

# Assessing learners' needs and language level

## Pre-course needs analysis

**T**he results of a pre-course questionnaire will make a valuable contribution to the planning stage of a programme of language learning once a group of language learners has been identified. Good preparation before the start of a language programme will ensure that delivery of the programme, the teaching and learning will be more effective.

Good planning should contain at least the following three elements:

- ❑ a knowledge of the learners and their needs
- ❑ a set of goals and objectives
- ❑ the course designer's view of the nature of language and learning

It is the first and second elements which inform the tutor what to teach. The third element influences the tutor in deciding how the language should be taught.



*Good preparation before the start will ensure that the teaching and learning will be more effective*



**A pre-course needs analysis questionnaire** will provide information on the first of these elements. In many training contexts it will be tutors who will be responsible for collecting the data. The information can be collected prior to the start of a course, either through e-mailing the questionnaire to the learners or by collecting their responses in an interview. The questionnaires should be administered in the target language, if the language level of the learners is adequate, or in learners' first language. Such a questionnaire can provide details on specific language needs of individual learners, but also on their previous language-learning experience as well as their competence in the target language.

Learners can be asked about the activities they have to carry out in the target language, such as attending international meetings, welcoming visitors, making phone calls, etc. The language functions the learners have to use in each activity can be identified: for example, giving a speech, writing a report, reading documents, listening to speeches, discussing issues in meetings.

**Issues that learners need to discuss** can also be identified through the questionnaire, and these can then be incorporated into activities in the classroom and opportunity given for extending the learners' vocabulary in areas they have highlighted such as collective bargaining, working time, European Works Councils etc.

The section which requires learners to assess their own language level is intended to provide a guide to tutors for the planning of groups and materials. This information complements any specific diagnostic test which tutors may wish to administer. The free writing section provides a further insight into the proficiency of the learner.

The questionnaire can be adapted to suit the needs of a particular course. Information from these questionnaires can then be summarised on a grid, which is helpful to tutors in forming working groups which are established for reasons other than level (mix gender, age, experience, those working in the same department, first language, etc.)



## Example

### English for European Trade Unionists

**Slovakia, 3 - 10 September 2005**

### Pre-course questionnaire

**Aim:** This questionnaire aims to provide us with information about your English language needs. This will enable us to design a course using methods and materials to meet your needs.

| SECTION 1 - Personal Details                           |                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| First name: _____                                      | Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Family name: _____                                     |                                                               |
| Work address: _____                                    |                                                               |
| E-mail: _____                                          |                                                               |
| Fax: _____                                             | Tel: _____                                                    |
| Organisation: _____                                    |                                                               |
| Job/Worktitle _____                                    |                                                               |
| Department (eg Education/Training international) _____ |                                                               |
| Number of years employed in your organisation _____    |                                                               |



**SECTION 2 – Language Needs**

| <i>Please indicate which of the following you would like to cover <b>on the course</b>:</i> | <b>Importance</b> |        |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------|-----|
|                                                                                             | High              | Medium | Low |
| • general social conversation                                                               |                   |        |     |
| • talking about your job                                                                    |                   |        |     |
| • discussing important issues informally                                                    |                   |        |     |
| • taking part in meetings                                                                   |                   |        |     |
| • expressing your opinions                                                                  |                   |        |     |
| • improving your pronunciation                                                              |                   |        |     |
| • obtaining information through correspondence (letters / faxes / e-mails)                  |                   |        |     |
| • discussing the enlargement of the EU                                                      |                   |        |     |
| • discussing trade union issues                                                             |                   |        |     |
| • discussing education and training                                                         |                   |        |     |
| • discussing European Works Councils                                                        |                   |        |     |
| • other .....<br>( <i>please state</i> )                                                    |                   |        |     |



### SECTION 3 – English language skills

You will soon be attending the English Language course.

Please answer the following questions **with reference to the course 'English for European trade unionists'**

- How important is it for you to practice the following skills on the course? (Please tick ✓)

|                   | Importance |        |     |
|-------------------|------------|--------|-----|
|                   | High       | Medium | Low |
| <b>SPEAKING</b>   |            |        |     |
| <b>LISTENING</b>  |            |        |     |
| <b>READING</b>    |            |        |     |
| <b>WRITING</b>    |            |        |     |
| <b>VOCABULARY</b> |            |        |     |
| <b>GRAMMAR</b>    |            |        |     |

Please write approximately 50-100 words in English explaining your present level of English and why you want to improve your English skills.

