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Students' Perceptions and Challenges in Learning Business English: Understanding Students' Needs and Job Market Requirements

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Abstract. English for specific purposes (ESP) is intrinsically a student-centered subject. Learners' perspectives are the fundamental determinants of the learning outcomes of ESP students. Research shows that the distinction between 'General English' and ESP is that the latter focuses on understanding the learners' wants, needs, and necessities. To address this gap in the literature, this paper undertakes an exploratory, mixed-methods study of 120 senior, ESP Saudi Business and Management college students, with the objective of formulating strategies for improving ESP programs to enhance students' employability. The participants' perceptions regarding the importance of Business English in preparing them for the job market, along with a self-assessment of their language needs, were gathered via a 16-item close-ended questionnaire, followed by interviews with some students. The results indicate that senior college students are fully aware of their language needs and can make decisions regarding the particular language skills that are needed for their own success in the job market. The results also show that students hold very positive attitudes towards Business English and believe that success in the job market is dependent on proper and adequate Business English provision at college level.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Learning Outcomes; Employability; Linguistic Needs for the Job Market; Business English; English as a Second language (ESL)

1. Introduction

The prominence of the English language as the world's primary lingua franca is uncontested. Alkubaidi (2014) and Shafie et al. (2015) state that presently, English is the principal medium that facilitates communication and connections

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across the highest number of diverse cultures and languages globally. In recognition of its importance at the global level, higher education institutions in countries where English is a foreign language have taken progressive steps towards enabling students to acquire the language (Moratinos-Johnston et al., 2018). Universities and related institutions of higher learning in Europe, for example, have over recent years increasingly adopted the ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education) courses that are taught in English (Moratinos-Johnston et al., 2018). Such adoption is largely spurred by the universities' recognition of the need to compete for international recognition while attracting foreign students and staff, as well as promoting international research and networking (Phakiti et al., 2013; Moratinos-Johnston et al., 2018). The advantages of integrating English at the university level are numerous and encompass both students' academic development and future career prospects (Ismail, 2011). Other notable benefits include, but are not limited to, enhanced success in language acquisition and the continuity of international economic, political, social, and cultural relations.

In the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), English plays a fundamental role in the lives of the general public. Notably, the vast majority of private companies and state entities such as ARAMCO (the Kingdom's largest oil company) require proficiency in spoken English in view of the necessity of using the language in day-to-day operations (Alzaharani, 2016). Moreover, the demand for an English-speaking local workforce is now at its peak as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia embarks on ambitious futuristic megaprojects that require a skilled workforce and white-collar professionals (Al Malki et al., 2022). The significance of English in the KSA is perhaps best exemplified by the language's prominence in the Kingdom's famous Vision 2030 (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017), which seeks to restructure the country away from oil dependency towards a more modern economic regime. There is an overwhelming scholarly and expert consensus that the prospect of successfully implementing Vision 2030 hinges upon improving English language teaching and learning in the Kingdom (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017). Accordingly, the government of the KSA has implemented various efforts aimed at restructuring the country's curriculum in consistency with its envisioned future.

English is currently a compulsory subject area within the KSA's public educational curriculum, beginning from the fourth grade until the completion of high school (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Notably, an English proficiency test is one of the mandatory admission criteria required of new students by all Saudi universities (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017). The attainment of English language proficiency in the KSA is also one of the prerequisites for students' advancement to undergraduate academic specialization (Alzaharani, 2016). Moreover, many universities in the KSA implement English for specific purposes (ESP) programs that transcend general English by providing the opportunity to develop communication skills that are essential to specific areas of academic and professional specialization (Elyas & Badawood, 2016). Common ESP examples include English for business communication and English for medical purposes (EMP), which are implemented in business and medical schools, respectively,

across the KSA (Javid & Umer, 2013). Generally, the teaching and learning of English constitute an important part of the Saudi educational curriculum, including pertinent programs that are gaining traction.

The rising prominence of the role of English in the KSA over recent years and its ever-increasing recognition as a lingua franca within the Kingdom's public and private sectors have generated considerable discourses regarding the teaching and learning of the language in Saudi schools and colleges (Al-Tamimi, 2019; Faruk, 2013). One key area of debate revolves around the fact that, despite the Kingdom's best efforts to foster learning within the educational system, including exposing students to nearly ten years of mandatory study, language proficiency remains low (Elyas & Picard, 2010). Notably, "the majority of students who move from high school to university, generally lack the skills and motivation in learning and in acquiring English language, and that lack is evidenced by their low scores" (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017, 87-88). Given the learning deficiencies at the lower levels of education, ESP programs emerge as the primary mechanisms through which practicable English language acquisition is facilitated for students who pursue higher education. Indeed, owing to their poor levels of proficiency, the vast majority of first-year Saudi undergraduates have to undergo intensive or remedial English courses before undertaking English-based academic courses (Al-Hazmi, 2017; Mahdi, 2019). However, there remain frequent complaints within the local Saudi press by employers regarding the communication difficulties faced even by recent graduates who have been instructed in English at the university level (Al-Hazmi, 2017). Such examples indicate the presence of a shortfall within the ESP programs of Saudi universities and the need for identifying, mitigating, and resolving the root causes of the challenges faced.

