# Determining Needs

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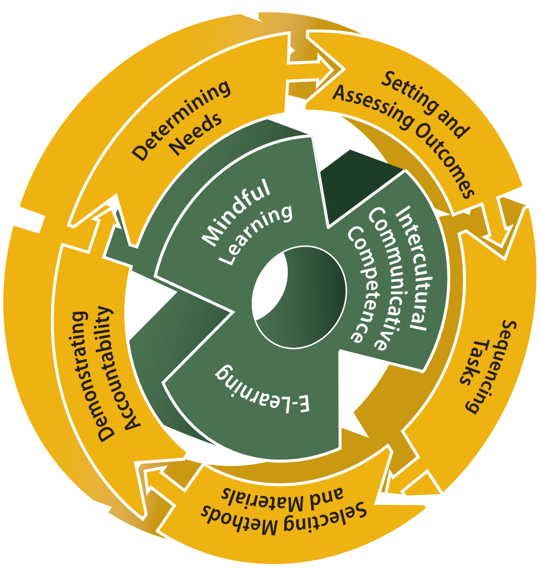
## ATESL Adult ESL Curriculum Framework




Government of Alberta

ATESL
Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language

# Section 1: Determining Needs

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## Overview

This section of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework* focuses on how to determine learning needs as a first step in developing a curriculum that addresses those needs. Information regarding learning needs is gathered from learners as well as from a variety of other stakeholders.[1] This information forms the basis of course outcomes, assessments, tasks, methods, and materials, all of which are discussed in subsequent sections of the *Curriculum Framework*. We begin here with a discussion of what a needs analysis is, along with a list of principles for determining learning needs. The rest of this section addresses the process of conducting a needs analysis.

## Introduction

The term *needs analysis* is used in a variety of ways. It can be used to describe, for instance,

- Information gathered to place learners in classes that are suited to their goals and their levels.
- Information gathered by instructors at the beginning of a semester to determine the language ability, previous learning experience, goals, interests, and/or special needs of learners enrolled in a particular class.
- A comprehensive research project involving multiple stakeholders and headed by an institutional or government department. In this type of needs analysis, for instance, input may be gathered from professional associations, employers, industry leaders, community organizations, funding agencies, and academic institutions in order to develop a curriculum or to gain a broader perspective on the ESL needs of a community, workplace, or profession.

Although there are many reasons for conducting a needs analysis, not all of those bear on the focus of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework*. In this section of the framework, we focus specifically on how to conduct a needs analysis in order to develop or revise a planned curriculum – that is, in order to develop a plan for instruction before a course is taught.[2] However, it is important to recognize that a planned curriculum must also be flexible enough to accommodate the needs and interests of those particular learners that present in a particular class, during a particular semester. As such, the needs and interests of learners in a particular class need to be analyzed, and such analyses should affect class content and direction.[3] The learning needs of learners should be reflected in both the "curriculum as planned" as well as the "curriculum-as-lived."

A sound curriculum is based on a thorough analysis of the learners' needs as they are identified and defined by the learner *and* by other stakeholders; in other words, learning needs should be considered from the point of view of the learners, certainly, but also from the points of view of, for instance, instructors, employers, industry leaders, professional associations, academic institutions, funders, community organizations, counsellors, and settlement workers. Analyzing learning needs allows one to discover why learners are learning English and what they will need to be able to do with the language. In this way, curriculum developers develop an understanding of the expectations and challenges learners will face, and identify skill and language gaps along with learner abilities, attitudes and priorities. An analysis of these issues is the first step towards identifying what should be taught in a class.

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1 Other stakeholders could include instructors, professional associations, licensing bodies, present and potential employers, industry leaders, community organizations, funding agencies, academic institutions, counsellors, graduates of the program, etc.

2 In this document, we do not address doing a community needs analysis to determine whether there is need for ESL training in a particular community. For a document that covers that topic, see Seabrook De Vargas and Anderson (2004), "A Needs Assessment Tool for ESL Programming," available on the ATESL resources database.

3 See Needs Assessment in a Learner-Centred Approach (Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis & Pidlaski, 2001, Chapter 3) for a description of the needs assessment process an instructor would go through to identify the needs of learners in a particular class. Information from this type of needs assessment would inform the direction of teaching and learning in that class; it could also provide input into future offerings of that course.

## Principles for determining needs

The following principles for determining learning needs have been informed by the ATESL Best Practices document.[4]

1. Initial and on-going stakeholder input is essential to program design that addresses learner needs. It is through input from a variety of stakeholders[5] that learning needs are identified. It is the responsibility of the program to address those needs.

2. Determining needs is a cyclical and ongoing process. A curriculum is not static and finite. Because learners' needs change along with demographic changes, immigration patterns, and economic and labour market fluctuations, the curriculum must be revisited periodically to ensure that it continues to address current needs.

3. Learner needs must directly inform learning outcomes and class content, including the tasks, texts, themes, and assessments that are chosen.

4. On-going assessment is an essential part of needs analysis. As learners in a particular class interact with the learning materials, it is important that the planned curriculum be adapted to meet the gaps, needs, and interests that emerge.

