

English for Specific Purposes: A Study Investigating the Mismatch between the “*Cutting Edge*” Course Book and the Needs of Prince Sultan Air Base Students

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Abstract

Needs analysis is generally believed to be important in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context because it enables practitioners and material writers to find out about their learners' needs. Thus, the main research question focuses on the perceived English language needs of the learners at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB), and the study involves an investigation into the mismatch between the *Cutting Edge* course book and the needs of PSAB students. A total of 70 students from different technical sections at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB), Saudi Arabia participated in the study. Two types of data collection methods were used in this study: quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interviews). The results obtained reveal that the current course book being used at PSAB does not meet their needs because the activities provided are not relevant to the specific context of their field, which is mainly military and aviation. Finding and adapting a textbook that is clearly linked to these students' needs and to the course objectives is suggested as one possible solution. In the context of PSAB, data from the interviews and surveys shows the need to assess the content of the course book in relation to the needs of the learners. It also indicates the strong demand of the students for supplementary materials that provide linguistic input to match their needs. Finally, offering supplementary materials and content-based instructions for those students would help to bridge the gap between language training and practical performance needs in real situations.

Keywords: aviation, curriculum, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), textbooks

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1. Introduction

The statement of the problem:

The textbooks used for teaching English to cadets attending the Prince Sultan Air Base English Language School (ELS) were developed at the Technical Studies Institute (TSI), Dhahran city, Saudi Arabia, by the department for curriculum development. It is argued that this book is not appropriate for meeting the needs of those students. As an officer and from experience working as a teacher, it has been noticed that the current course book is not entirely appropriate, although it has many advantages. It has also been found that the English language of the students is weak and that their needs are better served by replacing the textbook currently in use with the world renowned Cutting Edge textbooks developed by Pearson Education. Through using the new course books, the students' levels have been improving, and they are now able to use the English language adequately. However, the course book that most students are currently using is a general English course book, despite the learners having very specific needs.

Each individual student participant gained a degree from the Technical Studies Institute, in various specialisms, and has been employed according to the personnel requirements of the RSAF (Royal Saudi Airforce). They have been appointed to work in different sections of the PSAB (Prince Sultan Air Base), including maintenance of both AWACS planes and C130 planes, supply section, air traffic control, airplane crew, weapons and ammunitions, intelligence, and the training wing. Therefore, this study will examine the mismatches between the course book being used and the needs of learners. Munby (1978) states that the students' learning needs should be the basis of syllabus design. Attention has been paid to the importance of analysing learners' needs in many studies carried out to investigate learners' language requirements in a range of fields and majors. The only fields for which no investigations of this type have been found are the military ones.

1.3 Significance of the study:

The Royal Saudi Air Force provides English language training for their personnel in order to prepare them to perform their jobs competently and skilfully in a second language. English language is a very important course, since technicians working in different sections need to utilise English in many ways, such as reading manuals, communicating with other workers who are mostly not Saudis, and developing their knowledge. In fact, the students and teachers find it difficult to cope with the current courses because they are in contrast to the students' needs and their levels. The significance of relating teaching to the particular needs of students has been identified throughout the history of formal language learning, which has recently led to a growing interest in a distinct branch of language teaching referred to as ESP, and the Royal Saudi Air Force is no exception. This kind of language teaching is intended to provide learners with the competence to accomplish a particular set of tasks in order to achieve occupational targets.

1.4 Research questions the main question should be highlighted in the abstract.

The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the perceived English language needs of the learners at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB)?
- 2- What language skills are most needed by workers in different departments of PSAB?
- 3- What are some of the difficulties the students face when using the English language?

- 4- To what extent is the current course book appropriate for the learners? And what limitations have been found, and what solutions are available?

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2. Literature Review

The part played by English for occupational purposes (EOP), while significant, has been a lesser one (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998:2). A huge rise in the amount of business conducted internationally has prompted a corresponding increase in the significance of English for business purposes, which currently accounts for the greatest proportion of publications in the ESP category, and is attracting increasing attention from educators, organisations and publishing houses. ESP activity used to be closely associated with projects led, and usually staffed, by expatriate British, North American or Australasian teachers, often in large numbers; projects in the Middle East, such as in Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, are good examples. Local teachers seemed to play relatively small roles in such projects, and it was even occasionally argued by non-native speakers that ESP work was too difficult for them. It has always been believed that local teachers' knowledge of their situation, as well as their familiarity with their students' motivation and learning styles, gives them an advantage over native speaker expatriate teachers.