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**Thank you!**



## Assessing learners' language level

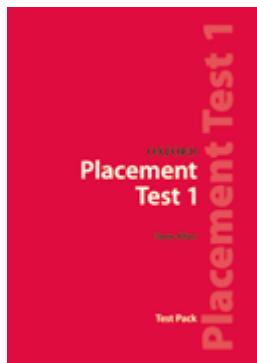
**In order to set up and deliver** a successful training course, it is important to bring together a group of participants with similar learning needs and aims. For language courses, it is crucial that learners in a particular learning group are also at a comparable level in their knowledge of the language, to avoid frustration in the classroom if some learners are confronted with tasks and activities that are either too easy or too difficult.

There are several ways in which the language level of each participant can be established. Obviously, the most effective is by means of a face-to-face interview with the tutor, where a series of questions and tasks can be set to each potential participant, thus enabling the tutor to group the learners according to their level.

If face-to-face interviews cannot be carried out, then telephone interviews can be conducted, but this is unsatisfactory as people do not always perform at their best on the telephone in a foreign language, if they cannot see and do not know their interlocutor. Obviously, new technology means that it is possible for people talking on the telephone to see each other – but such means are not yet available to all.

Both face-to-face and telephone interviews have the disadvantage of being extremely time-consuming for the trainer, and they are also difficult to set up for participants who have heavy workloads and who may travel frequently, and may not live and work in the same geographical area.

### Oxford Placement Test.



This tool enables tutors to assess students' level from elementary to proficiency. It involves a listening test as well as grammar, and takes about 75 minutes to administer.

The results are calibrated to the Common European Framework Reference levels (A1-C2), the Cambridge ESOL Examinations, and other International Examinations.

**Another useful tool** is the [UEFAP English Level Test](#) especially useful for learners who are not in the same place at the same time, as it can be carried out by individuals on-line.

This is a series of quick tests which give a rough idea of level on a scale 0-5. Individuals are asked to click on a level they think is appropriate for them, then they proceed as far as they can. Their level is then automatically assessed.

**Such diagnostic tools** are only useful if they have been used correctly. It is important that learners understand that these are not tests, but



rather diagnostic analyses which will enable the course planners to provide the most effective programme to meet the learners' needs.

The scores should be used in conjunction with information given on the Pre-course Questionnaire to plan the course content and organise the working groups.

## Changing needs

**Once a course has begun**, it may be necessary to gauge how participants' needs are changing, in order to adapt the course to meet these changing needs as far as possible. This change may occur for various reasons:

- Initial analysis of level and needs may have been faulty – the course may give them an increased capacity to express their linguistic needs
- Different learning styles of participants
- Desire for more specific functions or vocabulary

Changing needs can be expressed via one-to-one tutorials with tutors if the time allows, or by means of a mid-course questionnaire, which can be quickly administered. Another method is simply a group discussion, but this needs to be handled carefully where competing needs are expressed.

Learner attitudes to the course or language-learning in general, yielded by an initial pre-course questionnaire can be subsequently modified by exposure to best practice in communicative teaching. If, as is likely with trade unionists, the tutor favours a democratic style, sharing the information gained from feedback opportunities throughout the course with the learners is a way of enabling them to take responsibility for their own learning. This will also enable the tutor to provide a balance of language activities in each session. In order to gain feedback the tutor can use a simple questionnaire of the type shown below:



### Mid-course questionnaire

*In the last 3 sessions we have done a mixture of accuracy and fluency work.*

**Mark each activity below** as very useful , useful  or not useful  and add comments or suggestions where you wish:

1. Working on exercises on the perfect tense and correcting own work
2. Tutor presentation on problems with the perfect tense
3. Pair-work: sharing a past success and a past failure in your trade union experience (fluency work with no correction from teacher)
4. Group discussion of a trade-unionist's CV (reading text: no pre-teaching of vocabulary)
5. Writing own CV as if written 10 years in the future
6. Pair-work suggesting language improvements to each other's work; tutor acts as consultant.
7. Tutor takes in CVs and returns them corrected
8. Watching video of 3 interviews for a trade union job (difficult vocab. pre-taught)
9. Group work to evaluate the interviewers and the interviewees.
10. Report back to class; discussion
11. Preparing a role-play of job interviews



**One group may have divided opinions** on the best way to learn a language. Another can have members who are rather vociferous and the opinions of less vociferous learners need to be registered. In some groups the tutor meets resistance to certain methods. In all these cases a moderate use of a feedback questionnaire is especially useful and the willingness to negotiate a compromise can only be valuable, and will hardly be a new concept to trade unionists.