According to Javid and Umer (2013, 364), the element that distinguishes ESP from general English programs is "not the existence of a [learning] need as such but rather an awareness of the need." The overarching objective of any given ESP program is to cater to specific learners' needs, and this invariably involves preparing the students to function effectively in target situations by understanding their perceived "wants," "lacks," and "necessities" (Javid & Umer, 2013, p. 364). Although the root causes of the aforementioned insufficiencies in English proficiency within KSA are numerous and complex (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Naveed et al., 2017), some problems evidently emanate from the country's overall approach to teaching the English language and from various inadequacies within the universities' ESP programs more specifically (Al-Hazmi, 2017; Bartram, 2010). Accordingly, this paper makes the following hypothesis:

ESP programs in the KSA yield inadequate educational outcomes because they fail to capture students' awareness of the need for English acquisition or their perspectives regarding their wants, lacks, and necessities as they relate to English learning (Javid & Umer, 2013). To explore the above hypothesis in appropriate detail and to develop pertinent recommendations, this paper proposes an empirical study of ESP undergraduate students' perspectives regarding learning English within the setting of a Saudi university.

Given the insights above, this paper seeks to undertake an empirical exploration of Saudi undergraduate students' perspectives regarding learning the English language as part of an ESP course in a Saudi University. The study herein seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do senior college students perceive the need to enroll in a Business English course?
2. What challenges do senior college students face in learning Business English during the transitions from secondary school to college and from college to the job market?

The overarching objective of the study is to use the insights gained from learners' perspectives to formulate recommendations for ways to improve the delivery and outcomes of ESP programs.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. English in Saudi Higher Education

A preliminary review of the KSA's policy pertaining to the English language in higher education reveals an observable conflict between the vision of shifting towards communicating in English and the desire to preserve the native Arabic language (Al-Hazmi, 2017). In 1999, the Kingdom's Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) released a policy statement indicating that Arabic was the formal language of instruction in all Saudi institutions of higher learning (Alhawsawi, 2013). However, the policy statement left the decision to implement a secondary language of instruction to the individual councils of the universities concerned (Al-Hazmi, 2017). Given the pressures for internationalization and the aforementioned global trend towards the common use of English, many Saudi universities have now facilitated English language learning, both through preparatory courses and, less frequently, as the primary medium of communication and instruction for some undergraduate programs (Alhawsawi, 2013; Elyas, 2008; Faruk, 2014). According to Al Zumor and Abdesslem (2022), all Saudi universities now use English as a medium of instruction in all disciplines, except for humanities and religious studies, which are still offered in Arabic. Notably, several Saudi universities have succeeded in transferring from the use of Arabic to English as the only medium of instruction. For example, the King Fahad Petroleum and Mineral University (KFPMU) was the first institution of higher learning to announce a transition to the English language in the 1970s (Alhawsawi, 2013). The increasing recognition of the importance of English within the higher educational context by Saudi universities, beginning in the late 1960s, was subsequently reflected in governmental policy in 2010, when the MoHE shifted its aforementioned policy to allow for the teaching of English as a compulsory subject in universities (Alrabai, 2016; Alhawsawi, 2016; Elyas & Badawood, 2016). As indicated previously, the two main approaches to teaching and learning English in Saudi universities are preparatory programmes and programmes of English for specific purposes (ESP) (Javid & Umer, 2013; Nair et al., 2014). The former comprises of introductory programmes designed to prepare high school graduates for higher education studies, whereas the latter consists of programmes that are aimed at enabling students to develop the

specific communication skills pertinent to their own areas of academic and professional specialization.