2.1 ESP: History and Development:

There are various trends that have led to the expansion of a new realm in the teaching of English as a foreign or a second language, known as ESP. These trends resulted from various fields, including politics, science and commerce. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP has arisen as a result of three reasons: (a) the demands of the new world, (b) the revolution in linguistics and (c) the focus on the learner.

2.3 Differences between ESP and EGP:

There are various differences between ESP and English for General Purposes (EGP) that are noted in the ESP literature, and this section will shed light on these differences.

Walther (1987) explains that the goal of many EGP programs is to improve the linguistic and communicative ability of the learner to enable him or her to use the second language, and there are two main reasons for this. Firstly, students enrolled on EGP programs often learn the language as part of their education or out of interest, so it is usually unknown how the language will eventually be used. A second reason why EGP courses develop the capacity to handle a large number of situations is because these courses are rarely homogeneous, particularly where there are large classes (as in an entire school system), and so the need for students to perform specific tasks at specific times rarely coincide. On the other hand, the goal of ESP is to develop the linguistic and communicative capacity of the learner to deal with specific types of situations in the second language. ESP programs, Walther (1987) adds, attempt to develop different degrees of capacity as quickly as possible to meet the different immediate needs of the learners.

There are two principal reasons why the aims of an ESP course are different from those of EGP courses. Firstly, where language courses are for experienced employees, language training often costs the employer time (in the case of in-house courses) and money, therefore employers like the training to produce effective results as quickly as possible. Even in situations

where learners are attending language training on their own, these learners would like to be able begin using the language right away, and not sometime in the future, to perform specific tasks.

Secondly, since learners require the language for different purposes, which have different linguistic demands, not all learners need to be able to analyse large parts of the language system. Indeed, since many of the situations in which ESP is required, the second language can be clearly pinpointed, with only the linguistic and communicative capacity required to tackle these situations needing to be provided.

2.4 Needs Analysis:

Needs analysis is seen as a fundamental element of ESP. Richards (2001, p. 32) suggests that the reason for and context of the learners' requirements should drive planning and content, as opposed to basing the design on general English courses. As certain learners may have a specific need for language acquisition, it is necessary to limit the content to reflect only the learner's requirements. Needs analysis can provide a guide for adapting a new learning program as it enables teachers to identify the learners' needs and amend the learning process accordingly. One essential advantage of needs analysis is that by identifying the requirements of learners, it is possible to identify the weakness and strengths of their skill set with regard to the students' language use in their job roles. Dudley-Evans and John (1998) recommend needs analysis as the first stage in course design, and state that this should be conducted prior to the start of the course in order to allow for a basic course structure as well as the gathering of resources.

Needs analysis should be used, and courses should be developed, around human and material resources. Needs analysis can be seen as an objective endeavour to assist teachers of ESP find the best methods of teaching that are relevant to their learners.

2.3. Studies Related to Needs Analysis:

Much research has been conducted in this field, which seeks to determine students' learning needs in order to design appropriate English language or academic courses. Such research has focused on a variety of specialist areas, including scientific fields and the medical profession, as well as business.

Alfehaid (2011) conducted a study to evaluate ESP courses and investigate the needs of two groups of ESP students and health professionals at a Health Sciences College in Saudi Arabia. The main goal of Alfehaid's (2011) study was to create a proposal for the development of the present English for Specific Purposes course. A mixed methods approach was used to obtain the data. The findings on language needs revealed that all four of the language skills were important for both students and for their target careers. Also, the evaluation explains that while the ESP course is effective to some extent, it has some limitations, including its curriculum organisation and syllabus specifications; the teaching-learning materials used and the assessment procedures adopted. Accordingly, Alfehaid (2011) proposes a new ESP curriculum based on the students' needs.

A study by Nakaprasit (2010) examined the learning requirements of adult students of ESL who wished to enter higher education who were attending an intensive English language course at Ontario University, Canada. The research aimed to facilitate administrators and

teaching professionals in designing effective ESL courses to address learners' language needs for both academic and social aspects of university life. A mixed methods approach was used in this study, but with a qualitative focus and narrative findings. This holistic study gathered data on the perspectives of both learners and administrators. The study reveals that the learners' academic requirements were not sufficiently addressed by the course, and that speaking and listening skills were not paid adequate attention throughout the course. In addition, it was found that the most effective way to tackle these problems was not to alter classroom practice, but to provide a different structure to the course, which would allow more flexible learning tailored to individual requirements.

