager she is expected to lead development of staff. Manager A's need in this case is to fulfill her job description i.e. company policy. For her job to continue there must be development. (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Manager A's object as a company worker.
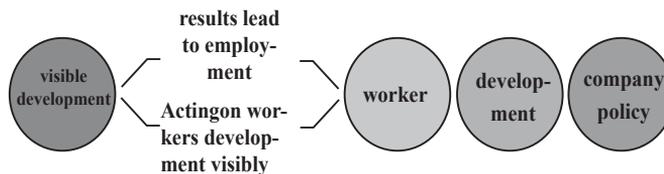
Source. By the author.

The outcome of acting on the workers is not just development. A crucial addition to that is visibility. Workers must be seen to be developing and this must be measured and verified (Figure 2). This "visible development" emerges from the goals and targets that head office English discourse requires, and this provides the manager with *meaning* for the *outcome*.

We may assume head office perhaps has the *need* of having well-trained and competent employees. But that need, when transferred to those acting directly on the workers, becomes a company-constructed order: company policy. Those with the authority to define objects for others do so by manipulating the *needs* of their dependents indirectly. That is, when Manager A acts on the worker as *object* she is fulfilling an externally imposed need, and one that is shared by (presumably) most in the company. Whether or not the workers themselves see their development as a need was not investigated. The way Manager A makes sense of this situation is by seeing her action as a way to stay employed. Without a good knowledge of English she cannot act on company policy information nor can visible development be reached without appropriate English language proficiency.

A secondary set of objects was evident (Figure 3) from readings of the transcript. Manager A's comments about tasks when communicating with head office and Brazil were grouped into two categories: Head Office Tasks and Brazil Tasks. As central themes in the manager's monologue they are parts of her professional life that lead to specified outcomes. For example, the outcome of tasks assigned by head office and her interaction with head office staff point to global alignment, whereby employees throughout the world are at the same level and follow the same training programs; "*The result* [of not following the global training model is that] *Colombia will not be aligned with the world, and the business strategy will be affected, which is bad.*" The manager's object in this instance is the set of tasks and official duties that head office proscribes. Participation is the basic premise for the manager acting on this particular object "*It's very important to have training goals aligned with the business strategy.*" The meaning is clear: do the tasks in the way head office says to achieve conformity across the company at an international level. However, from the interview transcription we can see how the manager makes sense of this activity in a variety of ways:

Not everybody speaks English. Some people can help. The girl that is my support speaks English very well because she lived in NY for 23 years. But the other part of the team is divided into the development and the training areas, and we need to work as a team. They don't even have basic English, and sometimes it's difficult (to work with them).

Not only does she receive information but is responsible for its dissemination and application in another language. The successful outcome of global alignment depends on a variety of skills that go beyond just English e.g. Spanish communication skills, interaction with other employees skills, etc.

**Figure 3.** Manager A's object of Head Office Tasks.
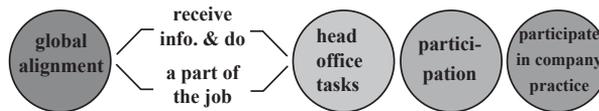
Source. By the author.

The object of Brazil Tasks is slightly different (Figure 4). Participation is still the motive for action, but this participation is situated at a more local level - Latin America. Identification of Brazil and Colombia as Latin America is evidenced when Manager A says "The Brazilian conferences are more focused on the regional strategy". This localization of participation leads to a

much clearer meaning for the manager: improving processes. The manager also makes sense of these tasks as an opportunity for her own development "When it's with the Brazilians, every member of the team should participate in the meetings, with a question or a comment." Finally, interacting within the Latin American community leads to a separate type of alignment: Latin America alignment.

Figure 4. Manager A's object as Brazil Tasks.
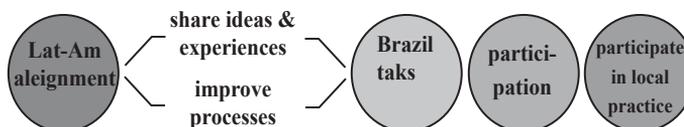
Source. By the author.

