

Language learning, teaching and assessment and the integration of adult immigrants. The importance of needs analysis¹

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Abstract

This paper:

- Stresses the importance of taking account of the language learning needs from a societal perspective;
- Explains how language learning needs can be described and function as a basis for the development and delivery of language programmes for adult immigrants;
- Explains how to take into account the perceived needs of immigrants as well as of the host community;
- Presents a possible route to follow in order to describe adult immigrants’ language learning needs from a task-based perspective.

Summary

As David Little, in his article “*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the development of policies for the integration of adult migrants*”² argues, if a language course and a language test are intended to support immigrants’ integration into the host community, both should take account of the perceived needs of immigrants as well as of the host community. Responding to language learners’ specific needs can increase learners’ motivation to follow courses of Dutch as a second language, their appreciation of what they learn and the extent to which they can apply what they learn in class in the outside world.

¹ This article is a shortened version of an article written by Van Avermaet, P. & S. Gysen (2006). From needs to tasks: language learning needs in a task-based perspective. In K. Van den Branden (ed.), *Task-Based Language Education*, pp. 17-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521689526>. We would like to thank Cambridge University Press (<http://www.cambridge.org>) for having given us the permission to produce this shortened version.

² See Part I

People learn a new language because they want to raise their chances of finding a proper job, because they want to function more efficiently on the workforce, because they want to get better acquainted with their neighbours, because they want to read certain books, articles or magazines, etcetera. Each of these learners has specific language needs.

Departing from language learning needs acknowledge that not all learners need to learn the same things, but that many, if not all, have their own objectives. As a result, from an organisational point of view, efforts need to be taken to design courses in which attainment goals match the language learning needs of particular groups of learners, and different curricula and courses are developed for groups with different needs profiles.

Educational policy makers who acknowledge or legitimise the description of curriculum goals in needs-based terms can implicitly acknowledge minority language speakers' right to use their mother tongue in certain situations, while at the same time stimulating them to functionally use the second language in other situations. As such, a description of language learning needs for specific societal domains can, implicitly or explicitly, underscore the richness of language variation and language diversity in a variety of multilingual spaces.

A task-based approach attempts to take learners' language learning needs as its starting point by interpreting them in the first place as an answer to the question 'why do immigrants want to learn the language of the majority group?' The answer to this question provides insight into the societal domains in which immigrants want to function while using the majority language. The logical consequence of this starting point is that the answer to the question 'what language the learner needs to acquire?' for functioning in a societal domain is determined by what he needs to be able to do with the language.

1. Language learning needs from a societal perspective

When it comes to curriculum design and the development of language programmes for second language education, two basic questions are usually asked by teachers and syllabus designers: '*What* should language learners learn?' and '*how* can language learners be stimulated to learn whatever they are supposed to learn?' A third question which may be equally important from the learners' point of view, but which, apart from language education for specific purposes, is very often overlooked, is:

'*Why?*'

Why do so many people all over the world go through the trouble of enrolling in second language courses, buying dictionaries and grammars, spending hours and hours practising grammar rules, experimenting with new sounds and new words, acquiring new orthographic systems and taking nerve-racking exams? In many language educational approaches, this question is hardly ever answered, and if it is, the answer tends to be restricted to something as vague as 'to become a proficient user' or 'to acquire knowledge of the target language'. Such statements raise the impression that for the majority of people, language learning is a reward in its own right. In most cases, however, it probably is not (Paulston, 1994). The majority of people learn second, third and fourth languages because these languages can be of particular service to them and because, if they fail to use it, they may not reach certain goals they have in mind.

The exploration of learners' language learning needs is often circumvented. Even it is acknowledged explicitly that individuals may have proper learning needs in mind, an analysis of *what* it takes to speak and understand the target language is what seems to be

needed the most. Whether it be notions or functions, vocabulary or grammar, language learning needs are not conceived of as essentially functional or societally-based, but are primarily seen as linguistic. Tasks a person has to fulfil are first of all seen as referring to the kinds of classroom activities that will enable the language learner to acquire particular elements of the target language.

