

Language Skills of PMA Cadets: Insights into Perceptions of Instructors

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I. Background to the Problem

Pakistan Army has inherited its working system and procedures from the British Army after independence in 1947; hence, the working language has continued to be English. The prospective army officers who get academic and professional training at the PMA, Kakul, come from varied cultural, economic and educational backgrounds. With English not being the first language of the country, the cadets' command of English language has a great deal of variation, with majority of them being towards the lower end of proficiency (Ahmed, 1998; Khushi, 2003).

Though the English syllabus taught at the PMA has been modified from time to time according to the changing needs but so far no empirical investigation has been made on cadets' English language needs.

The concept of needs analysis became popular with the emergence of ESP as a new branch of ELT where the focus is on the learner and his/her academic and professional needs. According to Graves (1996:12-13):

Needs assessment involves finding out what the learners know and can do and what they need to learn or do so that the course can bridge the gap (or some part of it). Thus, needs analysis involves seeking and, interpreting information about students' needs so that the course will address them effectively.

A number of ESP advocates, (e.g. Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Jordan, 1997; Flowerdew and Peacock 2001; Basturkmen, 2006) have emphasized that needs analysis should be the starting point for devising syllabuses. When the specific needs of a language programme are not well defined, there is always a possibility of dissatisfaction in achieving its aims and objectives and the students will end up the language programme without any proper language proficiency. As a result, the efforts of the course designers, teachers and the learners will go wastage. The rationale of the present study, therefore, emanates from the need to investigate the English language needs of PMA cadets in order to incorporate them into an ESP programme.

II. Review of Previous Studies

A variety of needs analysis have been conducted internationally as well as in Pakistan, to investigate the English language needs of different groups of learners. All these studies confirmed the importance of identifying learners' needs and showed the risk and dangers of ignoring needs analysis in designing ESP courses. The following overview first provides a sampling of studies in needs analysis conducted in different parts of the world and then presents studies in ESP in Pakistan.

For instance, in Jordan, there was a study conducted by Zghoul & Hussein (1985) to investigate the English language needs of undergraduate students from different disciplines, including natural sciences, engineering, medical sciences, economics, and arts and humanities. Two separate questionnaires were administered to 90 teachers and 1147 students. The questionnaires explored three major issues: the extent of English language use at Yarmouk University; perception of the students' language abilities; and perception of English language needs. Results obtained from this study showed extensive use of English as reported by both students and teachers. With regard to the perception of language abilities, the study showed that students tend to overestimate their abilities in the different language skills, whereas a more realistic estimate is shown in the responses of the teachers. The students ranked listening as the most important skill followed by speaking, reading, and writing. On the other hand, the teachers ranked listening as the most important skill followed by reading, writing, and speaking. The study concluded that, at the university level, English course requirements should be taught for specific purposes to prepare students for their field of study (e.g., engineering) from when they first join the university.

Al-Gorashi (1988) investigated the English language needs of military cadets in Saudi Arabia as perceived by junior officers. Data were collected through questionnaires from 212 officers representing different branches in the military. The results of the study showed that English is very significant in situations related to the cadets' future jobs and training courses depending on the nature of each military branch. The overall assessment considered reading and listening as the most important required skills. The result also indicated that the English language preparation that the officers received was poor. The study concluded that the language preparation does not meet the English language knowledge that the officers' jobs required.

Serkan (2003) investigated the English language needs of the students enrolled in the office management and secretarial studies departments of Nigde University's Vocational colleges. Data were collected through four different questionnaires, from currently enrolled students, former students, content teachers and employers. The findings of the study showed that a new curriculum was required which should meet the students target needs along with their learning needs. Moreover, the results pointed out that a new course curriculum should focus on improving students' reading and speaking skills as compared to writing and listening skills. Finally, all of the participant groups of the study agreed on the importance of using content-related reading materials from the internet.

Alhuqbani (2008) identified the English language needs of police officers in Saudi Arabia. For this purpose, a questionnaire was administered to 103 police officers on the job. The findings showed that English plays a remarkable role in police department. The participant officers were found to be conscious of the significance of tailoring the language materials they study to their occupational needs. All the officers rated those items that were relevant to their jobs as important. Based on this finding, the study has proposed some general guidelines for the improvement of the English program at King Fahd Security College.

Tamimi and Shuib (2010) investigated the English language needs of Petroleum Engineering students at Hadhramount University, Malaysia. The aim of the study was to identify the students' perceptions of the frequency of English language skills used, the importance of these skills, their ability in performing the skills, the areas of language use that they need training/teaching in, and their preferences for the English language course. The sample of the study was 81 third, fourth, and final-year petroleum undergraduates in the academic year 2006-2007. A questionnaire was used for data collection. The results stressed the significance of English for petroleum engineering students and identified the students' lacks, wants and necessities with regard to English language skills. The study concluded with pedagogical implications that might help to improve the current English language course based on the students' needs.