By introducing the idea of self-evaluation at the beginning of any course the learning environment becomes one of negotiation and discussion of learning strategies. This can only be beneficial in terms of creating a positive learning environment.

## Self-evaluation and assessment

### The target group

**Some of our trade unionists** may arrive in our classes with a negative language learning attitude. They may feel discouraged by their inability to communicate well in the target language; or they may have already started a language course and given it up, or they may well feel they have not been making sufficient progress. Some will have experienced very traditional methods of language learning and may find it difficult to accept the rationale behind a learner-centred approach. They may also experience anxiety and frustration with particular language learning tasks. When a learner becomes frustrated, s/he loses interest, becomes detached, bored and often blames the tutor or drops out. It is a negative spiral.

### The good language learner model

**To avoid this downward spiral**, we need to develop self-awareness in the language learner. S/he needs to find out what kind of learner s/he is, be encouraged to keep records of progress which help him/her to set short term language goals and ultimately to feel that s/he is a good language learner who has developed a sense of autonomy and can take responsibility for his/her own progress.

Our learners will no doubt be used to working through a collaborative process and reaching a negotiated outcome with others in their role as trade unionists. This experience can be successfully transferred to the language classroom where learners should be encouraged to build up criteria for their own self - assessment as part of a negotiated dynamic process with their peers and the tutor.



## Keeping personal records

If we are using a competence-based syllabus our obvious model for self- assessment is the specific competences attached to the particular level the learner is studying. These should be negotiated with students as the course progresses. Below is an example of how students could build up a profile of their competences and take an active part in assessing their own progress by keeping a personal record of tasks performed. This helps learners to set short-term goals.

| DATE    | SKILL     | TASK                      | COMMENT                                                    | ACTION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------|-----------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 24.9.04 | Speaking  | Delivering a Presentation | People said it was difficult to follow.                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work on Topic</li> <li>• Indicators &amp; Introducers e.g.: <i>I'd now like to move on to.....</i> etc.</li> <li>• T. suggested I make my sentences shorter and pause between</li> <li>• points.</li> <li>• Need to practise pronunciation of vowel sound /i:/ and focus on weak forms.</li> </ul> |
| 30.9.04 | Listening | Tour of factory           | Had difficulty understanding explanation of various roles. | Need to do some vocabulary work on specific jobs/roles in a factory.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

## Assessing progress

**Because we can predict** the type of situations our trade unionists will find themselves in and the language tasks and skills they will require to deal with these situations, our learners can then `rehearse' the language they may need (see section on Communication Activities) and can assess how competently they perform the task. By repeating the activity at a later stage in the course, learners can measure the progress they have made and build up their confidence. This principle can be applied not only to speaking activities but also to reading, writing, listening and vocabulary work.

Feedback should be provided by:

- **the tutor:** in the form of spoken or written comments on students `performance'. This could be from written work, role-play/discussion



## ***Language training for European trade unionists – a guide***

activities or via student video or tape diaries. (See section on Giving Feedback in Communication Activities.)

- **peers:** in the form of positive and negative comments on the performance of a task. Tutors should be encouraged to use a marking code for written work (i.e. T = mistake with a tense) rather than simply correcting the error themselves, so that learners can correct their own work and that of their peers and thereby genuinely raise awareness of their specific problems. By encouraging peer assessment you are helping to build up a supportive learning environment.

**Native speaker contact** is by far the most effective form of self-assessment. By using native (or near-native) speakers as much as possible in our teaching we are exposing learners to authentic language, but often within the more supportive confines of the classroom. Invite local native speakers into class to give talks or to be interviewed, take learners on visits etc. Short authentic exchanges of language help to build up confidence and learners then fill in their personal record sheets on how they 'performed'.

Learners should be encouraged to ask themselves questions like:

- How did I cope with / feel about the situation?
- How much did I understand?
- Did they understand me?
- Did my conversation flow?
- Did I communicate what I needed/wanted to?
- At which points was I searching for appropriate language?

**By identifying problem areas**, language can be fed in and hopefully when the task is repeated, learners will feel they have made progress. By recording these tasks in their personal record sheet they are clear what action to take if they want to improve. The tutor can negotiate the syllabus accordingly and can give group and individual advice on specific language areas. Learners then have the ultimate satisfaction of being responsible for their own learning.



## Tutor evaluation of learner's progress

**There are two main types** of evaluation that tutors can give to learners: **language performance** and **effectiveness of presentations**.