‘Task’, however, may also stand for the kinds of activities that learners want to or have to be able to do in society with the new language they are acquiring. In this interpretation, a language teaching approach – like a task-based approach – attempts to take learners’ language learning needs as its starting point by interpreting them first and foremost as an answer to the question ‘why?’ The answer to this question will, in the first place, yield non-linguistic answers. As a number of needs analyses with regard to the acquisition of Dutch as a second language by adult immigrants illustrate (e.g. De Groof, 2000; Schuurmans, 1994; Wijnants, 2000), people learn a new language because they want to raise their chances of finding a proper job, because they want to function more efficiently on the workfloor, because they want to get better acquainted with their neighbours, because they want to read certain books, articles or magazines, etcetera.

Focussing on language learning needs inherently involves variation in terms of course content. Task-based approaches that depart from language learning needs acknowledge that not all learners need to learn the same things, but that many, if not all, have their own objectives. As a result, from an organisational point of view, efforts need to be taken to design courses in which attainment goals match the language learning needs of particular groups of learners, and different curricula and courses are developed for groups with different needs profiles.

In multilingual societies, the choice for a needs-based approach may not only have consequences for the teacher and the curriculum designer, but also for policy making at a broader societal level (Brecht & Rivers, 2005; Cooper, 1989; Fishman, 1991; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). In terms of national or regional governmental language educational policy, to describe the goals of official language courses in terms of the particular tasks that immigrants aim to perform in particular language use situations and domains may be a forceful signal when it comes to building a society in which all languages and language varieties have their own space (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995; Spolsky, 2004). Educational policy makers who acknowledge or legitimise the description of curriculum goals in needs-based terms can implicitly acknowledge minority language speakers’ right to use their mother tongue in certain situations, while at the same time stimulating them to functionally use the L2 in other situations. As such, task-based descriptions of language learning goals can, implicitly or explicitly, underscore the richness of language variation and language diversity in multilingual societies.

2. Describing needs

In the previous paragraph, language learning was described as a goal-directed activity, serving the broader goal of enhanced functioning in society. However, such a general description of language learning needs is too vague to guide task-based curriculum design. A first step towards refining this description is to distinguish between the broad societal domains in which the second language learner aims to function. For instance, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR)³ (2001), designed to enhance cross-cultural and international communication about foreign

³ For a description of the CEFR, we refer to Part I: *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the development of policies for the integration of adult migrants*

language learning, foreign language education and foreign language assessment, distinguishes four broad domains of language use: the personal, public, occupational and educational domains.

Empirical research into the language learning needs of particular groups of learners or individuals (e.g. Bartlett, 2005; Kellerman, Koonen & van der Haagen, 2005; Lett, 2005; Richards, 2001; Van Avermaet *et al.*, 2004) reveals that needs are learner- or group-specific, that they are tied to local contexts and may change over time. On the other hand, if needs research is supposed to guide curriculum design and goal selection, such diversity needs to be controlled so as to remain workable. Listing individual learner needs may be theoretically sustainable, yet in most parts of the world, language education must be organized in groups in order to remain affordable and practicable. This naturally implies that the seemingly infinite diversity of individuals' language learning needs will have to be reclustered into a workable number of needs profiles.

2.1 Subjective and objective needs

A basic question is who should provide the information on language learners' needs in order to compose relevant profiles. Until the 1970s, language learning needs were primarily determined by language teachers and educationalists. From the 1970s onwards, language learning needs were re-interpreted: learners were not seen primarily as customers, but as individuals who had their own personal views on their language learning needs and on their personal development in general. Richterich (1972), and afterwards Van Ek (1975), Wilkins (1976), Munby (1978), and Brindley (1984) contributed to the classification of language learning needs along learner-based lines.

