1 The fact-finding stage: assessing societal factors

Overview

Before initiating a new language program, vital preparatory work in the form of information gathering must take place. This fact-finding stage provides answers to the key questions in any program: Who are the learners? Who are the teachers? Why is the program necessary? Where will the program be implemented? How will it be implemented? The answers to these questions, in turn, become the basis for establishing policy or formulating goals.

The first two of these key questions deal with the audience for whom the program and materials are to be developed, the actual consumers of the new program – teachers and learners. To know who the teachers and learners are requires thorough attention to needs assessment of a societal nature. Just as in the business world, market research has become an essential ingredient for commercial success, so in curriculum design, the fact-finding stage is an imperative prerequisite for effective decision-making regarding the participants.

In a country or setting where the language program planners and designers do not know the existing conditions, the fact-finding process must rely heavily on basic sociolinguistic research which relates to national concerns, international ties and political trends. However, in those places where the planners are conversant with local conditions, they may be able to supply the answers to some of the questions themselves, or at least be able to call on other specialists who can provide the necessary information.

Assembling data bearing on these factors is usually carried out by means of two basic techniques: collecting information that appears in governmental and other institutional documents, for example in census reports, and administering questionnaires and interviews which collect both objective and subjective feelings and attitudes prevailing among the members of a community. However, in those places where the planners are conversant with local conditions, they may be able to supply the answers to some of the questions themselves, or at least be able to call on other specialists who can provide the necessary information.

In order to answer the key questions inherent in the fact-finding stage, investigations are necessary in each of the four areas specified in diagram

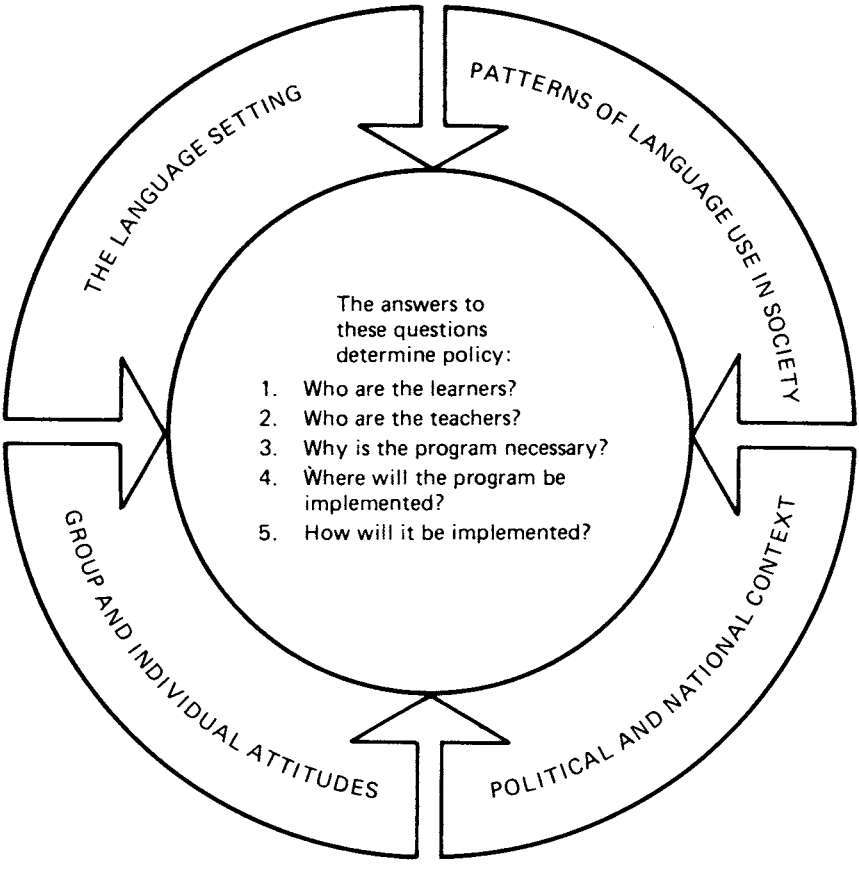

Diagram 1 The fact-finding stage
The fact-finding stage provides answers to key questions about language program policy.

1. Accordingly, this chapter comprises four major sections: 1.1 The language setting; 1.2 Patterns of language use in society; 1.3 Group and individual attitudes toward language; and 1.4 The political and national context.

1.1 The language setting

The term language setting refers to the 'totality of communication roles' (Gumperz 1968) in any speech community. Program planners need to

understand and evaluate the significance of the language setting in terms of its effect on the learners and the learning process. For example, the language setting might be one in which there is strong support for the learning of the target language (TL). On the other hand, it could be one in which there is indifference or even negativism towards it. Therefore, an initial survey of the language setting should provide a description of the role of the target language and the roles that all other languages fulfill in the local community.