Al-huqbani (2008) conducted a study to investigate and assess the English language needs of police officers in Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire was administered and distributed to 103 officers working at King Fahad Security College, The Higher Institute of Security Sciences and the Individual Security Sectors. The results of the study show that English language plays an important role in police work. Also, these results reveal that although police officers and their colleagues understand the importance of English to police work, many officers stated that they have not been trained in how to use English for police purposes. Therefore, Al-huqbani suggests some general guidelines for the improvement of the English program in the security sector. He also found that it is important to take into consideration the proficiency level of the target learners before the commencement of the ESP program. Al-huqbani concludes that the selection of materials should be related to police work. Moreover, the language materials that the cadets are exposed to should include the communicative knowledge that cadets and officers need in order to perform their duties. Finally, Al-huqbani states that there should be more emphasis on the teaching of listening and speaking, since there is a need to improve the officers' proficiency in communication.

Cowling (2007) carried out a needs analysis survey at a major Japanese firm for the purpose of designing an intensive course of study in English. This multiple-method research reveals the essential role of needs analysis in uncovering the requirements of this group of learners.

Algorashi (1989) conducted a study to investigate the English communicative needs of Saudi military cadets at King Abdul Aziz Military Academy (KAMA). Algorashi distributed a questionnaire to 212 Saudi army and air defence officers: eighty-nine captains, fifty-six first lieutenants and sixty-seven second lieutenants representative of various army branches. The questionnaire consisted of 58 items and was divided into three parts: one about biographical data, the second containing questions about the language background of the subjects, and a third with questions about the activities for which English may be used by the subjects. The findings of the study show that English is of great importance in situations related to the cadets' future jobs and training courses. The study also reveals that the English course at KAMA is not enough in terms of instructional information given to the cadets, and the content of the textbooks is not relevant to their needs. For the development of teaching English at KAMA, Algorashi puts forward many recommendations. He suggests that the teaching of English should be defined in terms of the final practical use of English in the workplace, and not in terms of the general capacity of English. In addition, there should be more focus on the teaching of reading and listening skills.

Overall, the textbook should enhance the communicative knowledge needed for carrying out the military activities that are related to the cadets' specialty.

Finally, a study by Mosallem (1984) investigated the communicative needs in terms of English within the Egyptian police force, across ten separate departments. These included special security, passport officials, airport security, traffic police, tourist police, criminal investigations, Interpol, police station forces and national security. The research instrument used was a questionnaire. Within each department, individuals were selected on the basis of several variables, including rank and age group. The survey questionnaire was made up of sections which gathered data on the degree to which English is needed in the officers' professional roles; what skills are required for completion of their usual tasks; how well officers consider that they are able to use English; which aspects cause difficulty with using English, and the perception of the importance of English skills in succeeding in work and in promotion opportunities. Mosallem found that the English language requirements within the police force are set out by the individual departments. However, a recommendation of the study arising from a needs assessment is that a basic English course could be created for use by officers from all departments in order to prepare them to use English within their work tasks.

3. Research Design:

There are different ways of investigating and gathering data. In terms of methodology, this research has utilised mixed a methods research approach. Dörnyei (2007, p. 44) describes such research as a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods within a single research project. Also, Dörnyei (2007, p.24) makes a distinction between these two methods: Quantitative research includes procedures of data collection that result in numerical data which is then analysed using statistical methods. On the other hand, qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result in open-ended, non-numerical data that is analysed using non-statistical methods. Holliday (2010, p.99) states that the basic goal of qualitative research is to get to the bottom of what is going in all aspects of social behaviour.

The main advantage of mixed methods research is that by using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, researchers can utilise the best of both paradigms, thereby integrating quantitative and qualitative research strengths (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 45). Also, Dörnyei adds, mixed methods research has the potential to provide evidence for the validity of the research. Indeed, improving the research validity is related to the idea of triangulation. The data collection will follow different stages. In the first phase, a textbook evaluation questionnaire will be used to collect students' perceptions of the English textbook and its appropriateness for the Saudi cadets. The second stage will involve carrying out interviews to obtain in-depth information from the participants. The research issues have been divided into four areas as follows:

- a- Learners' Perceptions of the current course book
- b- Perceived English language needs of PSAB learners
- c- The language skills most needed by learners from different departments
- d- Difficulties met by the learners in using the English language