One basic distinction many of these authors drew was the one between subjective and objective needs. Objective needs can be deduced by parties other than the learners themselves from an analysis of the learners' personal characteristics, their language choice behaviour, their level of language proficiency, etcetera. For instance, a young immigrant who is unemployed and looking for a job can be expected to have a need for the kind of language that helps him on the job market. He will probably have to be able to understand job ads, consult the multimedia job bank on the internet, write an application letter and the like. Subjective needs, on the other hand, are based on the learner's own statements. They do not necessarily coincide with objective needs. For instance, empirical research shows that functioning efficiently in social situations of a formal nature, such as filling in forms for the municipal board or communicating with bank managers is seldom formulated as an explicit language learning need by second language learners (Wijnants, 2000; De Groof, 2000; Schuurmans, 1994), yet their teachers claim that students regularly ask to help them with these kinds of problems. Similarly, learners may signal subjective needs that are not acknowledged from an 'objective' point of view. For one, subjective needs may not only pertain to the goals learners have in mind when using the language, but also to 'what' and 'how' they want to learn it. In other words, language learners do not always distinguish between needs related to targets and needs related to learning styles and pedagogical approaches (Hutchinson & Waters, 1986). For instance, many second language learners have a clearly defined need for acquiring the 'grammar' of a language, for this matches their view of what efficient language education should look like (Depauw, 2000). Such perceptions are often based on their own, or others', previous language educational experiences: what language teaching should be like is based on what it has been for individual learners in the past. Nunan (1988) illustrates how strongly learners' perceptions with regard to pedagogical needs may differ from those of teachers'. Figure 1 below summarizes teachers' and students' assessments of the relevance of certain classroom activities:

Classroom activity	student	teacher
articulation exercises	+++	+ /-
lockstep education	+++	++
conversation practice	+++	+++
correcting errors	+++	--
vocabulary training	+++	++
working with cassettes	--	+
discovering own mistakes	--	+++
using photos and movies	--	-
pair work	--	+++

Figure 1. Teachers' and students' assessment of the relevance of certain classroom activities for second language learning (Nunan, 1988)

Figure 1 shows that students interpret the more traditional, teacher-dominated activities more positively than less traditional ones. The teachers show a more balanced view.

In many cases of curriculum design, objective and subjective language learning needs will have to be balanced. Blindly following subjective needs that are formulated by the learners themselves, without paying due respect to objective needs, may not pay learners the best service in the long term. Second language learners do not always possess a clear picture of what certain domains (such as the workforce, or the social/touristic domain) demand in terms of target tasks and the required level of language use (Auerbach, 1995; Long, 2005). On the other hand, an exclusive emphasis on objective needs may not be ideal either: if second language learners do not have the feeling that the language they are learning, and the language learning goals that were selected by the curriculum designer, have a direct relation to what they feel they should be able to do with the target language in the outside world, they may become demotivated to follow the course or even drop out, as Berben's research (2003) into drop-outs in Dutch second language courses for adult immigrants showed.

Below, we will describe two needs analyses that were carried out with regard to the acquisition of Dutch as a second language for adults to illustrate how subjective and objective needs can be described and combined with a view to establishing and describing curriculum goals. We want to emphasize from the very beginning that these examples do not aim to act as models or prototypes. As Long (2005) has convincingly argued, there are many different ways to conduct second language needs analyses. In fact, for practical, financial and organisational reasons, most of the examples given below do not live up to all of Long's standards for second language needs analysis (i.e. stratified random sampling, use of multiple sources and use of multiple methods), yet they have inspired Flemish curriculum and course designers in tuning their courses of Dutch as a second language to functional language learning needs of the students involved.

2.2 Establishing relevant domains and language use situations

The European unification, resulting in higher mobility and exchange of workforce, the massive migration waves from Northern Africa (e.g. Morocco, Algeria) and Turkey, incited by the economic reconstruction of Europe after World War II, and the recent influx of political refugees have strongly raised the societal, economical and social value of learning new languages all over Europe. In fact, in Flanders, the demand for more courses of Dutch arises from two sources: on the one hand, the majority group of native speakers in Flanders

expresses a desire to communicate with immigrants while also expecting immigrants and their children, most of whom aim to integrate into Flemish society, to learn Dutch. On the other hand, the immigrants themselves have specific language learning needs. Curriculum design of courses for Dutch as a second language, then, should take both sources into account.