## Conducting a needs analysis

For the purposes of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework,* a needs analysis is defined as a research project that you (curriculum designers, program administrators, instructors) conduct in order to find out what the learning needs of the target learners are, and how those learning needs can be addressed.

In this section we will address the steps involved in conducting a needs analysis *(See Figure 1):*

**ATESL Best Practices for Adult ESL/ LINC Programming in Alberta**

**No. 5**

*The needs of the learners, along with input from community, educational, workplace and other stakeholders, are considered in initial and ongoing program planning.*

**No. 6**

*There are processes in place for regular program evaluation.*

**No. 10**

*Scheduling, location, length and delivery of classes take into account the needs of learners.*

**No. 39**

*Curriculum development and renewal is responsive to learner needs, based on input from the learner population as well as community, educational, and/or workplace stakeholders.*

**No. 40**

*The program ensures regular review and renewal of the curriculum and supporting materials.*

**No. 42**

*Instruction is both guided by the objectives and goals of the curriculum and responsive to the needs and goals of the learners.*

**No. 43**

*Class content (e.g., themes, listening/reading texts, speaking/writing topics, communicative tasks) is meaningful, appealing and engaging, with a transparent connection to the learners' real-world needs and future goals.*

**No. 53**

*Ongoing formative evaluation and feedback, of value to learners, are integrated into the teaching/learning process and inform class direction.*

[4] ATESL, 2009.

[5] Not only learners, but also instructors, community leaders, educational institutions, professional associations, licensing bodies, professionals practicing in the field graduates, potential and present employers, counsellors, etc.


*Figure 1. Needs analysis process*

Although the above are addressed in a step-by-step fashion, the actual process of a needs analysis is more iterative. For example, after doing preparatory research to understand the context, you may need to go back and revise the purposes of your needs analysis. Similarly, after beginning to gather information through interviews, you may decide to design a questionnaire.

## Step 1: Define your purpose

The findings of a needs analysis can be used in a variety of ways, for instance, to group learners, to select and sequence class content, or to determine methodology, course length and course intensity.[6] The findings may inform any of the following tasks:

- Writing a list of outcomes that a course will address
- Deciding what approach should be used in a class
- Determining themes and projects
- Selecting specific materials for workplace or bridging programs
- Developing learning tasks and activities
- Evaluating or re-evaluating existing curricula
- Assessing outcomes and providing feedback to learners

Understanding the purpose of the needs analysis will help you focus on asking the right questions, and keep you from asking superfluous questions. What is it that you already know, and what do you still need to learn? What will you do with the information you collect? A clear understanding of these issues can help you hone the questions you will be asking.

Specifying what you intend to do with the understandings you glean from the needs analysis will also help with subsequent planning decisions. So, the first step in conducting a needs assessment is for the committee or individuals involved (e.g., administrator, instructor, curriculum developer) to clarify the purposes of the needs assessment. You should be able to complete the following statements:

- We are conducting a needs assessment because…
- We are conducting a needs assessment in order to find out…

## Step 2: Understand the context and the project

**Understand the expectations, culture, and constraints of the context**

It is important to understand the context and variables that could affect the success of a curriculum project. A new or revised curriculum generally involves changes to the status quo of any given teaching context. If you understand the expectations and specific culture of the organization(s) involved, and understand where resistance could potentially come from, you can more easily overcome that resistance. If you understand the factors that are likely to have an effect on the design and success of the course, you will be able to take those constraints into consideration when designing the course. "Constraints" can include factors such as age of learners, experience/training of instructors, length of a course, class size, learner attitudes towards the target language, resources available, classroom size – that is, anything that could have an effect on curriculum design.[7] The following preparatory steps can help you develop an understanding of your context:

- Talk with a variety of stakeholders to get their input on the project.
- Do an environmental survey to become knowledgeable about the current context. For instance, gather the following:
  - o Program/institution guidelines and any curriculum or teaching materials already in place
  - o Information regarding learners, instructors, and teaching conditions

[6] Nunan, 1988, p. 45.
[7] Nation & Macalister, 2010.

- o Information on changes in immigration or visa policies and labour market trends
- o Information on any programs that your learners may be aiming for (e.g., documents from a professional association to find out what the licensure process is)

• Observe teachers and learners in their learning settings.

**Identify potential stakeholders**

Stakeholders can include the people who conduct the needs assessment, the people who provide information or answer questions, the people who implement the changes, and the people who benefit from the changes. Stakeholders may include past, present and potential learners, instructors, employers, colleges/universities, academic advisors, funding agencies, other programs, administrators, professional associations, and community organizations (such as support agencies and places of worship).

The purpose of your needs assessment will determine the scope of your project and the number of stakeholders you will need to contact. For instance, if your purpose is to develop a specific course that has already been determined, such as workplace communication, stakeholders may include local employers, employment agencies, teachers and learners. If your purpose is to develop or revise a curriculum for learners who consistently transfer into other college/university programs (e.g., hospitality and tourism, apprenticeships, or the Faculty of Engineering), stakeholders may include graduates from your program enrolled in the receiving program, as well as instructors from those programs who could provide information about curriculum requirements, materials, advice, as well as insight into what is challenging for the learners.