3.1 Setting and Participants:

Since the goal of this study is to investigate the mismatch between the course book and the needs of Saudi cadets working at (PSAB), the sample population is Saudi Air Force Technicians. 70 cadets of different ranks participated in this study. Their ages range from 22 to 30 years. These cadets are studying an RSAF Elementary English Course at the School of English language/Base Training Wing/ Prince Sultan Air Base. All of them graduated from the Technical Studies Institute (TSI) with different specialties and have been appointed to fulfil the Royal Saudi Airforce's (RSAF) needs. They have been appointed to work in different sections of PSAB, such as the maintenance of both AWACS planes and C130 planes, supply section, air traffic control, weapons and ammunitions, intelligence, and the training wing. The training strategy in the RSAF permits an instructor-learner ratio of 1:12 as the maximum in each classroom, unless there is a waiver by the Training Wing Commander to exceed the limit, for example if there is a shortage in teaching staff or school facilities.

3.3 Instrumentation:

This study will use two types of data collection: questionnaires and interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Learners' Perceptions of the Current Course Book:

The view of most of the participants in this study is that the content of the course book is appropriate for their needs, as shown by their response to statement 1 (S1). A combined total of 78.6 per cent are agreement with the statement that the content of the course book is appropriate for learners' needs. This observation may be due to the participants' perception- indicated in the response to the question what they like most about the course book- that the exercises and examples provided in the course book are simple.

The data obtained from the questionnaire and the interviews further reveals why most of the participants indicated that the course book is appropriate for their needs. Firstly, the new words and situations presented in the course book hook the interest of the learners. A typical response in this case came from Student A who mentioned during the interview that , *"The new words in the new course book excited me because it assisted me with new words, meanings and topics that are likely to be related to everyday situations."* Thus, a total of 60 percent agreed with statement 2 (S2) that the topics and lessons in the course book promote students' engagement and interest.

Another reason for the participants claiming that the content of the course book is appropriate for their needs is that they found that the instructions and examples are adequately explained and illustrated. In fact, a total of 54.3 percent indicated their agreement with statement 3 (S3).

Also, the participants believe that the accompanying materials that come with the course book are useful and informative, as can be seen in their response to statement 4 (S4) where 17.1 percent chose strongly agree, while 47.1 percent chose agree. Moreover, the participants indicated that their exposure to the instructions in the course book helped them read the instructions in manuals written in English, as 57 per cent of them showed

strong agreement and 54.3 percent showed agreement with statement 5 (S5). In addition, it appears that the course book improved the participants' general vocabulary, as indicated by their response to statement 7 (S7) in which 58.6 percent expressed agreement with the statement that the course book has helped them improve their general vocabulary.

Similarly, 57.1 percent of the participants reported that the course book helped them with everyday listening, while 62.9 percent claimed that the course book helped them with everyday speaking. All of these perceived benefits are likely to have stemmed from the students' exposure to new general vocabulary and interesting situations that reflect casual everyday conversations that happen at home, in the shopping centres, or in restaurants. As student C noted:

I learned new words I can apply to everyday situations when I see friends in shops, or when I meet office workers during tea breaks. The new words also help in listening to casual conversations.

However, despite the aforementioned benefits that the participants gained from the course book, overall, the course book seems to have fallen below the expectations of the participants. To illustrate this, less than half of the participants agreed that the course book helped develop their writing skills. In fact, 22.9 percent chose neutral, 28.6 percent disagreed, and two percent strongly disagreed with statement 6 (S6). The data from the interviews suggests that the participants generally do not consider the course book helpful in developing their writing skills because the writing exercises presented in the course book are not relevant to the writing skills needed in the actual jobs of the participants. According to Student F:

The writing situations in the course book are so very different to writing situations in the actual work. The writing in the course book does not show actually how to write things related to our field.

Furthermore, the participants have reported that the course book has not really helped much in terms of providing them with expressions and technical words relevant to their job. Thus, only 45.7 percent indicated agreement with statement 10 (S10), while 30 percent chose disagree, and 12.9 percent expressed strong disagreement. This finding is supported by the interview data, which reveals that while the course book abounds with situations reflecting real-life scenarios, it does not provide situations pertaining to the scenarios in PSAB. A typical response from the interviews came from Student E, who reported:

Really we appreciate the realistic situations in the course book, but there is a different reality in PSAB. Everyday life in PSAB is not all about eating, drinking, and going out. It is more maintenance of planes, and of working in the supply section. PSAB means weapons, ammunitions, and intelligence and, you know, training and more. There is no mention of that in the course book. It should be part of it.