2.2. Importance of English in the KSA

English as a foreign language (EFL) plays a particularly important role in educational instruction within the KSA, in view of the mounting pressure on Saudi students to acquire the language as a professional medium of communication. The Saudi educational system has had to adapt to this pressure over recent years, especially in response to the advent of globalization, which has generated an increasing demand for English language skills within the Saudi marketplace (Al-Tamimi, 2019; Alrabai 2016). The English language's significance in Saudi Arabia not only refers to its communicative and linguistic practicality but also its economic, social, and political utility. This significance has been magnified recently, with the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, which places the Saudi citizens at its heart. With the aim of creating a vibrant Saudi society while preparing Saudis to become global citizens, a huge pressure is placed on Saudi educational systems to prepare students for this massive transformation, which essentially requires proficiency in the one global language shared by the academic, business and economic world. According to Albiladi (2022), one of the outcomes of the Vision is equipping Saudi students with the necessary skills and competencies required by the future globalized labor market.

In terms of the economic significance of the English language before the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, several studies demonstrate empirically that English features prominently within the KSA's system of education because of its perceived economic value and particularly because of its intrinsic linkages to discourses of petroleum (Alhawsawi, 2013; Alrabai, 2016; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). However, as argued by Almegren (2022), after the Vision was announced and became the driving force for change in Saudi Arabia, the economic significance of English has extended beyond oil-based economy to a more open and diversified economy, in which English is considered to be the language of commerce, tourism and entrepreneurship. Therefore, the teaching and learning of English is conducted at all levels of education in Saudi Arabia, with the goal of developing a competent workforce that is sufficiently prepared for the needs and demands of both today's and tomorrow's Saudi organizations (largely oil-based), which are moving increasingly towards the use of English as the official medium of communication (Jenkins, 2013; Moskovsky & Alrabai, 2009). Moreover, Alrashidi and Phan (2015) observe that English has taken an increasingly prominent position in recent years within the Saudi economy because of its role in facilitating Saudis' participation in the labor market, as well as the eventual replacement of the approximately 9.5 million foreign expatriates currently working in key economic sectors.

Additionally, English plays critical social and political roles within Saudi society, which are equally recognized within the Kingdom's educational system (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Clementking et al., 2013). Furthermore, the English language is also seen as the political and economic gateway to the rest of the world; thus, it develops into a noteworthy regional and global foreign policy

player (Widodo et al., 2022; Jimenez, 2018). The political importance of the English language in the context of the KSA is also intricately linked to the economic dimension in view of its bridging role in the realm of foreign investment (Alrabai, 2016; Albadry, 2017). Socially, the use of the English language has contributed to rapid technological adoption within the KSA and to the positive evolution and modernization of the country's cultural norms and practices (Combs, 2017; Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013). Overall, promoting and facilitating the integration of the English language within the Saudi educational system, and into higher education most especially, enables the generation of the economic, social, cultural, and political benefits elaborated above.

2.3. Challenges to English Acquisition

As indicated above, the government of the KSA recognizes the teaching and learning of English to be among the most fundamental cornerstones of the Kingdom's envisaged knowledge-based economy, as articulated within the Saudi Vision 2030 (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017). However, despite the government's best efforts through the policy platforms of agencies such as the MoHE, reports of Saudi EFL learners attaining low rates of proficiency persist (Al-Nasser, 2015). For instance, statistics from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) reveal that the average test score in Saudi Arabia was 57 out of 120 in 2009, representing the second lowest score in the Middle East and one of the lowest TOEFL averages in the world (Alrabai, 2016). The low level of English proficiency in the KSA, even among undergraduates and new graduates who either receive instruction in English or participate in ESP programs, is attributable to a range of multidimensional factors. As argued by Zrekat and Al-Sohbani (2022), these factors can be described as internal, external, or a combination of both.

The extant body of literary evidence unearths a variety of challenges facing higher education institutions in terms of equipping graduates with the required linguistic competencies for a successful immersion in the job market. According to Fatima and Louafia (2022), the huge challenges faced by higher education institutions in preparing graduates for the new job markets are characterized by competitiveness, endless possibilities, uncertainty and a huge shift from local to global business models. The challenges can also be attributed to interrelated factors underpinning low English language achievement within and beyond the KSA. For example, Alrabai (2016) attributes low levels of proficiency to learner-related variables including gender, motivation, anxiety, learning styles, and learning strategies (Alhaisoni, 2012; Alkubaidi, 2014; Al-Khairi, 2013; Alkhatnai, 2011). Additionally, a systematic review of the literature by Al-Hazmi (2017) found that many barriers to English language proficiency are linked to sociocultural variables including the deeply-rooted Arabic culture, language, and Islamic religion. Other scholars have emphasized the inhibitive, mediating role of specific variables of EFL instruction such as the teaching method, curriculum, and teacher behavior (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Alkhairy, 2013; Alhamdan et al., 2017). Furthermore, several researchers posit that the challenges presently faced are associated with deficiencies inherent within the current system of education, such as overcrowding in instructional settings, inadequate teacher

training and insufficient instructional technology, among other systemic factors, which cumulatively contribute to poor EFL results (Ashraf, 2018; Alzaharani, 2016; Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017; Alhawsawi, 2013). As posited by Almathkuri, (2022), a multiple perspective approach should be taken when exploring students' linguistic needs and evaluating the success of ESP programs, as problems emerge as a result of multiple factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic.