In other words, the needs analysis should facilitate the flow of information between your program and the people and organizations your program is affecting.

**Understand your timeframe**

Ideally, a needs analysis should take place before a curriculum is developed. However, a variety of constraints may affect your timeline (school schedules, seasonal peaks and ebbs, availability of personnel and stakeholders), and the process can be, and should be, much more recursive. That is, you should gather information prior to developing a draft of a curriculum, but you may be able to gather much more information when the course is piloted, which could lead to the refining of a curriculum and the development of additional materials to support the curriculum. At times, a needs analysis becomes the information you collect as you deliver the course, and it is during delivery that the goals, content and methodology are determined and shaped. That is, needs analyses can be conducted before, during and/or after you develop curriculum.

**For information on how the lived experiences of the instructor and students (i.e., the curriculum-as-lived) can be a valuable source of information for the curriculum-as-planned, see *Section 5: Demonstrating Accountability.***

For information on the learning needs of ESL literacy learners in the Alberta context, see *Stage 1: Understand Needs in Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework.*

## Step 3: Design your tools

Once you have developed an understanding of the context, you need to consider how you will gather information. The following are some of the factors that may affect the methods and tools you choose:

- Scheduling constraints (e.g., Are there seasons of the year when stakeholders will be unavailable or too busy to answer your questions?)
- Language constraints (e.g., Are your stakeholders able to communicate freely in English? If not, how will you get their input?)
- Budgets (e.g., How much time and funding has been set aside for needs assessment?)
- Availability and abilities of staff (e.g., Who will supervise the project? Who will design the tools? Who will do the research? Do these individuals already have the necessary skills, or will they have to be trained?)

### Select appropriate methods

The following is a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of some of the more common methods of gathering information regarding learner needs.

*Existing Documentation*

Much information on learner needs and trends may already be available in the form of learner evaluations, class evaluations, test results, post-program placement information, literature reviews, learner samples, and task analyses. Not only are these cost-effective sources of information, but a side benefit is that gathering this information allows you to establish contacts within the organization.

The disadvantages of depending on existing documentation, however, are that it is limited to past information, it may be difficult to access, and it may be difficult to analyze.

*Essential Skills Profiles[8] and Occupational Language Analyses*

Literacy and Essential Skills are defined by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2009b) as "the skills needed for work, learning, and life".[9] They include the nine essential skills that are used by competent workers in almost every occupation: reading, writing, document use, numeracy, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use, and continuous learning.[10]

Essential Skills Profiles (ESP) identify essential skills and workplace tasks that are required by workers in any of more than 250 specific occupations.[11] In other words, they are needs analyses of particular occupations that have already been produced and are publically available. An Occupational Language Analysis (OLA) defines the language requirements of an occupation by relating an ESP to the Canadian Language Benchmarks. In doing so, it provides more detail regarding the language required to complete the tasks described in the ESP. Essential Skills Profiles and OLAs are especially useful for gathering information for groups of learners who are heading towards a particular occupation (or related set of occupations). They can be used to identify the skills and tasks that learners in particular occupations will need to accomplish once they enter the workplace. (See the section below titled "Gathering Workplace Information" for more information on the Essential Skills).

8 http://www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/es/english/all_profiles.aspx
9 http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/index.shtml
10 For a full description of each essential skill, see http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/definitions/definitions.shtml#
11 Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009a

The downside of the ESP or OLAs is that they are sometimes difficult to integrate into general ESL classes with learners who are heading towards a wide variety of occupations.

For more information on the Essential Skills Profiles, see the *Essential Skills Profiles* on the HRSDC website.
For more information on OLAs (Occupational Language Analyses), see *ITSESSENTIAL.ca.*

*Canadian Language Benchmarks*

The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) are "a set of descriptive statements about successive levels of achievement on the continuum of ESL performance" (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005, p. VIII ). Each language skill (reading, writing, speaking and listening) is divided into 12 levels of increasing proficiency starting from Benchmark 1 (learners new to the language) to Benchmark 12 (approximating native speaker proficiency).[12] At the core of each Benchmark are descriptions of tasks the learners can do, a list of the conditions that need to be in place for them to complete those tasks, specific examples of the tasks/texts in real-world situations, performance indicators for each task, as well as a global description of the learner. The tasks for each language skill at any given benchmark are sorted into four categories:

- **Social interaction** (interacting in an interpersonal social situation)
- **Following and giving instructions**
- **Suasion** (persuading others, or reacting to suasion to do something)
- **Information** (exchanging, presenting and discussing information, ideas, opinions, feelings; telling stories; describing; reporting; arguing, etc.)