In 1993, empirical research was conducted, into Dutch as a second language learning needs of adult immigrants in Flanders (Schuurmans, 1994; Van Avermaet & Humblet, 1995). The schools for adult education where Dutch as a second language was taught strongly supported the research, because, until then, they had based their curriculum design on their own pedagogical intuitions. This had resulted in a strong tendency to offer courses aiming for 'general Dutch proficiency'. At a Round Table Conference in 1993, where all Flemish institutions offering courses for Dutch as a second language were represented, the need for coordination was strongly formulated: some courses (such as basic language proficiency courses) were organised in the same region by many different institutions, while at the same time other courses at higher levels, or courses aiming to reach a particular target group or specific attainment targets, were not organised at all.

Two other factors added to the felt urgency for needs research. First, the societal context in which courses for adult immigrant learners were embedded had changed drastically during the 1980s: post-war migration had changed from a temporary phenomenon (migrant workers staying in Flanders for a number of years and then returning home) to a permanent one (migrant workers deciding to stay and build a life in Flanders together with their families). Many immigrants felt a need to learn Dutch that they had not felt before, as a result of which language learning needs diversified. Secondly, at the beginning of the 1990s, a number of players in the educational field (inspectorate, policy makers, and syllabus developers) started to emphasize that for adult immigrants, learning Dutch was a functional endeavour. Courses for Dutch as a second language were explicitly expected to help immigrants to function well in the domains and language use situations that were relevant to their needs and where Dutch was used.

The needs research project we discuss in this paper, started from the following three research questions:

1. In what situations, requiring the use of Dutch, do adult immigrants in Flanders need/want to be able to function? To answer this question, a number of informants were interviewed:
 - Adult immigrants taking a course of Dutch as a second language at the time they were interviewed (N = 56);
 - Adult immigrants living in Flanders who were not following a course of Dutch as a second language or who had dropped it (N = 50);
 - Experts involved with the organisation of courses of Dutch as a second language (N = 17);
 - Native speakers of Dutch who, through their profession, had frequent contact with adult immigrants (e.g. doctors, police officers, shop personnel) (N = 30);
 - Other native speakers (N = 300)
2. How predominant is each of the above-mentioned situations (or cluster of situations)? To answer this question, 200 adult immigrants were asked to select one course of Dutch from a diversified menu of 20 courses, each focusing on different clusters of language use situations.

3. What should adult immigrants be able to do with the Dutch language to function efficiently in these situations? This question required a detailed qualitative analysis of the above-mentioned language use situations in terms of the linguistic demands they posed.

In this contribution we mainly focus on the data from immigrants. There is, however, one outcome of the interviews with the native speakers we would like to discuss here briefly. The interviews revealed that Flemish native speakers did not expect adult immigrants to perform highly in terms of formal correctness, nor expected them to acquire Dutch to a near-native level. Their expectations towards adult immigrants Dutch language use emphasized the functionality of their efforts (communicative adequacy is more important than formal correctness) and its symbolic value (Van Avermaet & Humblet, 1995). These expectations actually did not match the relatively high expectations with regard to formal correctness that were raised by teachers of courses Dutch as a second language. As such, this research, based on interviewing stakeholders, supported a functional view of courses Dutch as a second language, involving the need for curriculum design to match societal needs and emphasizing task performance rather than linguistic knowledge.

The adult immigrants were surveyed through the use of two questionnaires (one open-ended questionnaire and one with closed questions). In the closed questionnaire, a list of language use situations was presented. The informants were asked to tick the situations in which they wanted, or were expected, to function, and which (for them) required the use of Dutch. In the open-ended questionnaire, the informants were given the opportunity to freely list language use situations and domains that were relevant to them. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of these questionnaires revealed that five needs domains were particularly relevant for courses Dutch as a second language for adult immigrants in Flanders:

- a. work/business;
- b. education/training;
- c. informal social contacts;
- d. formal social contacts;
- e. children's education, communication with school.