Similarly, in response to statement 11 (S11), which asks whether the course book provides the learners with adequate knowledge of English to be used in their field of specialisation and work, only 11.4 percent of the participants strongly agreed and 28.6 percent

agreed, while 30 per cent were uncertain, 11.4 percent disagreed and 18.6 percent strongly disagreed. These results indicate that there is a need for teachers to provide the learners with adequate knowledge of appropriate English that the learners can use in their field of specialisation and work.

Another reason why the participants believe that the current course book being used in PSAB is insufficient for their needs is that it has not helped much in improving their conversation skills with their supervisors and colleagues who need assistance in the workplace. This is revealed by the participants' response to statement 12 (S12) in which only 8.6 strongly agreed and 40 percent agreed compared to 18.6 percent who disagreed and 2.9 percent who strongly disagreed. Student B provided a typical explanation for this observation:

You see, the dialogues in the course book that we use are not technical-only ordinary conversations. That is good for general English learning, but in case of our actual work, in which is we have to give advice to people or offer solutions to supervisors, the course book dialogues are not at all of help.

Correspondingly, less than half of the participants have reported that the course book helped them to understand the English spoken by foreign workers working in PSAB. Only 5.7 per cent strongly agreed and 40 per cent agreed to statement 13 (S13), while 37.1 per cent chose neutral, 11.4 per cent chose disagree and 5.7 percent chose strongly disagree. Apparently, the exercises in the course book have not helped the participants listen to and comprehend spoken texts.

Also, in response to statement 14 (S14) in the questionnaire about whether the course book has helped them write reports and business letters, only 11.4 percent of the participants indicated strong agreement. On the contrary, a considerable 41.4 per cent were uncertain (neutral) while 12.9 per cent disagreed strongly. The responses during the interviews have revealed that while the course book provides writing exercises, the situations given are more about descriptive writing and personal essays, as Student D surmised:

Yeah...we write a lot...but not reports or business writing or memorandums...but...a lot of describing...like describing myself, my family, and personal stuff like that. I do not remember making us write letters to commanders and other sections or reports about that...like when we have problems in the work...or we solved something.

Another criticism that the participants have attributed to the current course book is that it is not helpful for passing the English language examinations set at PSAB. In fact, the combined percentages of those who agreed and strongly agreed to statement 15 (S15) is only 42.9 percent, while the combined percentages for those who were uncertain and those who disagreed and disagreed strongly is 57.1 percent. This observation could be due to the fact that the participants thought that the technical information is not paid sufficient attention in the course book. This is reflected in the response of Student H during the interview:

The course book does not really help in terms of preparing for the exams. The exercises are good in the course book. But the problem is that when they test us, instructors give us exams full of exercises that have close links to technical words and sentences (like fuselage- cockpit- radar-engine).

Subsequently, only 5.7 percent of the participants strongly agreed and only 34.3 percent agreed to statement 16 (S16) which deals with whether the activities in the course book have enabled them to apply the English knowledge they have learned to real situations. It appears that while the participants' general English knowledge improved, the English knowledge that is relevant to their work at PSAB did not improve. The following common responses to the question "Write down three things that you dislike about the course book" provide an insight into why the participants believe that the activities in the course book have not enabled them to apply the English knowledge they have learned to real situations:

1. *There was not enough explanation of grammar.*
2. *There were no words and idioms that relate to our job or speciality.*
3. *Some topics' vocabulary is very different from the words we use in our work.*
- 4.

The aforementioned inference is further supported by the explanation of Student D who stated:

Sometimes, I feel I do really well in English class. But I get really confused when I notice that the vocabulary and idioms and words I learn in the course book are not used in my actual job. The people in my workplace, I mean the foreigners and the superiors, they use other words not at all used in the course book. It confused me. It makes me frustrated sometimes really. I wish too that grammar was explained enough. I think grammar is important, especially grammar related to my work.

To recapitulate, it could be inferred from the survey and interview data presented that there is a mismatch between the learners' work-related needs and the skills promoted or developed by the current course book. Hence, it would be better if modifications to the current course book could be carried out. In addition, the use of supplementary materials that could help the course book meet the needs of the PSAB learners should be considered. Thus, based on the previously mentioned data, it can be inferred that there is a mismatch between the learners' needs and the skills promoted or developed by the current course book, and this urgently needs addressing.