There are a number of basic ways of characterizing language settings. One important distinction derives from the role of the TL. Where English is the TL, there are differences depending on whether English is also the language of a wider community (often called English as a second language or ESL) as opposed to other types of settings where another language or languages are spoken by most members (English as a foreign language or EFL). Additionally, the roles in which language functions in the English speaking community need to be carefully investigated. For example, in a bilingual situation in an English-dominated country, the language or languages of ethnic groups may predominate in interpersonal functions in home and family life. On the other hand, in a non-English speaking setting, it is important to establish the role of English in respect to all other languages in the country.

While in an English speaking setting the language goals are often associated with the overall acculturation process (Schumann 1978) of new immigrants, migrant workers, or with specialized courses for foreigners who spend a limited amount of time in the country, the goals for learning English in a non-English setting are often closely related to the community's overall process of modernization. The phenomenon of 'shrinking world' has intensified the already existing need for a common world language – an international language – often referred to as a 'language of wider communication' (LWC). An LWC or world language is vital for communities whose primary languages are not widely used outside their own area. People of such communities need an LWC for purposes such as foreign trade or in order to gain access to scientific, technical and literary materials that do not exist in their own languages. Even when such an LWC fulfills major functions within the community itself, for example, when it has official or semiofficial status, its major role is closely linked with the process of modernization.

1.1.1 The continuum: ESL——EFL

Language settings where English is the TL might also be viewed along a continuum. At one end of the continuum is an English speaking setting where the language is spoken natively by most of the population, examples are the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Moving

slightly away from that end of the continuum, there are countries in which English is one of two or more official languages spoken natively by at least part of the population – Canada, South Africa, and others. Further along, there are countries where Engish is the only official language but is not the native language of more than a small minority of the people – Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, and others. Most of these countries have maintained English (the language of the former colonial power) as their present LWC, both for international needs and for internal communication among speakers of different languages.

Moving further along and approaching the other end, there are countries where English is neither the national language nor one of the official languages, but is given special status because of historical factors such as ex-colony or mandate status, or because of social and economic reasons: Israel, Kenya, Ethiopia, Malaysia and others (Fishman et al. 1977). In some of these countries English is the medium of instruction in the school system, or at least for a part of the course of study, while in others it only has the status of a major foreign language, one which is compulsory and highly valued as a prestige subject in the curriculum. Finally, at the other end of the continuum there are countries where English is taught as only one of several foreign languages available to students within the school system, even though in practical terms it may be recognized as the most important foreign language: Japan, People's Republic of China, Italy, Brazil and others. Even in these cases, the role of Engish in the process of modernization, science, and technology is significant.

The position of the particular language setting along the continuum is an indication of the degree of support which the learner can find in the immediate environment. The highest level of support is, of course, available in an English speaking setting while the least is in the case where English is no more than a school subject. Yet, affective factors related to learners' attitudes might interfere with the students' exploitation of the support available in the fully native setting or may interfere with the effective implementation of a new program in a school system where the feelings of the population are anti-target culture for political or national reasons. Although the language setting itself is very significant, it cannot be fully evaluated without taking into account other factors that impinge upon it.

Adult language learners in an English speaking setting can be of two broad types: (a) those who have come to settle in the new community and whose first needs are survival skills, and (b) those who have come for a limited period of time, probably for a well-defined purpose. In the case of the first group, learners' needs and expectations must be considered in relation to their potential employment either as professionals, skilled or unskilled workers. Of course, planners who have implemented

such adult ESL programs know all too well that in any one group of learners there can be a wide range of both language and educational backgrounds among the participants.

In the second instance, the relevant language setting may be limited to the school or community within which the students will live for a short period. Learners may be enrolled in a summer course or in a program offering an academic degree or certificate. In both cases, the assessment process must involve faculty and fellow students in these courses in order to help the planners recognize requirements as articulated by the school environment.

Finally, the English speaking setting might also be the environment in which students from other countries come for ESP (English for Special or Specific Purposes) courses. Thus a group of bankers, for instance, may go to England for an intensive course of three to six weeks. This course might focus on the English language needs of banking clerks when functioning in their own environment – in the non-English speaking context. Yet, while they are in England, it will be necessary to take full advantage of the setting. Consequently, needs must include the type of extra-curricular activities that these students will want to participate in outside the actual course of study although their stay within the target speech community is temporary and the need for acculturation is limited.

1.2 Patterns of language use in society

Among the basic types of language settings, we have distinguished between an English speaking setting and all the others, or those places in which English plays different roles as evident in the various types within the EFL range in the continuum. The common element among these other settings is the fact that English plays the role of an LWC, but this role can vary considerably from one setting to the next. Societal needs can only be defined for these settings on the basis of a careful investigation of the role of English as an LWC. Such an investigation must examine three major areas: (1) the role of the LWC in education, (2) the role of the LWC in the labor market, and (3) the role of the LWC in furthering the process of modernization.