The previous studies gave examples of different needs analysis around the world. The following overview reviews studies conducted specifically in Pakistan with participants of similar socioeconomic backgrounds to the participants of this study.

Qadir (1988:76) suggested a course of English for MBA students in the light of their communicative needs. Her findings showed that communication skills could be developed if the learners were motivated, so they could relate to the situation and could identify with functional goals of the course. Qadir's research provided useful insights to ESP researchers and course developers.

Iqbal (1998) conducted a study to justify the rationale of introducing a course of English language for the students of Computer Science. In his research, he described the designing features of the syllabus of English for this group of learners, based primarily on their needs and problems at the university level.

Imtiaz (2002) investigated the academic and professional English language needs of M.Com Banking students in Pakistan. Data were collected through interviews and questionnaires. In the light of her findings, she suggested a business communication and report-writing course for the M.Com Banking students.

Similarly, Jabeen (2005) analyzed the academic and professional language needs of the students pursuing their Masters degree in Journalism at Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, and proposed a course outline based on this needs analysis.

Ahmed (2005) carried out an extensive and useful research on legal English. His findings have presented a clear picture of the levels of inadequacy in several areas related to academic and professional situations. In the light of the findings, he recommended a Legal English Course, which could be implemented in various academic and professional institutes of legal education in Pakistan.

It is evident from the research projects mentioned above, that like other parts of the world, there has been a great development in needs investigation projects carried out in different disciplines in Pakistan as well. However, no significant research has been conducted that investigates the academic and professional language needs of the army officers in Pakistan. The present research is an attempt to fill this gap.

III. Research Methodology

This section will describe the research methodology adopted in the present study.

III.1 The Profile of the Instructors': General Information

The participants of this study were eleven instructors from the department of English. All of them had Masters Degrees in English literature. However, two of them had an added qualification of M.Phil. Only three of them had an ELT background. The teaching/service experience of the chosen group ranged between 3 to 21 years. Two of the interviewees (A and B) were Lieutenant Colonels, four of them were in the rank of Majors (C, D, E,) and the others were Captains. This group was chosen as population sample considering that the instructors have first hand knowledge of the level of linguistic adequacies of the cadets.

Table depicts the profile of the five academics from the three faculties in the university.

TABLE: Profile of the Instructors Teaching at the Department of English

Instructors	Rank	Qualification	Years of Service
A	Lieutenant Colonel	MA English (lit) M.Phil (Lit)	21
B	Lieutenant Colonel	MA, Diploma in ELT	19
C	Major	MA (English lang. and lit) M.Phil (Linguistics)	16
D	Major	MA	14
E	Major	MA	12
F	Major	MA	11
G	Captain	MA	8
H	Captain	MA	6
I	Captain	MA	6
J	Captain	MA	5
K	Captain	MA	3

III. ii Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews on telephone from eleven instructors of the Department of English, PMA, Kakul. The interview questions of the instructors sought the information related to the following aspects:

1. The reasons for teaching English course
2. The significance of teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks to cadets for academic/professional purposes
3. Difficulties in language skills faced by the cadets
4. Suggestions to improve the English courses taught at the PMA

III. iii Analysis of Instructors' Interviews

First, data collected through semi-structured interviews from the instructors was transcribed. Then for each of the questions in the interviews, all the responses were analyzed qualitatively according to the different themes. The important points from the data of interviews were highlighted. Any interesting insights provided in the interviews were also noted.

III.iii.a Instructors' Perceptions: Reasons for Teaching the English Course

The interviewees were asked various reasons for teaching the English course. The different reasons provided by them are discussed below:

Theme1: English is working language of the Pakistan Army

All of the instructors believed that the main reason for teaching English to the cadets is that it is the working language of armed forces. They pointed out that the medium of instruction in the professional courses is English and written communication in the form of official letters, faxes, memorandums, instructions, and messages is carried out only in English language. As far as spoken English is concerned, presentations, briefings, lectures, meetings, conferences, are conducted in the English language.

One of the instructors (A) stated the importance of English language in these words:

¹Other than an interaction with the soldiers and possibly some Junior Commissioned Officers, an officer's entire activities in his academic and professional fields are conducted in the English language. You can't take a step forward in the army, unless you are well-equipped and conversant with English language.

A few instructors (C, D, G, K) also pointed out that the cadets need to learn English for their survival because they are forced to use the English language

¹ The quotations in the bold letters are the exact words of the instructors in response to different questions asked during the interviews. The language mistakes of the respondents have been given as they were. The reason for presenting the exact words of the interviewees is to make their voices audible. The quotes make the people more real.

within the premises of the Academy and if any cadet is found speaking vernacular, he is punished.