It is important to note that the CLBs are not a curriculum guide. However, if you know the approximate benchmark levels of your learners, the CLBs can serve as a guide to what learners at that level are capable of doing. They can be used to identify the types of tasks that are appropriate for learners at a particular benchmark level. Also, if you are designing a course to help learners reach a particular benchmark (e.g., for entry into a bridging or apprenticeship program), the CLB can assist you in identifying the tasks and skills that learners will need to be capable of doing. (See the section below titled "Benchmarking programs and occupations to the CLB" for more information on using the CLB to gather information on learner needs.)

The CLBs are a less useful needs assessment tool for those programs whose classes are not benchmarked to the CLBs. Also, while the CLBs list what learners at a certain level can do, they do not identify the particular needs of learners in a particular context – in other words, although they should be consulted, they should be used in combination with other methods of gathering input on learner needs.

For more information on the *Canadian Language Benchmarks,* see *Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2011.*

[12] The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks has also produced a guide to describe literacy learners: *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners* (Lohansson, Angst, Beer, Martin, Rebeck, & Sibilleau, 2001).

*Interviews (telephone & face-to-face)*[13]

Interviews, whether by telephone or face-to-face, can be useful, especially at the beginning of a needs analysis project, to identify gaps and general areas of need. They can also be used to gather information prior to designing a questionnaire. In interviews, respondents do not have to be limited by a list of options (as often happens in questionnaires) – in fact, open-ended questions work best in interviews. Also, interviews allow for follow-up questions and probing into issues. The advantage of face-to-face interviews is that communication can be facilitated by non-verbal communication, interpreters, and even visuals and realia (especially with language and literacy learners). The advantage of telephone interviews is that they can be a convenient and cost effective method of gathering input from native speakers or very fluent language learners.

However, there are drawbacks to interviews. Because interviews are time consuming, the number of interviews conducted is often limited. Also, the value of the information gathered during an interview is dependent on the interviewer's skill, and because interviews are less anonymous, respondents may be reluctant to volunteer negative information. Face-to-face interviews can be difficult to schedule and may include additional costs associated with travel. However, although telephone interviews are more cost-effective and easier to schedule, they can be especially intimidating and difficult for second language speakers, who often depend on non-verbal cues to make sense of communication.

*Focus groups*[14]

Focus groups allow a group of 6-12 people (ideally) to explore an issue at the same time. As with interviews, open-ended questions work best, and focus groups may be used to gather input for designing a questionnaire. A facilitator can make good use of probing and follow-up questions, and the dynamics of a group working together can encourage brainstorming and may lead to more thorough discussion and analysis of a topic than individual interviews.

However, focus groups can be difficult to schedule and they require a skilled facilitator as well as a note-taker. Recording and transcribing of discussions can be difficult if more than one person is speaking at the same time. Also, some participants may be reluctant to speak out in a public setting. Because focus groups are not anonymous, people may not feel comfortable presenting unpopular ideas, and sometimes only the ideas of the most outspoken participants are shared. Also, focus groups can be costly in terms of facility rental, transportation, refreshments, and so on.

*Questionnaires (paper or electronic)*[15]

Questionnaires are a cost-effective means of getting information from many people at one time. Programs such as SurveyMonkey[16] make the preparation of electronic surveys especially easy, and information is automatically tabulated. Another advantage of questionnaires is that they are generally anonymous – people can freely express their opinions without worrying about the repercussions of what they say.

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[13] See also p.36 of *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook* (Bow Valley College, 2009).
[14] See also p.36 of *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook* (Bow Valley College, 2009).
[15] See also p.36 of *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook* (Bow Valley College, 2009).
[16] http://www.surveymonkey.com/

However, the downside is that there may be a low response rate, and you may have to follow-up with people to encourage them to complete the questionnaire. Open-ended questions are often skipped, and yet closed questions can limit options, making it difficult to identify gaps.[17] Another complication in the adult ESL context is that questionnaires can be difficult for people with language and literacy issues, and electronic surveys may not be accessible to people who are not familiar with computers or who do not have computer/ internet access.

**Develop questions**

When designing questionnaires and interviews (individual, telephone or focus group), it is important to design questions that will elicit the information you need, based on the goals that you have already identified. For instance, you may choose to ask questions about gaps, needs, priorities, abilities, essential skills, mindful learning, e-learning, and intercultural communicative competence:

**Table 1. Asking the right questions.**

| Topic: | For example… |
|---|---|
| **Learner gaps, needs, or solutions** | What problems are learners facing in the community? |
| **Priorities** | Rate each of the following tasks according to how important they are to you. |
| **Abilities** | Which of the following do you find difficult to do? What are your strengths? |
| **Essential skills** | What type of reading do your employees need to do on the job?[18] |
| **Mindful learning** | Which of the following strategies do you use to learn English? |
| **E-learning** | Do you have access to a computer and the Internet at home? What software programs are you familiar with? How do you currently use a computer or technology to learn English? |
| **Intercultural communicative competence** | In what ways are your attitudes, beliefs and values similar to or different from the attitudes and beliefs of the Canadians you have met? Rate each of the following according to how similar or how different you feel your attitudes are from the attitudes of Canadians: male/female roles, work ethic, corporal punishment, aging, independence, materialism, time, money. |

Design questions to gather specific information that will be useful and usable, making sure each question has a direct purpose.