1.2.1 Education

In education, for any setting where English is not the native language of most members in the community, two major aspects need to be considered: the role of English as a means for furthering one's education, and the effectiveness of the existing curriculum and teaching materials. The first and broadest question relating to the role of English in the

process of furthering one's education is whether English is the medium of instruction in the school system. The question to ask is: do students study geography, math, and other general subjects in the native language or in English?

Not all cases where English is the medium of instruction are the same. In some countries the medium of instruction is the native language only in the early years of schooling, while English becomes the medium in secondary school and in others English is the medium of instruction only at the college level. In other cases, English as a medium of instruction is limited to certain subjects for which there may not exist suitable teaching materials. In Malaysia, for instance (Boey 1979), at the time when the country gained its national independence in 1957, the primary school offered six-year courses in four languages: Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil; but it was written into the constitution that Malay would become the national language and English would be the official second language. Thus the educational system began a transition period switching gradually from English to Malay as the medium of instruction, reaching a stage at which only tertiary education still maintained English as a medium by 1982. At this point, many educationists realized that the level of English proficiency, as was to be expected, decreased and therefore some suggested that English be reinstated as a medium of instruction at least for some of the subjects.

In order to evaluate the true role of English in the school system, it is necessary to have a full picture of all subjects taught at school and of all available textbooks and other teaching materials. In addition, if teachers are not native speakers it is important to evaluate their knowledge of and ability to use English.

Another question arises in cases where English is not the medium of instruction: what is the role of English as a language of study? This question refers to the degree to which the learners depend on their knowledge of English in order to get access to the subject matter of their interest. For example, what level of English competence is actually necessary for a person to study engineering at the college level? Are there any textbooks, lectures and other study matter in the native language or is it all available in English only? English as a language through which to learn advanced subjects is sometimes referred to as EAP (English for Academic Purposes) but, in fact, the scope of learning a language for studying is wider than that of an academic context since it may also include scientific and technological subjects which are not taught at the college level. For example, courses in vocational or technical schools might make use of texts and manuals written in English.

Once the role of the LWC in education is established, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing program and materials. Often a new program is required because there is a serious gap between the

results of the existing one and the needs of learners for English as a language of study. Policy decisions will have to be made in order to find ways to close this gap, if indeed it has been determined that learning through the English language is a worthwhile educational goal in the society.

An indication that language programs are failing to meet learners' objectives is often signaled by the existence of flourishing schools and courses outside the official educational system. In these instances, graduates of the formal school system enroll in private courses because they feel that they lack the level of proficiency needed on their job. In Thailand, for instance (British Council English Teaching Profile 1979), English has been a compulsory subject but was changed to an elective subject throughout the school system. Thus, the national educational system has not placed great emphasis on English and as a result the level of English is lower than what the public feels it needs. There is, therefore, a growing demand for English classes outside the school system. Various institutions of academic or professional types offer courses in English to teachers, scientists, business executives and others.

In many countries, colleges and universities offer special preparatory and remedial English courses to all graduates of the school system because universities do not accept them as being sufficiently advanced for studying at college level. Such a situation indicates a sharp discrepancy between the achievements of the English instructional program and actual societal needs.

Information concerning the effectiveness of the existing program in the school system comes from two major sources. One is through examining the official documentation available and the other is by an investigation of the English program itself. As far as the first source is concerned, in most cases the ministry of education in a country can provide the relevant information, often even with results of surveys and research that already has been carried out. In some countries, there are special research institutes which carry out various surveys within the school system that might be of great value to the investigators dealing with the LWC situation. In other cases, universities are involved in various research projects that may throw light on the questions relating to curriculum design.

In addition to consulting the official documentation, it is usually advisable to conduct a survey of the English program itself containing evaluative mechanisms for finding out about: (a) the results of language achievement tests, (b) the overall curriculum, (c) the existing textbooks, (d) the existing teaching methods, (e) teacher-training programs, both in-service and preparatory, and (f) opinions and perceptions expressed by teachers, students and parents.

The combination of the two paths of investigation, official documen-

tation and careful evaluation of the existing program, provides a picture of the effectiveness of the English instructional program at any point in time. Such an investigation may take several weeks, several months or several years, depending on the scope of the study, the size of the community, the degree of cooperation of local authorities, the participation of suitable personnel, and the available funding.

1.2.2 The labor market

In collecting information about the role of the LWC in the labor market, the researcher needs access to official assessments from governmental or other labor agencies, but in addition it is vital to interview and collect information from individuals in the field. Such field reports should include employers, employees, as well as those who are job seekers. It might be relatively easy to get information from governmental offices such as a ministry of labor (where there is such an institution or its equivalent), or national employment agencies, governmental productivity and labor research institutes, and the like. But in addition to these 'state' agencies, it is important to obtain views from general employment agencies, as well as from placement centers for professionals, technicians, and academics.