Despite the vast amount of literature pertaining to the potential causes of low levels of English proficiency in the KSA, very few studies have paid specific attention to ESP programs within universities and other settings of higher education. The few studies that have attempted to undertake such a narrowed scope and approach to exploring the problem have revealed a consistent finding, namely "the importance of eliciting information from learners' perspectives" (Javid & Umer, 2013, p. 365). Research emphasizes that the students' subjective needs with reference to "what the learners have to do to actually acquire the language" (Javid & Umer, 2013, p. 365), based on their individual perspectives and lived experiences, are essential elements that warrant consideration when exploring the barriers and drivers of language acquisition (Alzaharani, 2016; Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017; Jaliyya & Idrus, 2017). As suggested by Ahmed (2022), many of these hurdles can be overcome by better preparation of students before their immersion in real-life work situations if they are aware of their linguistic strengths and weaknesses and have positive perceptions about language.

Given the insights above, this paper seeks to undertake an empirical exploration of Saudi undergraduate students' perspectives regarding learning the English language as part of an ESP course in a Saudi University. The subsequent section elaborates upon the methodology used by the study, including a comprehensive description of the research population, setting, instruments, and the overall method applied to data collection.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm Description and Rationale

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design. Such an approach to research combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques in the collection and subsequent processing of qualitative and quantitative data (Warren, 2010). The rationale underpinning the selection of the aforementioned research design was the intention to reflect fully the diversity of experiences captured by both the qualitative and quantitative methods (Warren, 2010). Accordingly, this study retrieved quantitative data by means of a close-ended questionnaire designed to elicit the participants' language needs and skills. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were undertaken in order to gather more in-depth qualitative data.

3.2. Participants

The participants enrolled in this study were 120 senior undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor's degree in various disciplines at a Saudi Business and Management college. All of the participants had completed the college's business-related ESP courses and were undertaking their cooperative internship training at various companies. The students were all invited to participate in the

study on a first-come, first-served basis. Many students registered their interest in taking part in the study via an electronic form, but only 24 participants were randomly selected from each of the following disciplines: supply chain management (24 participants), management information systems (24 participants), human resource management (24 participants), marketing (24 participants) and accounting (24 participants).

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Two types of data collection tools were implemented in this study. The first was a sixteen-item questionnaire. Each participant was asked to respond to each item in the questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (Bolarinwa, 2015): (strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD)). The questionnaire is shown in the appendices. It was used to elicit answers to the first research question: How do senior college students perceive the need to enroll in a Business English course? The first three items revolved around the students' perceptions and attitudes towards English language, in general, and ESP for success in the labor market in particular. The remaining 13 items address students' self-assessment of their linguistic needs in relation to the requirements of the job market. The interviews were intended to help in gaining more insight into the students' perceived usefulness of ESP courses for a successful transition to the labor market and to answer research question 2: What challenges do senior college students face in learning Business English during the transitions from secondary school to college and from college to the job market?

3.4. Data Gathering Procedures

The questionnaire was prepared using Google forms, and was then sent to the participants via email. In addition to the questionnaire, the study implemented convenience sampling (O'Brien et al., 2014) to select 10 participants for further in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The selection criteria for the interview sample included the criteria that participants should have completed the questionnaire and should be willing to commit approximately 30 minutes of their time to an interview on an appointed date. The topics used to formulate the open-ended questions for the interview were:

1. the students' perceptions of the need for enrolling in a Business English course;
2. the factors shaping students' perspectives towards learning English; and
3. the language-related challenges faced at the undergraduate level of education.

Data collected via the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics and subsequently triangulated with the interview data through thematic analysis, as expounded in the 'Findings and Analysis' section below.

3.5. Data Verification and Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire instrument was pretested for content, face, and construct validity (Bolarinwa, 2015). To protect anonymity and confidentiality, neither the name of the research setting nor the names of the research participants are revealed herein. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed

consent (O'Brien et al., 2014). All research material was stored in a secure server that was only accessible to the researcher and analyst.