More domains could be distinguished, but these pertained to smaller groups of learners. Most of these latter domains were also more specific sub domains of the five above-mentioned domains (e.g. for domain a: courses for nurses; for b: courses for lawyers and magistrates). As can be inferred, the overlap with the generic domains distinguished by the CEFR is considerable, but not complete. A fifth domain (children's education) is markedly different. Especially immigrant mothers were found to express the desire to learn the kind of Dutch that would enable them to support and monitor their children's education in a Dutch-medium school and to communicate with the headmasters and the teachers about the child's performance and behaviour at school.

Each of these five domains was further described in terms of the language use situations, requiring the use of Dutch, they typically involve. This was done by key-informants and stakeholders within each of the domains. Figure 2 exemplifies a number of language use situations that are typical for the fifth domain (education of children):

Domain	Typical language use situations
Education of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enrolment of a new pupil in a school

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informative meetings organised by the school for parents • inform school about sickness of the child • ...
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Figure 2. Example of language use situations derived from the domain 'Dutch as a second language related to children's education in Flanders'

Language use situations are defined here as situations that typically require the use of language to run smoothly and comfortably to all parties involved. In this needs research, the inventory was narrowed down to the situations that require the use of Dutch.

Establishing relevant domains and language use situations also was the first step in another needs research project. In 1999, the Centre for Language and Education was subsidized by the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*) to design a new set of official exams for Dutch as a Foreign Language. Again, this analysis focused on adult learners. A task-based approach was adopted as theoretical framework for the development of these exams, focussing on the direct relationship between the language performance that is assessed and the language use situations, requiring the use of Dutch, in which the examinees eventually aim to function.

In this research project, a needs analysis was conducted among a sample of foreign language learners of Dutch who aim to obtain a certificate (Van Avermaet et al., 2004; Gysen & Van Avermaet, 2005). A written questionnaire was sent to a random sample of students all over the world (N = 700) and to teachers of Dutch as a foreign language (N=800). A part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of domains that could be of potential relevance to the future test takers (e.g. following law studies in a Dutch-speaking country; living in Flanders or the Netherlands). The respondents were free to add domains themselves. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of a non-exhaustive list of 30 language use situations, which had been compiled by consulting key informants who had been involved in the field of Dutch foreign language teaching (e.g. policy makers, former teachers, former assessment developers) for a long time. The students and the teachers were asked to rate the importance of each domain and language use situation on a three-point scale.

Data analyses revealed that the second part of the questionnaire yielded the results that were most useful to analyse and interpret. Factor analyses of the teacher data pointed to the predominance of four domains: 'business contacts', 'social contacts', 'study', and 'tourism'. Factor analyses of the student data yielded the same domains, with one exception: the student data lumped social and touristic contacts together. These research results were then presented to a group of experts and key-informants in the field of Dutch foreign language teaching (headmasters, language experts, and assessment experts). They were asked to reflect on the data and to advise the test developers in order to establish certification of domains and language use situations that were most relevant for substantial groups of learners of Dutch as well as for stakeholders in society.

On the basis of the needs analysis and the experts' input, four needs profiles, corresponding to the selected domains, were selected:

- a. academic language proficiency;
- b. professional language proficiency;
- c. societal language proficiency;
- d. informal/tourist language proficiency.

Together, the two above-mentioned studies illustrate the first steps in the needs research we conducted: lists of potentially relevant domains and language use situations were presented to a sample of stakeholders, including the learners involved and other relevant parties. From these lists, the most crucial domains and language use situations were selected. These domains may, in a first phase, be quite generic, but may also be more specific, depending on the context and the target population. In some cases, conducting a needs analysis is not even a prerequisite for determining relevant domains. This is, for instance, the case when the language use domain is clearly definable in advance and very narrow in scope (e.g. an institute organizing a course of Dutch as a second language for nurses, or developing a language test for Belgian magistrates).

In a second phase, the list of selected domains and language use situations was presented to experts in the field, who were asked to refine and complete the list. In this second phase, the contribution of experts and stakeholders may become determinant, especially when the learners involved have no clear picture of the language use situations that are typical for the selected domains.