In this context, a young instructor (K) stated:

Without English there is no survival. The moment cadets enter PMA, they can't communicate in any other language except English. Once they enter their professional life its importance increases day by day. All the written work is in English. Moreover, you are appreciated if you speak English with a good accent.

To conclude, all the interviewees strongly believed that English language plays an important role in the academic/professional military settings. Moreover, cadets need English language for their survival at the Academy since they are forbidden to use any other language except English at the Academy.

Theme 2: English is an International Language

Almost all the instructors claimed that one of the major reasons for teaching English to the young cadets is because of its importance as an international language. They mentioned that a large number of Pakistani army officers and troops are deployed around the globe on various Peace Keeping missions. The medium of communication at all these places is English. Almost invariably, the foreign courses and higher studies in reputable universities inside and outside of Pakistan are conducted in the English language. Access to new technology, new training manuals, strategic thinking papers and analyses of tactical situations developing around the world are mostly available in the English language, which further makes the learning of English essential for an army officer. Like the instructor A said,

...It is critical that our future officers be proficient in English language, else they would be greatly inhibited in their understanding of the modern technology, new weapon systems and the sixth generation inductions.

Other instructors also shared the view that being an internationally spoken and understood language, English is necessary to compete with the world. With this aim, English is emphasized at the Academy. Instructor F argued:

The world has become a global village. We can't live in isolation in this fast moving world. Our army officers in order to compete with the officers of other nations need to be proficient in English in order to read technical instructions.

III.iii.b Instructors' Perceptions concerning the significance of teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks to cadets for academic/professional purposes

Views of the instructors were obtained pertaining to the language needs of the cadets so that those needs could be addressed in the proposed syllabus. There was no difference of opinion regarding the importance of all the four language skills. However, there was a difference of opinion among them with regard to the ranking of the language skills in order of importance. Some of them believed that proficiency in writing skill was more important for the military cadets, while others felt that speaking skill was more essential. Most of the instructors ranked reading skill as third, and listening fourth, in order of importance. The responses of the instructors showed that writing and speaking skills were more important for the cadets than listening and reading skills.

Based upon the responses of the instructors, the different types of reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks required by the cadets for academic/professional military settings are discussed below:

Theme1: Importance of Listening Tasks

With regard to listening skill, all the eleven instructors considered ‘listening to lectures in classes’ and ‘listening to Audio Visual Packages’ (prepared by BBC, which is part of the English course) important listening tasks required by the cadets at the PMA. The vast majority of the instructors (nine) also pointed out that listening to seminars/presentations was important for the cadets for academic/professional purposes. In addition, four instructors stated that interacting with instructors and senior cadets as well as listening to orders and instructions, were important listening tasks. Two instructors noted that listening to other student’ in group discussions was also important for the cadets. Other two instructors also pointed out that listening to guest speakers and then writing a summary of their speech was an important listening task required by the cadets.

Theme 2: Significance of Speaking Tasks

There was a consensus among the instructors that adequacy in spoken English was very essential in the academic lives of the cadets. All the instructors mentioned that the cadets required spoken English for, ‘delivering presentations, speeches, conducting and participating in seminars, meetings, conferences and group discussions’. Five instructors (**A, B, C, E, G, H**) also pointed out that the cadets required proficiency in spoken English in order ‘to interact with faculty members and foreigners’.

Theme 3: Significance of Reading Tasks

According to the analysis of the responses of the instructors, all of them stated that reading of textbooks was an important academic reading task for the cadets.

The vast majority of the instructors) (ten out of twelve instructors) also stated that reading of professional journals and technical manuals was important for the cadets for professional purposes. In addition, four instructors (**B, C, I, K**) pointed out that interpreting data in tables and diagrams was an important academic reading task required by the cadets.

Theme 4: Significance of Writing Tasks

There was a complete agreement amongst the instructors regarding the importance of writing skill. They identified a variety of writing tasks required for academic/professional purposes by the cadets. Based upon their responses, the different types of writing tasks required by the cadets in the academic /professional military settings are listed below:

- Writing presentations
- Formal/ informal letters
- Report writing
- Book reviews
- Case study
- Research paper
- Tactical appreciation
- Comments (e.g. views on important events, changes in system)
- Minutes of a meeting
- Essays
- Précis writing
- Message writing
- Minutes of a meeting

III.iii.c Cadets' Language Difficulties as Perceived by the Instructors

The instructors were asked to comment on the difficulties faced by their students related to the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The details are as under:

Difficulties related to listening skill

Overall, most of the instructors expressed satisfaction with the listening skill of their students. They were of the view that at the time of entry level, many cadets face difficulty in understanding spoken English. However, by the time they graduate from the Academy, they do not face any such problem.