[17] This is why interviews or focus groups are often done prior to designing a questionnaire.

[18] For additional ES questionnaires and surveys, see Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001, p. 38; Luft & Seabrook de Vargas, 2005, Appendix A; and diagnostic checklists in Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2009.

Different types of questions are used to elicit different types of information. Open-ended questions need to be specific enough that the answers will be useful. Closed questions need to be carefully crafted so that the information they elicit is useful. If the project is large in scope, and there is enough time, it is good practice to pilot the questionnaires and interview/focus group questions to ensure that they elicit the information you are looking for.

For specific guidance regarding gathering information from ESL literacy learners, see pages 24-29 of *Stage 1: Understand Needs* in *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework*.

## *Step 4: Gather information*

**Privacy regulations**

Whenever you are collecting, using, and potentially disclosing personal information, you need to consider the regulations around the Personal Information and Protection Act (PIPA) and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPP).[19]

**Gathering the data**

It is important to set up processes for the gathering and recording of the data. It is also important to ensure that those involved in collecting the data understand both those processes, and the purpose of the research.

If you are using interviews or focus groups, you will need to ensure that those who are conducting the interviews and focus groups understand the purpose of the research and follow consistent processes. Some of those processes may include

- Explaining the purpose of the interview, and indicating how long it will take.
- Informing the interviewees of how their answers will be recorded (notes, recording device).
- Ensuring confidentiality.
- Asking open-ended questions.
- Speaking clearly and slowly, especially in the case of second language learners.
- Giving people time to think and answer (i.e., not talking too much).
- Clarifying through repetition and summary.
- Not taking more time than was originally promised.
- Transcribing notes the day of the interview if possible.

If you are using questionnaires, you will need to ensure that those who are designing and administering the questionnaires also follow consistent processes. They will need to

- Explain the purpose of the questionnaire (in writing, as well as in person if the questionnaire is being administered to a class, for instance).
- Provide technical support if necessary.
- Ensure confidentiality.

[19] http://pipa.alberta.ca/; http://www.servicealberta.ca/foip/

- Give a time frame for when it should be completed.
- Have a plan in place for following up on non-responses.
- Ensure that all questions are necessary given the purpose of the needs assessment.
- Ensure that questions are not biased.
- Ensure that respondents will feel comfortable answering the questions.
- Ensure that questions are written in clear, plain language.

**Gathering workplace information**

Essential Skills Profiles (ESP) and Occupational Language Analyses (OLA) were mentioned earlier as a potential source of information regarding the language skills learners may need in the workplace. Here we will provide more detail regarding how to use the ESP to access information regarding learning needs.

A first step in using the ESP is to identify the occupation(s) that your target learners are likely to enter. In bridging and English for the workplace programs, this can be relatively straightforward. In general ESL programs, however, this is more complex, and information from the learners themselves, from the labour market in your area, and from follow-up contacts with graduates of the program can all provide input on the following questions:

- Which industries/occupations in the community are attracting your learners?
- What are specific employers saying about the learners who have gone to work for them?
- What areas of further training are learners entering?
- What is the purpose for needing a particular essential skill?
- What tasks are required of the employee/learner at the job?

The second step would be to search the Essential Skills Profiles[20] (ESP) to identify the workplace tasks that might be relevant to your learners, and the complexity levels of those tasks. ESP are occupation-specific summaries of how workers apply the essential skills to successfully perform tasks at their jobs. Each of the 250+ profiles developed by HRSDC provides a list of the tasks that are completed by skilled workers in that occupation, organized by essential skill and ranked according to complexity level.

If your learners are in, or are heading towards, a particular occupation (or a limited number of occupations), you could use an occupation, keyword, or NOCC search to identify a list of skills and tasks that would be relevant for those learners. For example, if a number of your learners work within the healthcare system as caregivers and aides, the following are the Oral Communication tasks that they are likely faced with (taken from the Nurse Aides, Orderlies and Patient Service Associates NOC 3413):[21]

- Inform nursing staff or other supervisors of changes in patients' conditions. (1) , (daily)
- Interact with co-workers to co-ordinate work activities, share information or request assistance. (1) , (daily)
- Receive instructions from their supervisors and discuss problems to be resolved. (1) , (daily)
- Talk with patients' families and friends to greet them and exchange information. (1) , (daily)
- Listen to patients to make behavioural observations and to assess their needs. (2)
- Explain procedures to patients and respond to their questions and concerns. (2) , (daily)
- Participate in staff meetings to discuss schedules, duties and patient care. (2)

[20] http://www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/es/english/all_profiles.aspx lists all the occupations
[21] http://www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/ES/English/ShowProfileNOC.aspx?v=26&ID=108952&v1=&v2=3413&v3=

The numbers at the end of each of the above tasks refer to the complexity level of the task, which differ from the proficiency levels of learners described by the Canadian Language Benchmarks.[22]

If there are no relevant Essential Skills Profiles available (or if additional information is needed) workplace information can be gathered by