3.6. The Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were checked in two steps. The first involved ensuring face validity and entailed the questionnaire being given to subject field experts to determine whether the questionnaire items were successful in capturing the topic under investigation. The second step involved calculating Cronbach's Alpha using SPSS to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. Table 1 below shows that the Cronbach's Alpha reliability was calculated as 0.81, indicating that the questionnaire is reliable as a data collection tool, as the score conforms to that suggested by Howitt and Cramer (2005), who recommend a score higher than 0.7 for ensuring the internal consistency of questionnaire items.

Table 1. Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
0.81	16

In the following section, the findings from the questionnaire and the interviews are described and analyzed.

4. Findings and Analysis

In this section a quantitative analysis of the responses of the participants detailing their perceptions regarding the need to enroll in a business English course is presented. The section also includes a qualitative thematic analysis of the challenges faced by EFL learners during transition to college and transition to job market along with the factors that shape their perceptions regarding learning business English.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

To assess Saudi senior undergraduate students' perceptions regarding the role of ESP courses in preparing them for future work environments, and how they perceive the need to enroll in a Business English course, they were asked to respond to the positive statements below, using a five-point Likert scale. Table 2 illustrates the frequency of responses per questionnaire item.

Table 2. Students' perceptions regarding the role of ESP courses in preparing them for future work environments

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Mean				Mean
Question 1 (English language skills and competencies are necessary for success in my future work environment)	36	60	12	12	0
	30%	50%	10%	10%	0%
	80%		10%		10%

Question 2 (Taking Business English courses prepares me with the skills and competencies necessary for success in my future work environment)	30	90	0	0	0
	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
	100%		0%		0%
Question 3 (The skills I need are incorporated in the Business English course that I already took)	6	48	36	24	6
	5%	40%	30%	20%	5%
	45%		30%		25%

Table 2 shows that while the vast majority of the students agree that English language skills and competencies are necessary for success in their future work environments, only 10% of the participants think otherwise. When it comes to the statement “taking Business English course prepares me with the skills and competencies necessary for success in my future work environments”, the participants unanimously agreed with the statement (100%). In terms of the perceived success of the ESP (Business English) courses already studied in equipping the students with the employability skills they need, only 45% of the study population agreed with the statement. The remaining participants either disagreed with the statement (25%), or neither agreed nor disagreed (30%).

Table 3. The work-related skills that senior students believe they will acquire by enrolling in Business English courses

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Mean			Mean	
Question 4: I am taking this course because I need the following work-related skills:					
1. Team working	12	108	0	0	0
	10%	90%	0%	0%	0%
	100%		0%		0%
2. Oral and written communications/presentations	24	96	0	0	0
	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%
	100%		0%		0%
3. Leading and participating in meetings	12	78	30	0	0
	10%	65%	25%	0%	0%
	75%		25%		0%
4. CV writing	0	120	0	0	0
	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
	100%		0%		0%
5. Job interviews	0	102	18	0	0
	0%	85%	15%	0%	0%
	85%		15%		0%
6. Business-related correspondence	0	120	0	0	0
	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
	100%		0%		0%
7. Digital communication	0	90	0	0	30
	0%	75%	0%	0%	25%
	75%		0%		25%

8. Work relationships	18	84	18	0	0
	15%	70%	15%	0%	0%
	85%		15%		0%
9. Action planning	0	120	0	0	0
	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
	100%		0%		0%
10. Decision-making skills	0	48	60	0	12
	0%	40%	50%	0%	10%
	40%		50%		10%
11. Problem-solving skills	0	42	54	12	12
	0%	35%	45%	10%	10%
	35%		45%		20%
12. Commercial awareness	0	114	0	6	0
	0%	95%	0%	5%	0%
	95%		0%		5%
13. Persuading, influencing and negotiating skills	6	72	30	0	12
	5%	60%	25%	0%	10%
	65%		25%		10%

Table 3 above summarizes the participants' cumulative level of disagreement or agreement with respect to each language skill included in the questionnaire.

To gain an insight into why students enroll in Business English classes and for what purposes, the second part of the questionnaire gives an idea about senior students' expectations in relation to work-related skills that may be learned or acquired by enrolling in Business English courses. As can be seen in Table 3, all of the participants (100%) believed that enrolling in Business English courses would help them learn how to work within teams, improve their oral and written communication, and teach them how to give good presentations, learn how to develop action plans, and write CVs and business-related correspondence. Most of the students (85%) believed that enrolling in Business English courses would help them perform well in job interviews, understand how to manage work relationships, and become commercially aware (95%). The results also show that 75% of the participants enroll in Business English courses with the intention of learning how to lead and participate in meetings and gain an idea about the etiquettes of business digital communication. Decision-making and problem-solving skills seem to be the work-related competencies that our participants least associate with Business English courses. More than half of the population (65%) wanted to learn persuasion, influencing and negotiating skills. While only 35% of the students enroll in ESP courses to learn problem-solving skills, 45% do it to acquire decision-making skills.

