



# Professional Development **Fact Sheet** **No. 4**

## ASSESSING THE NEEDS OF ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

When adult English language learners arrive at literacy programs, they bring with them an extraordinary range of life experiences, educational backgrounds, current abilities, and future goals. In order to serve these students better, teachers can conduct a variety of learner needs assessments.

### What is a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment, simply put, is a tool that helps instructors and program managers discover learners' interests and what they need to learn. There are two basic kinds of needs assessments:

1. A formal, program-wide measurement to determine individual students' English language proficiency and appropriate placement within a program, and
2. An informal means by which a teacher can identify more about a student's perceived needs, expectations, and abilities.

The second, more individualized type of needs assessment is the focus of this fact sheet. Here the term *needs* can refer to students' perceptions of their wants, desires, expectations, motivations, requirements, as well as their constraints in learning and using English.

When used in combination, these two distinct yet complementary types of assessments can help instructors collaboratively establish learning goals with their students and assist students in making progress toward those goals. Long (2005) cautions those analyzing the needs of English language learners to balance the interpretation of information obtained through students' self-reports with data obtained from a variety of other sources and methods. Used properly, the potential benefits of informal needs assessments are numerous.

### What is the Purpose of an Informal Needs Assessment?

Teachers often say that adult learners "vote with their feet," that is, students may opt to leave a class that does not seem sufficiently interesting or relevant to their needs. Given this, an adult educator can use an informal needs assessment to help maintain student interest in class. Depending on when an instructor uses the informal needs assessment, it serves different purposes: to guide the development of a learner-centered curriculum, to inform decisions about topics and approaches used in ongoing instruction, to provide feedback on completed activities, or to shed light on future goals.

### What are Examples of Informal Needs Assessment Tools?

Needs assessments can take many different forms. The following five types of tools are adapted from *The CAELA Guide for Adult ESL Trainers* (2007):

- Survey questionnaires
- Learner inventories
- Timelines
- Brainstorming sessions
- Dialogue journals

In addition to these five tools, teachers can informally assess learners' needs by chatting with students, interviewing them, or having them interview each other. Teachers may also observe students' performance to gauge less tangible qualities, such as the degree of confidence a student exhibits when speaking in front of the class, or the learner's comfort and engagement when working in a small group.

**Survey Questionnaires.** One of the most common tools, the survey questionnaire can reveal topics of interest to learners as well as their interest in acquiring particular skills. Learners can mark simple *Yes/No* checkboxes in response to direct questions including whether they want to be able to read notes from their children's teachers, ask a pharmacist questions about a prescription, or understand instructions given by a supervisor. Students can also prioritize these needs using a simple 1–5 Likert scale in which 5 indicates a very strong need, and 1 indicates no need.

Instead of using questions, the needs assessment may prompt students to complete open-ended sentence stems, such as:

- I learn best when...*
- When I do group work...*
- I enjoy using English to....*
- When I speak English, I feel uncomfortable when....*

Or it may contain a series of statements, such as *I can use a telephone to call an ambulance*, or ask students to assess their abilities by checking a column headed *I Can Do This Now*.

For beginning-level students who cannot yet read English, the questionnaires can consist of pictures illustrating a variety of situations. Students can circle the pictures representing situations in which they most commonly encounter difficulty and put a star next to the most important one. Alternatively, the teacher can post enlarged pictures on classroom walls and invite students to stand under the picture that shows what they most want to learn.

**Learner Inventories.** Learner inventories are a great way to find out how students use English outside of class. The instructor can create a simple log (e.g., a chart or list) for students to fill in weekly. Sample questions might include the following:

- *Did you speak English to anyone? What did you talk about?*
- *What did you read in English? What was interesting?*

Adult ESL students can also keep weekly family events logs in which students report what they did with their children (e.g.,



went to the park, took a walk, helped with homework, played games).

**Timelines.** Students can create personal timelines with pictures or written lists that highlight important past events and future goals in their own lives. By sharing the timelines in class, students can receive support from their peers and guidance from their instructors in determining smaller, achievable objectives to help them reach their long-term goals.

**Brainstorming Sessions.** In class, students can brainstorm questions for a questionnaire, compile a list of how they use English outside of class, or capture students' ideas in a mind map. To model how to create a mind map on speaking English, the instructor draws a circle in the center of the board and inside the circle writes *Speaking English*. The teacher draws a diagonal line out from the circle, labels it *Who?*, and then asks the class whom they spoke English to this past week. The teacher records student answers on individual "branches" from the main diagonal line labeled *Who?* This process continues, with the teacher asking and mapping out *What?*, *Why?*, etc., until students are able to create their own mind maps.

**Dialogue Journals.** Dialogue journals can take many forms. They can be oral, written, or online. As a needs assessment tool, journals prompt students to write about what they are learning, how they are using English, and what they want to do with English in the future. When the instructor reviews the student's work, the teacher should emphasize fluency and content rather than accuracy and grammar. Peyton (1993) offers several suggestions for using dialogue journals successfully with students at different English proficiency levels. Depending on the technology available, students can record their comments on a tape recorder or on a computer equipped with a microphone, rather than writing them. Whatever form it takes, the journal fosters a one-on-one "conversation" between learner and instructor and provides instructors with insights into their students' educational aspirations, progress, and challenges.

### How can Teachers Use the Information They Gather?

Ultimately, the instructor can use the information obtained from the needs assessment, in conjunction with additional information obtained from formal assessments, tests, and observations of students' performance, to inform instruction.

Instructors may review and analyze the information to find answers to questions such as these:

- Which topics do most students find interesting?
- How will I approach topics students view as important that are not yet in the curriculum?
- What are the main reasons students report that they are studying English?
- What percentage of students report that people understand little of what they say in English?

After reviewing the data, the instructor can determine the degree to which the curriculum and available timeframe can accommodate students' interests and needs. Establishing student priorities can help the instructor decide the extent to which he or she will incorporate these into the instructional plan.

If the majority of the students report that they want to improve their conversation skills, for instance, the instructor can include pair- and small-group activities in each lesson to increase student-talking time and develop the student's verbal fluency.

Imagine that the majority of the learners in an intermediate-level ESL class report that they want to get better jobs but that they have not had any experience with job interviews. Knowing this, the instructor can design relevant activities such as creating interview questions, conducting role-play activities between interviewers and job applicants, and reviewing culturally appropriate interview behaviors.

Analyzing the results from a needs assessment conducted at the beginning of a course can help the instructor plan direction for the coming weeks. Sharing a summary with the learners confirms that the course meets the students' needs, shows that the instructor values student input, and helps foster a sense of community. Used mid-term or at the end of term, learner needs assessments can provide valuable feedback. The teacher may decide to revisit a lesson, provide more practice on a given skill, accommodate additional learning modalities in the next class activity, etc. When used in conjunction with other sources of data, the learner needs assessment can guide the instructor in making effective decisions in the classroom that will help adult English language learners succeed.

### What are Other Resources on Learner Needs Assessment?

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