3. Deriving tasks from lists of language use situations

A description of domains and language use situations must be further refined in order to be convertible into a workable tool for curriculum, syllabus or assessment design. After all, domains and situations only describe contexts in which language is used, but do not specify what particular things a language learner should do with language in order to function efficiently in these situations. To reach this latter level of specification, ‘task’ can be used as the basic unit of description (Long, 1985, 2005). As a result, an answer to the question ‘what’ (what should the language learner be able to do with language?) can be formulated.

To derive a set of tasks from a list of language use situations, various methodologies can be adopted, such as:

- a. *Observations in the target domain and in the selected language use situations.* For instance, in a number of Flemish curriculum development projects (De Groof, 2002; Lanssens & Speybrouck, 1999), researchers conducted observations in the workplace or on the training floor to establish which tasks were typical for particular language use situations in the professional training domain;
- b. *Gathering ‘expert’ opinions:* written and oral surveys, using open and/or closed questionnaires, can be administered to people who have long-term experience in the domain and in the relevant situations;
- c. *Sampling language learners’ experiences:* if the language learners already have personal experiences in the selected language use situations, they may be able to make explicit what particular tasks are relevant for their purposes or with which particular tasks they experience difficulties.

These different methodologies may be combined and may be applied before the development of the course as well as during the course. The latter is typically the case with negotiated, learner-centred syllabuses (Nunan, 1988). The example in figure 3 shows that a language use situations often involves more than one language task.

Language use situations	Language tasks
Making a hotel reservation by telephone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand/ask questions about the room - answer questions about parking facilities - express personal requests and wishes - understand simple instructions about payment

	- ...
asking/understanding a route description	- understand/ask questions about how to drive to a destination - answer questions to a person who asks for a route description - understand simple instructions from a person who describes a route - ...

Figure 3. Examples of tasks relevant to specific language use situations related to the use of Dutch in the informal/tourist domain

4. Conclusions

A task-based approach attempts to take learners' language learning needs as its starting point by interpreting them in the first place as an answer to the question 'why'? The answer to this question provides insight into the societal domains in which immigrants want to function while using the target language. The logical consequence of this starting point is that the answer to the question 'what' language the learner needs to acquire for functioning in a societal domain is determined by what he needs to be able to do with the language: which tasks are essential in the situations that are relevant to the learner, and which qualitative level of performance needs to be reached in order to perform these tasks adequately?

A possible route to follow in order to describe adult immigrants' language learning needs from a task-based perspective is summarized in figure 4.