4.2. Perceptions Regarding the Need to Enroll in a Business English Course

As shown in Table 2 above, the overwhelming majority of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed (80%) with the need for enrolling into the Business English course in consideration of their future careers. The remaining 20% either disagreed or were neutral about the fact that Business English is a prerequisite for success in the workplace, while no participant disagreed strongly with the statement. Upon further probing of the participants' perspectives through semi-

structured interviews, it emerged that the primary reasons underlying their perceptions of the Business English course were considerations of future work prospects. The overwhelming majority (9 out of 10) of the interviewees felt that English was essentially a determinant of one's success in the Saudi labor market. This observation is consistent with the findings of extant research, which indicates that work environments within both the private and public Saudi economic sectors are increasingly prioritizing the English language as a core criterion in their selection and recruitment processes (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Elyas & Badawood, 2016; Al-Tamimi, 2019). One participant asserted, "These days, not only in this country but in the Gulf as well and across the world, having proficiency in the English language in addition to being college-educated increase[s] one's chances of landing a well-paying job." Another interviewee remarked, "Being bilingual is always an advantage when it comes to finding employment, and right now, English is the most marketable language."

When probed as to why the Business English ESP course was their preferred choice, compared to other alternatives both off- and on-campus, a number of recurrent themes emerged from all of the discourses. Firstly, the students felt that the course was the most viable avenue through which critical business communication skills could be acquired. Preference was shown towards specific skills that were equally captured by the research questionnaire, as previously elaborated. The skills that were mentioned most frequently were: general oral and written communication skills; skills pertinent to the job-seeking process, including resume writing and job interviews; skills facilitative of business-related correspondence, including digital communication; and skills that enable commercial awareness in general. Several studies of learners' perspectives in Saudi Arabia indicate the same categories of language needs from the perspective of students (Alhaisoni, 2012; Alkubaidi, 2014; Alkhatnai, 2011). Generally, the majority of the research participants felt that enrolling in the Business English course was necessary because it not only offered them the opportunity to develop the skills that are essential for future success in their careers, but also because it exposed them to real-life situations in which the use of English was unavoidable.

4.3. Factors that Shape Students' Perspectives Regarding Learning the English Language

During the interview process, participants were asked to describe their overall attitude towards learning English. The underlying objective was not simply to understand the students' emotional inclination towards the necessary acquisition of the language, but also to ascertain the factors underpinning the formation of said attitudes. The majority of the students reported a positive attitude towards the learning of English, although a few reported that their pursuit of language proficiency was merely a necessity that they would avoid if it was a viable option. Generally, their attitudes were intricately linked with both extrinsic and intrinsic sources of learning motivation (Alkhairy, 2013; Jaliyya & Idrus, 2017). These sources of motivation ranged from economic to socio-cultural factors.

The major source of extrinsic learning motivation for the participants was the factor of future job prospects. All interviewees felt that learning the English language was critical to the likelihood of transitioning successfully from college to the business world (Faruk, 2014). Four interviewees noted, in particular, that many Saudi business organizations give preferential treatment nowadays to prospective employees who are skilled in the English language, an observation that is consistent with the findings of current literature (Al-Hazmi, 2017). Other notable sources of extrinsic motivation that emerged strongly during the analysis of the interview transcripts comprised of the students' future plans to work for international organizations and to undertake travel abroad, as well as the influence of digital media and the Internet. As Jenkins and Wingate (2015) posit, many EFL and ESL students are motivated to pursue proficiency in the English language owing to media influences and because of the desire to amass or leverage the vast amount of both entertainment and academic knowledge available through digital technologies and the Internet. Some interview participants noted that the Internet had made it quite easy to access vital information that is fundamental to various dimensions of life. One student opined that, although translation services were increasingly translating material from other languages into the native Arabic, English proficiency still remained the key to fully accessing and utilizing the knowledge that is available digitally and on the Internet.

Many interviewees asserted that they were incentivized to be more proactive in learning English because the acquisition of such skills would enable them to fit in, communicate, and work effectively as expatriates (Alrabai, 2016). One in particular remarked that he found himself increasingly aware of the need to learn English because he travelled abroad frequently for his summer vacations, and that "there's no country in the world where I have ever been that I have not found English to be the most effective medium of communicating with other people in whatever contexts." Intrinsic sources of motivation also emerged from within the interview process, with the two most notable factors being the positive influence of family and friends, and meaningful contributions from inspiring teachers.