From all these institutions, the researcher should inquire:

1. Which professions require a knowledge of the LWC and to what extent:
   a) the need for speaking?
   b) the need for writing?
   c) the need for reading professional material?
2. To what extent do the people seeking employment have the required knowledge of the LWC?

Newspapers and advertisement columns seeking and offering employment are another good source for checking the labor market. In addition, advertisements of institutions of adult education reflect what people are seeking, in terms of language courses, once they have completed their schooling, and after they have had experience in the labor market. These data serve to reveal the gap between the school system and actual needs that school graduates face.

Finally, interviews with individuals who have been absorbed into the labor market in a variety of professions, and with others still seeking employment, should be held. Information gained from the first group makes it possible to assess the real requirements for the LWC in the field and learn to what extent it aids or hinders one's professional progress. The second group – those seeking employment – provides a useful, up-to-date picture of:

1. how well prepared they are in the LWC.
2. to what extent they expect to use the LWC.

1.2.3 The process of modernization

The important factors affecting the role of English in the process of modernization are closely related to the accessibility of technological information and know-how. To what extent is such information accessible to a community whose primary language is not an LWC? In this context, several questions need to be considered:

1. To what extent are technological and scientific journals available in the local language(s)?
2. To what extent are instructions and catalogues accompanying modern machinery made available in the local language(s)?
3. To what extent do professionals receive training abroad?
4. To what extent is the community dependent on assistance given by foreign experts?

In a rapidly developing society, these four factors are most important in terms of developing human resources of high caliber to help implement technological progress. If, however, such materials and instruction are not available to the members of the community in their own language, a first prerequisite will be the acquisition of the LWC as a tool to further one's knowledge in technological and scientific fields. If the LWC is not readily available to large parts of the population, then neither will advanced technology be available to them, unless special efforts are made on a national scale to translate important reading matter into the local language or languages.

On the basis of information collected about patterns of use of the LWC in a particular community, a definition of societal needs can be made. Such needs will thus be defined in terms of the concrete, practical ways in which the members of the community use or need to use the LWC, for example, in relation to questions such as: In what contexts will a person need to use the language? What will be the extent of this use in terms of reading, speaking, writing? What levels of proficiency and accuracy will be required?

1.3 Group and individual attitudes toward language

Societal needs can be investigated and evaluated qualitatively and quantitatively, yet their effect on the actual success of a new program cannot be determined without taking into account group and individual attitudes towards the learning of an additional language. Whether the setting is a native speaking environment or not, it is important to distinguish between two types of attitudes: (a) attitudes towards the TL, the people who speak it and the culture which it represents; (b) attitudes towards the learning/acquisition process itself, its relevance to individually per-

ceived needs, its efficacy as represented by the teachers, the materials and the school system as a whole. The first type usually reflects group attitudes while the second type is an indication of personal factors based on an individual's experience and aspirations.

Positive attitudes towards the language will reflect a high regard and appreciation of both the language and the culture it represents. Positive attitudes towards the acquisition process will reflect high personal motivation for learning the language, a feeling of self fulfillment and success and an overall enthusiasm about the language course. A combination of positive group attitudes towards the language with positive individual attitudes towards the process is believed to bring about the best results in terms of language acquisition.

Negative group attitudes towards a language are often related to historical factors, political and national trends, or social conflicts. In a country that was colonized, for instance, the attitude of the members of the community might be anti-LWC because it represents the earlier colonizing power. This might create a clash between such group attitudes and the real needs of the nation for an increased use of the LWC for instrumental purposes. Similarly, in an English-speaking environment, a group of new immigrants might develop negative attitudes toward speakers of English who act superior, either socially or culturally. Such an atmosphere can influence newcomers to emphasize self-identity and group congruence by placing high value on maintenance of their first language and limited, instrumental acquisition of the TL.

Negative individual attitudes may have their initial roots in negative group attitudes, but these can become intensified by negative experience with the acquisition process such as classroom anxiety, feelings of discrimination, and the like. The combination of negative group attitudes with negative personal feelings will result in the lowest level of language acquisition. Negative attitudes, whatever their roots, create psychological distance between the learner and the subject matter and are, therefore, of vital significance in the learning-teaching process. In such cases we may find ambivalent attitudes on the part of learners who realize the necessity to learn and use the LWC but have developed negative feelings towards it.

A conflict between individual or group attitudes as based on learners' perceived needs and the specified goals of the existing program might be another source of negative feelings. If the course of study emphasizes either a literary or structural analytic approach to language learning while learners feel that they need to use the language for immediate communicative purposes, there may be a serious conflict of interests which will affect the learners' motivation.

Learners' negative attitudes can be detrimental to the success of the language program. Course designers need to place special emphasis on