Manager A's meanings can be categorized into active and passive work procedures (Table 2). Active refers to objects which are improved by the manager acting on them i.e. better workers and company processes. Passive refers to objects which when acted upon only have a completed/uncompleted status. Sense likewise can be categorized into positive and ambivalent. Sharing ideas and experiences along with continued employment in the organization is viewed positively by the manager "I develop and the company develops". While acting on head office tasks leads to an unemotional sense of going through the motions "And they say, ok well, just to inform you we have a new e-learning system, we're going to have a transition from the other system, , thank you."

Table 2. Summary of Manager A's objects and the sense and meaning she ascribes to them. Included is motive, which did not appear to correlate to meaning nor sense.

Object	Meaning	Sense	Motive
Worker	visibly acting on workers' development (active)	results lead to continued employment (+)	development
Head Office Tasks	a part of the job (passive)	receive information & act on that information (/)	participation
Brazil Tasks	improve processes (active)	share ideas & experiences (+)	participation

Source. By the author.

We can see visually that an object with active meaning leads to a positive sense, and that an object with passive meaning leads to a type of disconnection from the task. Motive, however, does not appear to influence meaning nor sense.

5. DISCUSSION

Manager A has three objects which are included in various day to day tasks - Worker, Head Office Tasks, and Brazil Tasks. That is to say, while she may be performing a large variety of different tasks in English that on the surface appear unrelated, the focus of her action from her perspective can be summarized by these three *objects*.

These objects do not, however, act the same. Based on the interview data the object of Head Office Tasks appears to control the manager. The manager gives the impression that she is obliged to perform without being an active participant. On the other hand, when acting on the object involves actively contributing to the growth of the company Manager A makes sense of this in a positive way. It would appear that the outcome of the manager's tasks seems less important than the meaning and sense the manager ascribes to the task.

In summary we can say her motivation for using English at work is dependent upon her interpretation of the perceived benefit the task involves for others. An overview of the results from this exploratory study can be listed as:

- Objects are the focus of the manager's actions;
- The way this manager perceives a workplace task depends on the perceived benefit of the task for the company/manager;
- Objects that are interpreted in a positive sense and active meaning are more likely to promote the improvement of the manager's English;
- The meaning and sense the manager ascribes to the object is more important than the outcome for motivation.

In an artificial environment the language instructor cannot hope to replicate the outcomes nor the sense and meaning that the manager ascribes to the activity. However, active meaning and positive sense can be incorporated into classroom language learning task design. For example, a classroom language activity that involves a simulated situation in which Manager A must act on workers to improve their productivity (active meaning, positive sense) may have a greater chance of increasing her motivation during the activity.

Even though they elicit low levels of motivation, replicated Head Office Tasks may also be incorporated into the syllabus. In this case, however, work would need to be done to ensure that the manager ascribes an active meaning and positive sense. Here, it becomes important to establish before the classroom activity the language learning benefits that the activity provides. In addition, an ESP teacher might want to attempt to change Manager A's perception of the Head Office Tasks by working with Head Office themselves. By understanding the reasons for Head Office Tasks being the way they are, Manager A might see how her actions impact on people she is not familiar with - thus increasing her motivation.

6. CONCLUSION

The results found in this case study show that simply replicating work activities and tasks is probably insufficient for language training. Without taking into account the sense and meaning ascribed to each activity we may produce classroom tasks that are not motivating for the learner. Classroom tasks should first and foremost provide impetus for the successful transformation of the learner's objects leading to outcomes that have a positive effect on the learner/group.

In needs analysis process a researcher may attempt to narrow a learner's behavior into a specific, institutionally constructed box. Following Robinson (1991), this study has taken what the learner does, and attempts to help them do it better.

By placing a needs analysis within the context of activity theory and utilizing qualitative data coding with inductive categorizing this research enabled making sense of a manager's interview data in a way that provided rich and useful information for the field of ESP. In the current climate of fluidic work activities, an EFL user is required to act out a variety of tasks using tools that are becoming more and more diverse.

It is hoped that with more samples of needs analysis case studies the field may grow, and provide a greater range of accurate tools to those tasked with the course design for ESP job.

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