4.4. Thematic Analysis (Challenges Faced by Learners during Transition to College and Transition to Job Market)

The consensus among the interviewees was that the major challenge they faced with respect to English acquisition at all levels of education stemmed from their individual and collective social environments (Ashraf, 2018). To this effect, one participant noted, "Here in Saudi Arabia we speak our native language everywhere, including at home and in outside interactions with peers, classmates and even teachers...Virtually everyone. There is almost no chance to learn English in day-to-day interaction." Additionally, according to the interviewees, during the transition from high school to college, the major challenge involved in learning English was the dramatic change in teaching methods and instructional strategies (Ahmad, 2014). Many of the participants felt that they were not sufficiently skilled in the English language when they transitioned from secondary school to university, an observation that is

consistent with the findings of various empirical studies (Alrabai, 2016; Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017). The following excerpt captures this sentiment:

When I was in high school, my friends and I simply saw English as another troublesome subject that was added into the curriculum by adults to make our lives more difficult [Laughs]. And I think that our teachers felt the same way and so they designed their teaching styles in a way that ensured that we had the best chances of going to college, not necessarily with the aim of training us into eloquent speakers. So they taught us how to pass English examinations, not how to utilize the language at a higher level that is meaningful and functional like right now in college or in our careers.

Another interviewee stated:

Our secondary school teachers of English usually gave us instructions in written form. They rarely conveyed the requirements of the language to us directly. They left us alone to revise or make drafts on our assigned tasks and did not emphasize the aspect of learning English through practice. And I think practice is the necessary if not the most important part of learning any new language. When we came to college, we realized that our competence in English was basically at the lowest levels possible, even though we thought that we had been perfecting it over the years. Yet once we were in college our lecturers had no time to catch us up with the basics. They simply assumed that our English was at the level that was required for college.

The students felt that they lacked the opportunity to truly improve their language once they had transitioned into college, and they noted that this problem was present even within courses and programs that utilized English as the primary medium of communication (Al-Hazmi, 2017). All of them were of the opinion that the university's ESP programs, such as the Business English course, were the final recourse that students who wished to meaningfully improve their language skills were left with, before transitioning into the competitive labor market. Although a substantial number of the participants maintained the view that even the ESP programs were not necessarily sufficient for addressing all of their learning needs (4 out of 10 interviewees), they felt that the Business English course offered the best chance of achieving dramatic improvements in skill and competency areas that are critical for professional success.

In the following section, the meaning, importance, and relevance of the results are discussed with a brief recap of the key results interpretations, along with the implications, limitations and recommendations.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

This study commenced with the overarching objective of formulating recommendations regarding the prospect of improving an EFL ESP program within the context of a Saudi university. In pursuit of the stated objective, the paper sought to answer two research questions:

1. How do senior college students perceive the need to enroll in a Business English course?
2. What challenges do senior college students face in learning Business English during the transitions from secondary school to college and from college to the job market?

Accordingly, the analysis herein established that, firstly, the students perceive the Business English course as being essential. The overwhelming majority of the study participants (more than 80%) were of the opinion that taking the course was a fundamental prerequisite for success in their future work environments. Most felt that the course was a viable means of developing their language skills and competencies, especially in terms of their individual areas of specialization. They felt that the ESP program exposed them to the practical, real-life situations that they expect to encounter in their work environments, from the point at which they submit their job applications to their eventual proactive engagement within their work environments. The participants' attitudes towards learning English were also found to be positive, drawing from a range of extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation, including future job prospects, family and friends, exposure to digital media, and the influence of teachers.

Nevertheless, the study also revealed several challenges that the students face in learning English, both during their transition from secondary school to college and in their expected transition from college to their various fields of profession. Notably, the participants felt that they were not adequately prepared for the demands of the English language at the college level. They attributed their low proficiency in English at this stage to social influences and failures within the education system in general. They also perceived the educational provision by the college with respect to the English language programs to be insufficient. Consequently, most students viewed ESP programs such as the Business English course to be the only viable alternative for addressing their language needs before their eventual transition into the job market. However, although both the questionnaire and interview analysis demonstrate the significance of the ESP program in the context of this study, it is equally important to note the emergent perspective that the course in itself is not sufficient to address all of the students' learning needs. Given the above, this paper makes the following recommendations, based on pertinent and relevant literature, aimed at bolstering the case university's ESP program and the institution's overarching approach to teaching and learning English.