The data pertaining to the learners' satisfaction has provided more evidence with regard to the mismatch between the course book and the work-related needs of the participants. To start with, a small number, 25.7 percent, agreed with statement 1 (S1) in the third section of the questionnaire, which states: "Generally, I am satisfied with the course book". On the contrary, 55.7 per cent of the participants indicated uncertainty (not sure) while 18.6 per cent of the participants signified disagreement. This finding can be explained by the common response to

the question “Do you think the present course book meets your needs as a learner?” articulated by Student G:

The course book is good for learning English, but in fact it is a general English course book and to some extent I think it should be improved to meet our needs as technicians since we are studying specific English.

The way the course book is taught also seems to magnify the mismatch perceived by the participants, as indicated by their response to statement 2 (S2) for which only 28.6 percent reported that they are generally satisfied with the way the course book is being taught, compared to a considerable 40 percent who reported that they are not sure, and the remaining 31.4 per cent who showed outright disagreement.

The same thing is true of the participants’ perception of whether the course book has contributed towards improving their level of English. Only 38.6 percent reported agreement, while 37.1 percent reported uncertainty, and the remaining 24.3 percent showed disagreement. According to Student H, the students at PSAB generally do not feel that the level of their English has actually improved because ‘*even after studying English, the difficulty experienced in the work place is almost the same.*’

Another source of learner dissatisfaction is the number of hours allotted to studying the course book in the classroom. On the one hand, only eight percent indicated agreement with statement 4 (S4), while 37.1 percent expressed uncertainty. On the other hand, a massive 51.4 percent of participants reported that they are not generally satisfied with the number of study hours provided for the course book in the classroom. Student I shed light on this concern as he commented:

There should be more hours to spend on discussing the content of the course book. You see, it is not good that students are assigned home reading for most of the pages. The teacher’s explanation is important, especially for grammar and vocabulary. Maybe if there was more time for the course book, the teacher could provide more examples of use of English that we can use in the workplace.

Finally, in response to statement 5 (S5), only 25.7 percent agreed that the skills taught in the course book are appropriate to their needs, while a considerable 38.6 percent signified uncertainty and 35.7 percent indicated disagreement. This observation implies that, overall, the participants are not satisfied with how the course book addresses their actual needs. As Student K revealed:

Actually, the course book does not have topics related to our needs- just English language- which I think is necessary to build up our general English, but also we need to have topics related to our speciality and our job role.

In short, the learners are not satisfied with the current course book because while it presents novel experiences for them, its contents are not sufficient to meet their needs as they carry out their work at the PSAB. Hence, it would be better if the teachers of the English language classes could adapt the contents of the course book and the way the structured learning experiences are presented to the learners to ensure that they match the needs of the learners.

4.2 Perceived English Language Needs of PSAB Learners:

To study the needs perceived by the learners at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB), semi-structured interviews were conducted. The responses of the learners have been coded and categorised. Table 1 summarises the perceived English language needs of the respondents.

Table 1. *English Language Needs as Perceived by PSAB Learners*

Learn to read instructions found in manuals written in English
 Develop skills for writing reports, memos, and business letters
 Learn general vocabulary
 Use technical words
 Communicate with superiors and fellow workers
 Understand English words spoken by foreigners

As can be seen in Table 1, the learners of English language at PSAB consider learning the four macro skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as necessary skills for carrying out their respective jobs effectively. A typical response to the question “What do you need to learn in your English language class?” is that of Student A who stated:

I want to learn everything English...You see, my work is so demanding. I read manuals in English, sometimes with difficult words I can't understand really. My superior asks me to write letters and all that. Then there are foreigners in my workplace. They talk and really it is difficult. Sometimes their English is hard. The words I can hear, but ...I don't know exactly what it means.

Student B also explained how the four macro skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are related to their jobs at the air base:

I think the four skills are of great importance to us. Since we are technicians and work in technical sections in the air base, especially in the maintenance of planes, we need to know how to read, write, speak and listen in English. Knowing how to read well will help technicians to read manuals in English, and also knowing how to write well will help me to write reports to supervisors and will help me order parts for the planes. Also, the listening and speaking skills are important to understand and communicate with the pilots and with our supervisors whose language is English, like Americans, Philippine and people from the United Kingdom.