- Observing the target workplaces or academic settings (i.e., those settings that learners will transfer into) for how essential skills are being used.
- Interviewing learners (or former students) who are already working or studying in those contexts regarding the essential skills they need for success in those contexts, and any difficulties or gaps they face in using those skills.
- Interviewing experienced workers (in workplace settings) or successful students (in academic settings) regarding how they make use of essential skills.[23]
- Interviewing employers (in workplace settings) or instructors (in academic settings) regarding the essential skills that would be required for success on the job or in school.[24]
- Gathering authentic material (i.e., the material your learners are/will be working with) from the target context, being sure to find out what the learners will need to do with that material. For instance, do learners need to compare a label to a chart to ensure that all information is correct, or do they need to read a label to determine the correct dose of a medication? Do they need to read and study a safety manual in order to develop a clear understanding of the information, or do they need to scan through a manual to find answers to specific questions? Do they need to read an article in order to answer multiple choice comprehension questions, or do they need to be able to critique the article and participate in a discussion regarding the ideas in the article?

Organize this procedure so as to categorize listening/speaking, reading/writing tasks, noting the frequency of particular tasks.[25]

For more information on the Essential Skills or the Essential Skills Profiles, see *Literacy and Essential skills* or *Essential Skills Profiles* on the HRSDC website.
For more information on OLAs (Occupational Language Analyses), see *ITSESSENTIAL.ca.*

[22] In contrast to the 12 CLB levels, there are 4 levels of complexity for the Oral Communication ES, and 5 levels of complexity for writing, reading, and document use. In 2005, the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks published *Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework* to help ESL practitioners integrate Essential Skills workplace materials and tasks more effectively into classrooms benchmarked to the CLB. This document contains tables that compare the complexity levels of the Essential Skills with the proficiency levels for each of CLB level.

[23] For additional ES questionnaires and surveys, see Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001, p. 38; diagnostic checklists in Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2009; and Luft & Seabrook de Vargas, 2005,Appendix A.

[24] For additional ES questionnaires and surveys, see Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001, p. 38; diagnostic checklists in Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2009; and Luft & Seabrook de Vargas, 2005,Appendix A.

[25] You may also wish to categorize tasks into the sub-skill groups identified in the CLB 2000/2010 documents and identify the benchmark level of the task or even the range (stage 1, stage 2, stage 3). It is also important to identify tasks that fall out of the common range. (See "Gathering information to benchmark programs and occupations to the CLB," below.)

**Gathering information to benchmark programs and occupations to the CLB**

The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) were mentioned earlier as a potential source of information regarding the abilities of learners and the skills and tasks that they may need in order to reach a particular benchmark. As mentioned, this information is less relevant if classes or receiving programs and occupations are not benchmarked to the CLB. However, correlating the language demands of a receiving occupation or a receiving college program/class to the CLB can be a useful means of gathering information related to learners needs.

Hammond and Holmes (2011) compare methods that have been used in projects across Canada to benchmark the language demands of occupations and college programs to the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB). One purpose for such a benchmarking project is to inform curriculum or resource development.[26] In most of the projects described, a variety of methods for gathering data on reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks were used, including observation, job shadowing, interviews, focus groups, surveys, environmental scans, and collection and analyses of authentic materials. Contextual factors and performance conditions for these tasks were recorded, as were sample language and sociocultural information. The goal of the projects was to identify key communication tasks in each skill area and relate these tasks to CLB descriptors.[27] Benchmark levels were then assigned to each skill, often informed by the frequency and importance of tasks.[28]

Specifying benchmark levels and tasks for each skill provides the curriculum developer with valuable information regarding what learners need to be able to do to function successfully in a college program or occupation.

For more information on the Canadian Language Benchmarks, see *Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2011*.
For specific guidance regarding conducting a needs assessment for ESL literacy learners, from the perspective of both programs and instructors, see *Stage 1: Understand Needs* in *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework*.

## *Step 5: Analyze the information*

Analyzing the information you have gathered and putting it into a usable format is the step that brings meaning to the information you have gathered. It allows you to

- Make sound curriculum development and revision decisions.
- Determine program and curriculum outcomes.
- Develop materials.
- Choose content.
- Identify what needs to be changed.

[26] Hammond and Holmes (2011) describe a wide range of purposes of CLB-referenced benchmarking projects:
- "defining standards for entry into a college program
- describing the language needed to work safely and competently in an occupation
- informing the development of an occupation-specific language assessment tool
- informing the development of an online self-assessment and self study materials for people to improve their English
- a basis for curriculum or resource development" (p.18).

[27] In many cases, CLB performance conditions informed this process.

[28] For more information regarding how decisions were made regarding benchmark levels, refer to the Comparative Analysis of CLB Benchmarking Methodologies document (Hammond & Holmes, 2011).