5.1. Provide intensive and immersive English courses for new students at the earliest possible phase of enrollment:

One of the notable barriers to English acquisition revealed by this study concerns the challenges faced by students during their transition from high school into college. Research consistently shows that the process of learning a new language is more effective at an early age (Ahmad, 2014), yet English proficiency continues to be low for Saudi secondary school graduates, despite their having had almost a decade of academic exposure to the subject (Alrabai,

2016). This paper attributes the failure to several multidimensional factors, while also revealing that universities do not proactively deal with the problem once students transition to college. Accordingly, it recommends that the case university analyzed herein should consider implementing intensive English programs for all new college entrants on arrival, to aid them in addressing the challenges they face in learning the language (Ashraf, 2018). This should involve proactively conducting comprehensive assessments of learners' needs and consequently tailoring the curriculum to match the students' language needs for various academic courses.

5.2. Use English only as the instructional medium for instruction in the EFL ESP class setting:

This study's participants reported that a significant challenge to learning English stems from inhibitive factors within their social environment, which primarily relies on Arabic in all contexts. EFL settings that implement a bilingual approach to instruction are also empirically shown to be less effective than their English-only counterparts (Ashraf, 2018). Therefore, to ensure that learners achieve the best possible outcomes, the ESP setting should strictly adhere to a policy of instruction and interaction that is English-based (Storch & Tapper, 2009). This will ensure that learners gain the maximum exposure to the vocabulary and skills they require, in the shortest possible time-frame.

5.3. Use the learners' perspectives to improve student-centered approaches in the ESP setting:

A student-centered approach is positively correlated not only with improved learning outcomes but also with the teachers' and institution's ability to leverage strategies that are suitable for the 21st century learner (Phakiti et al., 2013; Nouraldeem, 2014; Khan, 2011). Such an approach is especially critical within the instructional and learning context of the ESP setting, because it capitalizes on the students' awareness of their need to learn English (Javid & Umer, 2013; Griffiths, 2013; Benhania, 2016). It also allows the instructor to tap into and leverage the learners' motivation to develop their desired linguistic skills (Alhamdan et al., 2017; Alharbi, 2015; Alnasser, 2013). Therefore, this paper recommends that the ESP program examined by this study should consider shifting towards a more student-centered perspective when designing courses, developing strategies and preparing learning materials for students.

6. Conclusion

Understanding EFL students' perspectives regarding learning English is instrumental to the development of strategies aimed at alleviating the various difficulties faced by students, especially in an ESP setting. This exploratory study has attempted to incorporate students' perspectives in the formulation of recommendations for improving a Saudi university's ESP programs. The findings of the study are generalizable to any EFL setting, but particularly to those settings engaged in teaching English for specific purposes. Nevertheless, more research is needed to design and test the teaching and learning strategies that are best suited to EFL learners within the Saudi context and particularly for students enrolled in ESP programs.

Although this study reveals interesting and pedagogically applicable insight, due to the small sample size of participants enrolled in the case institution, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. As it is beyond the scope of the present study, the linguistic proficiency levels of the participants were not taken into account; nor was there any evaluation of the ESP (Business English) courses that the participants studied.

7. Implications for Future Research

This study explored Saudi senior undergraduates' perceptions regarding the potential efficacy of the ESP courses taught at university level in preparing graduates for the labor market. The study was conducted in a business school and explored Business English courses. It would be interesting to investigate whether the same perceptions and beliefs are shared by non-business students who also study industry-related ESP courses. Moreover, since the population of the present study was comprised of senior students, it would be illuminating to include alumni students who had already graduated from college and found employment. Their insight would add significantly to the literature, as their work-related skills and competencies would have been already tested and their evaluation of their own language needs would have matured. The results of the present study only give part of the story. Hence, in addition to evaluating students' self-reported work-related skills gained by studying ESP courses, further research should also investigate students' English proficiency levels and assess the quality of the ESP curriculum in an effort to complete the picture.

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9. Appendix 1

The Questionnaire

Directions: *Please respond to the following statements with one of the following letters: SA, A, N, D, or SD. Note that SA stands for strongly agree, A-agree, N-neutral, D-disagree, and SD- strongly disagree.*

Question 1: English language skills and competencies are necessary for success in my future work environment. _____

Question 2: Taking the Business English course prepares me with the skills and competencies necessary for success in my future work environment. _____

Question 3: The skills I need are incorporated in the Business English course that I am currently taking. _____

Question 4: I am taking this course because I need the following language skills:

- team-work _____
- oral and written communications/ presentations _____
- leading and participating in meetings _____
- CV writing _____
- job interviews _____
- business-related correspondence _____
- digital communication _____
- work relationships _____
- action planning _____
- decision-making skills _____
- problem-solving skills _____
- commercial awareness _____
- persuading, influencing and negotiating skills _____