The aforementioned data from the qualitative interviews and the survey implies that the learners recognise the fact that they need to be able to learn how to read, write, speak, and listen to English texts and be able to apply those skills in the context of their workplace. Since the course book plays a major role in the PSAB learners' learning process, then they should expect their English course book to be appropriate for addressing such needs.

4.3 The Language Skills needed most for learners in different departments:

With regard to the language skills needed most for the different departments, the data from the interviews has revealed that learners need to learn how to read, understand, and follow the instructions found in operation manuals written in English; write reports, memoranda, and business letters; communicate with English-speaking superiors and fellow workers, and comprehend spoken texts. In addition, the respondents noted the need to pass the language tests in the air base, as well as the need to be able to apply their language skills in real situations outside the classroom, as needs that should be satisfied by the language class.

This means that the learners expect their course book to provide them with sufficient structured learning exercises that will not only ensure that they pass the language test set at the base, but also help them transfer their English language skills as they communicate with other English-speaking interlocutors outside the confines of their work. Hence, there is a strong need to ensure that the course book being used matches the needs of the learners at PSAB.

4.4 Difficulties met by the learners in using the English language

Among the difficulties experienced by the learners in using the English language are understanding the spoken texts, sustaining conversations in English, writing formal texts, understanding technical terms and other English vocabulary words, and expressing themselves clearly in English. For example, when asked about the difficulties he experiences in using the English language, Student D replied:

It is hard for me to understand foreigners like Filipinos speaking in English to me. Some words I don't know. Some I heard already before but the meaning I don't know. Student D added: The hardest part is when I start talking in English with a foreigner but I feel really mad because after the start, I cannot continue the talk anymore. In addition, Student E narrated, "Many, many difficulties. Last week, the boss said to write a memo for him then he would sign. I confuse. I not moved first. How about that?"

The foregoing responses of the participants indicate the language needs they need, as well as the skills they think they need the most, and they reflect the difficulties that they experience in using the English language. Hence, teachers and administrators concerned with language learning at the PSAB must ensure that the course book, which is the primary instructional material used in the English classrooms, provides activities that address the perceived needs and difficulties that the learners at PSAB actually experience.

5. Conclusion:

This study has generated data that points to the fact that the learners of English for Specific Purposes at Prince Sultan Air Base believe that they have to learn not only general English language skills but, more importantly, English language skills that are related to the field of military and aviation. Among the English language skills that they consider of utmost importance to them are reading skills, technical writing skills, communication skills, listening skills, and speaking skills.

Unfortunately, while the participants in this study have acknowledged the benefits of the current course book in terms of developing general English skills, they realise that the current course book does not really help them acquire the language skills specific to their field of specialisation. Consequently, the data from this study reveals that there is a mismatch between the activities offered by the current course book and the needs of the learners at PSAB. Thus, it is necessary to provide supplementary materials that will address the discipline-specific needs of the learners. Similarly, there is a need to modify the current teaching strategies utilised by the English teacher. While the textbook has not yet been replaced, there is a need to integrate writing, speaking, listening, and reading activities that are more relevant and workplace-based.

5.2 Implications for ESP:

The results of this study highlight the importance of considering the absolute characteristics and variable characteristics of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), in developing instructional materials like course books, and creating appropriate language learning environments for adult or professional learners enrolled on English courses in specific disciplines (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). The recurring responses of the participants to the questions in the survey and interviews conducted is that the current course book being used at PSAB does not meet their needs, because the activities provided are not relevant to the specific needs of their field, which is basically military and aviation. This is precisely what absolute characteristics of ESP refer to- the capacity of ESP to provide the learners with the skills they need in their specific field of expertise through structured learning experiences that mirror the realities in the area of specialisation that the learners will eventually practice. An implication of this for teachers is the need to find and adapt a textbook that is clearly linked to their students' needs and to the course objectives. If the textbook focused on the linguistic skills technicians need in the workplace, it would be more useful.

Also, teachers should make use of authentic materials by taking, and if necessary adapting, parts of relevant workplace manuals. Brown (1995, p. 5) states that it is important for teachers to facilitate activities in which learners can “express their intentions.” Communication opportunities also allow learners to practice what they have gained in terms of language, discourse, pragmatic and strategic competencies.

Likewise, the responses of the participants echo the need to provide learners with instructional strategies that are different from those used in teaching general English. This is precisely what variable characteristics of ESP means. In addition, the results of this study also lend support to the argument of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) that a learner-centred approach is crucial to the effective teaching of English for Specific Purposes.

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