It is important to remember that needs are not objective facts. Instead, they are "subjective interpretations of information from a large variety of sources" (Richards, 2001, p.67). Therefore, depending on the scope of the project and the variety of answers, you may have to make judgment calls on how to prioritize needs. In making these judgment calls, you will need to consider parameters such as time, practicality, and fit with the philosophy and goals of your program/institution.[29] The following are questions that can be asked to help prioritize the needs that emerge:

- Where do the needs fit within the existing curriculum?
- Can steps for addressing the needs be implemented in the short-term or should they become part of a longer-term plan?
- Are there feasible solutions?
- Are the needs critical or just desirable?
- How should contradictory information be treated?[30]

The information gathered should be organized into lists, categories, themes, gaps, abilities, priorities (etc.), depending on the questions you have asked, the information you are looking for, and how you plan to organize your course.[31] Areas of organization might include some of the following:

- Purposes for using English
- Situations where English is frequently used
- Situations/problems that frequently occur
- Preferences for learning
- Communication problems
- Essential skills
- Linguistic gaps
- Content areas

These general categories should then be broken down further for the purposes of curriculum development or revision. For instance, "Purposes for learning English" could include to work, to study, for survival, and to speak to English-speaking Canadians. And each of those sub-categories could be broken down even farther; for instance, "learning English to work" could involve learning English to greet customers, to answer the telephone, to respond to complaints, or to understand safety procedures.

Information that has been gathered will need to be analyzed to the point that program goals and objectives can be defined, and curriculum content, learning tasks/activities, and outcomes can be written. The more thoroughly you analyze the data you have collected, the better you will be able to address the learning needs of your target audience. When possible, you may choose to go back to the stakeholders to check your conclusions (see Step 8). It is important to remember that this is a process that continually needs to be revisited, and that the needs you identify today may not be the needs you would identify next year.

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29 It's important to note that seldom are there enough resources (time, money) to address all of the needs that arise in a needs analysis, and difficult decisions will generally have to be made.

30 If, for instance, the needs identified by the employer are different than the ones identified by the learner.

31 There are different lenses through which you can view this information – will the curriculum be topic-based, CLB -based, task-based, or gap-fill based? The curriculum will look different depending on how you choose to organize, but a decision does have to be made about the organizational principle fairly early.

## *Step 6: Integrate the results into curricula*[32]

Integrating the results into curricula occurs when you move from analyzing and reporting the findings to incorporating those findings into learning outcome statements, themes and projects, tasks and activities, materials, and assessments.

First, there should be a clear connection between the needs that you have identified, and the **outcome statements** in your curriculum. Curriculum outcome statements show what the learner will be able to do after completing the class. For instance, the Oral Communication tasks from NOC 3413 (Nurse Aides, Orderlies and Patient Service Associates)[33] can be formulated into the following outcome statements to indicate what learners in a class for healthcare workers will focus on:

**Table 2. Outcome statements for healthcare workers (based on NOC 3413).**

**Learners will develop the ability to:**

- Provide relevant information regarding patient condition to other healthcare professionals.
- Participate in small, formal group discussions to negotiate schedules, duties, and options for patient care.
- Show listenership and check comprehension when receiving instructions from supervisors.
- Use appropriate strategies to make suggestions, propose solutions, and request assistance in conversations with coworkers.
- Explain a sequence of events (e.g., medical procedures) to patients.
- Negotiate positive relationships with clients and their families through the use of conversation openings and closings, small talk, apologies, and expressions of reassurance, support, and encouragement.

**For more guidance on writing outcome statements, see *Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes.***

There should also be a clear connection between the needs identified for a group of learners and the **themes, projects and tasks** that form the content of the course. If a particular group of learners identified "taking my child to the doctor" as a settlement need, for example, the instructor of that class could incorporate the theme of seeing a doctor into the reading activities the learners do and develop communication tasks related to that need. The themes, projects and tasks designed for a particular class can also be incorporated into the curriculum document if that need is identified as important for subsequent learners in a course. Tables 3-5 illustrate how the need to be able to take one's children to the doctor can be incorporated into the specific learning outcomes (SLOS), sample tasks, and performance indicators of a curriculum document:

[32] See *Alberta LINC 5 Curriculum* (Capune, 2008) for more information about writing outcome statements. See also *Setting and Assessing Outcomes,* the next section of the Curriculum Framework.

[33] http://www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/ES/English/ShowProfileNOC.aspx?v=26&ID=108952&v1=&v2=3413&v3=

**Table 3. Connecting outcomes, tasks, and themes: Doctor's appointment.**

**SLO: Learners will develop the ability to book a doctor's appointment by telephone.**

| Sample tasks | Performance Indicators |
|---|---|
| Role-play booking a doctor's appointment on the telephone. | • Responds to greetings and questions<br>• Identifies purpose<br>• Suggests dates and times for appointments<br>• Confirms information<br>• Writes down details<br>• Closes the conversation appropriately |

**Table 4. Connecting outcomes, tasks, and themes: Medical interview.**

**SLO: Learners will develop the ability to ask and answer health related questions.**

| Sample tasks | Performance Indicators |
|---|---|
| Role-play asking and answering health related questions in a doctor's office. | • Describes common symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, aches, pain, injuries)<br>• In response to questions, describes intensity of symptoms<br>• In response to questions, describes duration of symptoms<br>• In response to questions, describes treatments that have already been tried<br>• Asks questions<br>• Checks comprehension through repetition, summarizing and paraphrasing |