Participants will usually be asked to make two presentations, one near the start of the course, and the other towards the end. The aims of the initial presentation are to help participants get to know each other (typically students are asked to work in groups to research and work on their topic), to give them some initial confidence in speaking in front of the group, and to give the tutor some valuable information regarding their abilities with English. The tutor observes the presentations, and can then, through a tutorial, give students useful and supportive feedback regarding their work and their language. It is important at this stage that the evaluation is clearly supportive, as one does not wish to undermine participants' confidence in any way, but rather to help them feel that their contribution to and involvement in the course are both valid and worthwhile.



***Students will usually be asked to make two presentations***

The tutorial will usually start with participants having the opportunity to give their own thoughts on the presentation; often people will take this opportunity to say how nervous they felt, and that their English is not good enough, and so on. The role of the tutor here is to turn these worries into positive approaches to the course, and therefore help the students see the benefits of the work they are doing.

Participants will, of course, also ask for feedback on their English. While watching the presentations, the tutor therefore needs to note down examples of those areas which seem to cause the learner difficulty, and to present these in a way which helps them consider these areas more fully. An example of a feedback sheet would be as follows:



| You said ...        | Correction ... |
|---------------------|----------------|
|                     |                |
| <b>Other points</b> |                |
|                     |                |

**The top half of the sheet** can be used for language feedback (this may be to do with any relevant area of language: grammar, vocabulary, expressions, or pronunciation). Some will clearly have more difficulties or areas to work on than others, but tutors need to use their discretion; it would not be useful, for example, to note down or point out every mistake that the participants make! The “other points” section of the sheet can be used to make comments about the presentation, style and content, etc.

The aim of the second presentation is to draw together the various strands of the course input, incorporating language development, presentation skills and some research/presentation of an area which can be negotiated between students and tutors. Often, for example, participants will make a presentation about their work, or the organisation within which they operate, or the needs for language training within their field. Whatever the subject, the presentation gives the tutor valuable information which can be noted, edited and expressed to the student in ways which will aid their future language development.

Some tutors might prefer to use a fairly “open” format for evaluating the presentation; for example, headings like “strengths”, “areas for development” and “other points” might be used. These are open enough to enable the tutor to respond to the presentation made, and to make sure that all relevant areas are included.

Other tutors might prefer an approach which breaks down typical areas of a presentation, and gives learners guidance according to the main demands that the presentation makes of them.



**As you can see from the example below**, this evaluation sheet gives a detailed breakdown. It is more useful for participants if the evaluation sheet reflects the actual contents of the course (for example, point 5, regarding “signals” would need to have been covered on the course). Tutors should therefore tailor the evaluation sheet so that relevant areas are covered, enabling them to point learners towards the work from particular sessions should there be any doubt as to what is being referred to.

Whichever approach one takes to giving evaluations of learners’ work, it is important that they feel supported, and that despite the mistakes with English that they will undoubtedly have made, they are given guidance as to which areas they would benefit from working on. Tutors should take the opportunity to give learners a written record of these areas, and also point them towards books or other resources (e.g. internet) which might help them.

| <b>TUTOR’S EVALUATION OF FINAL PRESENTATION</b>                       |                 |      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------|
| NAME:                                                                 |                 |      |
| 1. What were the strengths of the presentation?                       |                 |      |
| 2. Were the main points easy/clear to understand?                     |                 |      |
| Yes                                                                   | With difficulty | No   |
| 3. Would the listener be able to summarise the talk for someone else? |                 |      |
| Yes                                                                   | With difficulty | No   |
| 4. Was it well organised?                                             |                 |      |
| Yes                                                                   | Generally       | No   |
| 5. Were “SIGNALS” used when moving to a new point?                    |                 |      |
| Yes                                                                   | Generally       | No   |
| 6. How effective was the language for emphasising some points?        |                 |      |
| Very good                                                             | Satisfactory    | Poor |



|                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7. Was the speed of speaking appropriate?<br>Yes                      Too fast                      Too Slow                                                                  |
| 8. Was the volume and clarity of voice appropriate?<br>Yes                      Generally                      No                                                             |
| 9. Was a clear explanation of specialist terms given?<br>Yes                      Generally                      No                                                           |
| 10. Was the quantity of information in the time available:<br>Satisfactory              Too much                      Too little                                              |
| 11. How well was eye-contact maintained with the listeners?<br>Well                      Poorly                                                                               |
| 12. Other serious difficulties in following the presentation were caused by:<br>Stress/intonation              Grammar                      Topic                      Others |
| 13. Did you indicate that you were about to hand over / conclude?<br>Yes                      No                                                                              |
| 14. Were questions dealt with:<br>Very well                      Satisfactorily                      Poorly                                                                   |
| 15. Advice for future presentations?                                                                                                                                          |

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