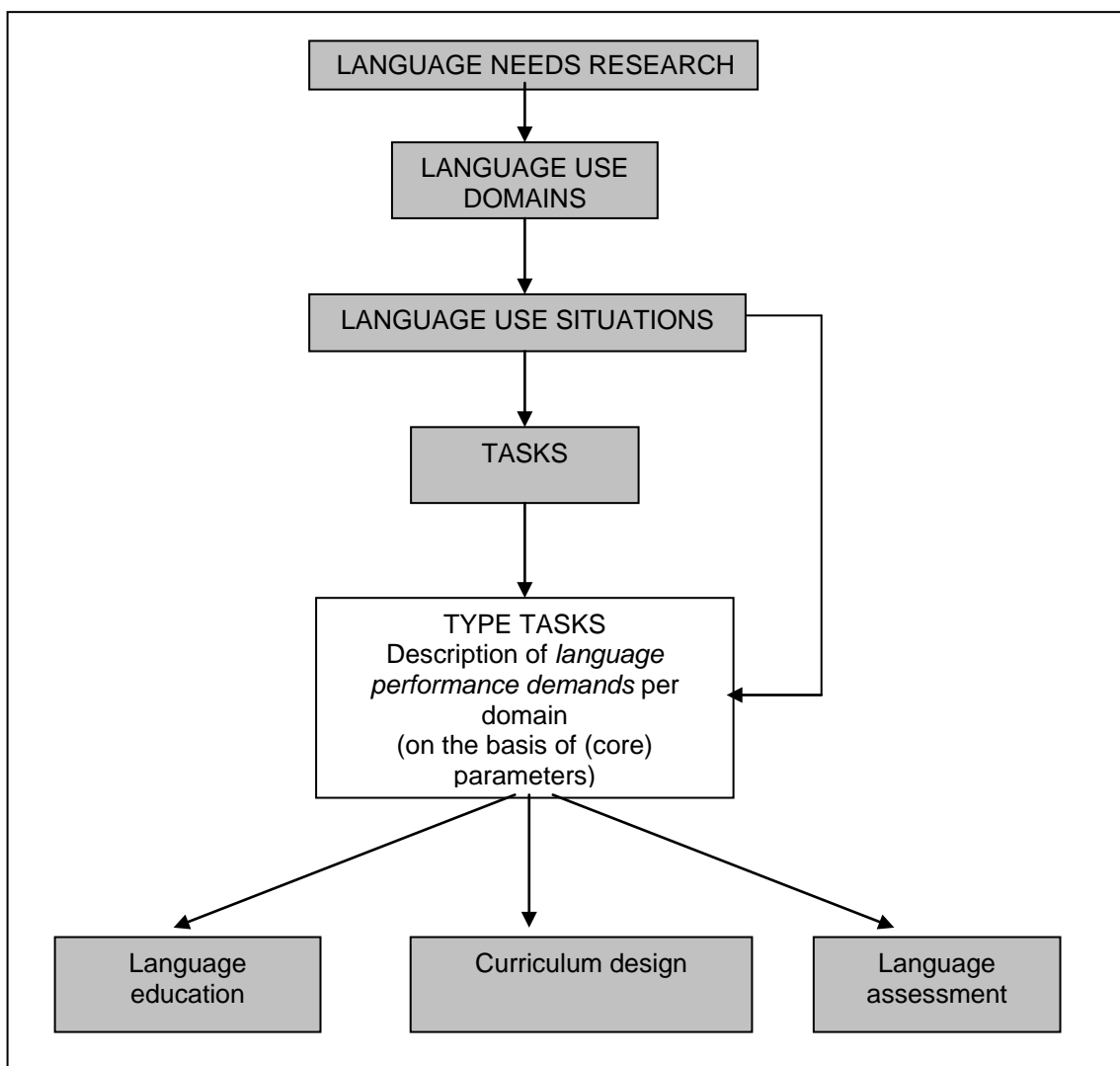


Figure 4. Flow chart of task-based SL needs research and target task description

On the basis of *research on language needs*, relevant *language use domains* and *language use situations* are determined. The domains can be generic, as was the case in the discussed examples, or can be very specific. The language use situations are very concrete descriptions of the situation relevant for a specific domain, situations where a specific repertoire has to be used that is relevant for that domain. The next step in the process is that *tasks* (what people have to be able to do with language) are derived from the selected language use situations. Various (combinations of) methodologies have been suggested to derive tasks from the selected list of language use situations.

Tasks can, in turn, be used as the basic unit to describe *language performance demands* or goals, which are the basis for *curriculum design*, *language teaching* and *assessment*. How tasks can be transferred to language performance demands or goals is beyond the scope of this contribution. We, therefore, refer to the larger article on language needs and needs analysis: Van Avermaet, P. & S. Gysen (2006). From needs analysis to tasks. Goals and curriculum development in task-based language teaching. In K. Van den Branden (ed.), *Task-Based Language Education*, pp. 17-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press⁴.

As Little⁵ says, if a language course and a language test are intended to support immigrants' integration into the host community, both should take account of the perceived needs of immigrants as well as of the host community. Responding to language learners' specific needs can increase learners' motivation to follow courses of Dutch as a second language, their appreciation of what they learn and the extent to which they can apply what they learn in class in the outside world. In addition, it increases face validity for test takers.

⁴ <http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521689526>.

⁵ See Chapter I: "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the development of policies for the integration of adult migrants"