**Table 5. Connecting outcomes, tasks, and themes: Newspaper article.**

**SLO: Learners will develop the ability to identify main ideas and supporting details in newspaper articles (on health related topics).**

| Sample tasks | Performance Indicators |
|---|---|
| Read a short newspaper article on a health related subject. | • Makes predictions based on title and pictures<br>• Identifies main idea<br>• Identifies supporting details<br>• Guesses meanings of words/expressions<br>• Summarizes the article orally for classmates who read a different article<br>• Relates the information in the article to own situation |

**For more information on developing tasks, themes, and projects, see *Section 3: Sequencing Tasks.***
**For more information on writing Performance Indicators, see *Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes.***

The needs identified for a group of learners can be incorporated into **assessment** rubrics. Learners can use rubrics to evaluate their own and other's performances, and instructors can use rubrics to provide feedback to learners. For instance, learners who are role-playing using the telephone to make appointments to see the doctor could complete the following rubric to give feedback to a peer:

**Table 6. Peer feedback rubric.**

| Did ________________ do the following? | Yes | Partly | No |
|---|---|---|---|
| Respond to the greeting | | | |
| Identify the reason s/he is calling | | | |
| Suggest dates and times for appointments | | | |
| Repeat information to make sure s/he got it correctly | | | |
| Write down correct information about time and place | | | |
| Close the conversation appropriately (e.g., said "Thank you" and "good bye," and waited for the other person's "good bye" before hanging up) | | | |

**For more information on planning for assessment, see *Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes.***

**Materials** can also be developed in response to the needs that are identified. These materials may be developed for a particular class (curriculum-as-lived) or for a curriculum package that is provided to instructors (curriculum-as-planned). For instance, if learners identify their children's healthcare as an important concern, current newspaper articles on the topic of children's health or emergency wait times (etc.) can be developed into reading activities in which learners do the following: make predictions based on the title and picture; guess meanings of words/expressions; answer questions to identify the main ideas and supporting ideas; and relate information in the article to their own lives. They can then summarize their article for other learners who read different articles.

**For more information on choosing materials, see *Section 4: Selecting Methods and Materials.***

Even during the course itself, new needs will arise that will need to be addressed/incorporated into the curricula. That is, while the course is being taught, the instructor makes use of materials, tasks and activities to enable learners to meet the learning outcomes (which reflect the learning needs) of the class. Learners interact with the learning materials, complete tasks, engage in activities, and improve skills. In the process of the teaching and learning, the instructor assesses whether learners are meeting the learning outcomes. This assessment should first result in feedback to the learner. However, the results of the assessment should also feed back into the curriculum. In other words, how learners are doing, and the gaps that become apparent as (or after) a course is taught, should affect the direction of the class as well as the learning tasks, texts, activities and materials that the instructor chooses to incorporate into the class. New needs may be identified during this process, and previously identified needs may be less important than originally thought. Feedback from learners and instructors regarding assessment should eventually result in further revisions of the *curriculum-as-planned* (i.e., the curriculum document or package).

**For more information on revising a curriculum, see *Section 5: Demonstrating Accountability.***

Developing learning outcome statements, themes and projects, tasks, classroom activities, rubrics, and materials are all covered in more detail in later sections of this curriculum framework. The point here is that all of these curriculum pieces should be transparently connected to the needs of the learners.

## *Step 7: Communicate results*

In order to demonstrate accountability during the process of determining needs, it is important to share with stakeholders what has been learned regarding learner needs. This can happen earlier in the process, for instance, as you check back with a stakeholder you have interviewed to ensure that you have correctly interpreted their contribution. Or it can happen later in the process as you write a report or use the learning needs that were identified to explain curricular decisions to instructors or learners. By communicating these results, the curriculum developer accounts for the decisions that have been made regarding outcomes and priorities, tasks, materials, methods and assessment. In this process,

- Learners are reassured that their contributions and feedback "count", and they understand why the course has been planned as it has.
- Instructors gain an understanding of the learning needs of their target audience (as much as can be determined prior to meeting the learners), as well as confidence to follow the proposed curriculum.
- Funders receive assurance that the moneys they have assigned to the project will result in learners' best interests being met.
- Employers understand the delimitations of the course and what they can expect learners to gain (and perhaps not gain) from the course.

**For more information on transparency in communication and accountability towards stakeholders, see *Section 5: Demonstrating Accountability.***

## Conclusion

The goal of this section has been to provide structure and guidance to the process of conducting a needs analysis. The process involves knowing your purpose and your context; deciding what information to collect, from whom, and how; collecting information; organizing, analyzing and prioritizing the information; integrating the results into curricula; and communicating results to stakeholders – all with the goal of meeting the learning needs of your primary stakeholders, the learners. The next section of the *Curriculum Framework* addresses the process of setting and then assessing learning outcomes that reflect the needs that were identified.

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