On the other hand, a few instructors (**B, D, F, and J**) believed that most of the cadets could not understand the dialogues of the English Audio-Visual Packages shown to them. Some of the problematic areas mentioned by them are,

‘understanding the unfamiliar accent in connected speech’ and ‘understanding slang and certain vocabulary items’.

In this regard, a senior instructor (B) mentioned:

Yes, students do face problems in understanding the dialogues spoken by the native speakers because of their lack of exposure to native speakers’ accent and unfamiliarity with the typical expressions used by the native speakers...

Difficulties related to Speaking Skill

The instructors indicated that when the cadets join the Academy, they have inadequate ability to express themselves in speech. They claimed however, towards the end of the course almost all of the cadets can speak English fluently. They stated that this change is primarily due to the teaching of English course as well as the environment at the Academy where the cadets are not allowed to use any other language except English. At the same time they also admitted that fluency is achieved, however, the cadets’ speech lack accuracy. Some of the common difficulties in cadets’ speech as pointed out by the instructors were poor pronunciation, inadequate grammar and lack of vocabulary. The instructor (A) said in this regard:

Most of the cadets at the time of joining the Academy are unable to speak English properly. By the time they graduate from the PMA, they become fluent in speaking English because of the environment at the PMA. But in most of the cases, their speech lacks accuracy...The most common problems they face are in the areas of grammar and vocabulary.

Difficulties related to Reading Skill

Majority of the instructors seemed quite satisfied with the reading ability of their students. However, a few of them pointed out that at times lack of vocabulary affected the reading speed of the cadets. Overall, majority of the respondents seemed satisfied with the reading abilities of their students. They reported that the cadets could read at an adequate speed without much comprehension problem by the time they graduate from the Academy.

Difficulties related to Writing Skill

Inadequacy in cadets’ writing was considered as major cause of concern by most of the interviewees. The instructors believed that the writing skill of the cadets was not up to the mark. The format of military writing is different from that of standard English writing. Clarity is very much emphasized in military writings. According to the instructors, the cadets are used to cramming and therefore lack originality of ideas in their written work. As instructor C stated,

Most of the cadets have inadequate skills of organization, which result in lack of clarity in texts.

Grammar was reported as another problematic area by most of the instructors. The reason given for this deficiency was out-dated teaching methodology at school and college level education. The common mistakes reported were mainly in the use of tenses and subject-verb agreement, conditionals, narration and voice. Lack of vocabulary and poor spellings were also reported as areas of concern by some of the interviewees.

III.iii.d Suggestions of the Instructors' to Improve the Standard of English at the Academy

The following themes emerged in response to the suggestions of the instructors with regard to improve the standard of English at the PMA:

Theme 1: Syllabus should correspond to the needs of the cadets

Theme 2: More emphasis is required on teacher training

Theme 3: Cadets' should be placed according to their proficiency level

Theme 1: Syllabus should correspond to the needs of the cadets

Most of the instructors suggested that in order to improve the standard of English at the PMA it was important that cadets should be taught specific language skills, which would help them in their future professional, and everyday lives. One of the instructors expressed his views in these words:

The main aim of teaching English to military cadets should be to prepare them to speak and write effectively. The kind of writing tasks required in the army profession should be taught to the cadets. Teaching drama, novel and poetry do not help to improve their language. Literature component should be excluded from the syllabus, as it has no practical value.

Another senior instructor having an ELT background suggested to introduce ESP syllabus. He stated:

It is now high time that we should completely redesign a new syllabus. The need of the time is to introduce ESP syllabus...

Some of the instructors suggested that instead of teaching stories and articles from the textbooks, authentic material like newspapers should be used to teach various language points. In this regard an instructor stated:

...although writing activity is also undertaken, but unfortunately it is not focused. Reading and writing skills are more remotely touched upon as they are left to the discretion of the student and not given the required treatment they deserve.

From the spoken perspective, it is quite impressive. However, the written aspect must concentrate on creative writing... Moreover, listening comprehension and speed reading activities must be carried out more frequently and purposefully.

An instructor while criticizing the phonetics course said:

It is taught at very basic level. Instructors are not trained enough to teach it. Audio visual aids are played without providing any guidelines to the students. Cadets usually sleep during that time.

The instructors felt that ESP course was required by the cadets in their academic and professional lives, rather than literature oriented syllabus. They lamented the fact that the future professional language needs were not taken into account to a large extent while teaching the English course. Some participants expressed concern of having no say in the designing of curriculum. They mentioned that they had to follow the lesson plans and teaching materials assigned by the Department.

Theme 2: Need for Teacher Training

Emphasis on teacher training was stressed by a number of instructors. Those who expressed this view believed that if the cadets were taught language through new and effective ways then it would certainly have very positive effects on their learning. As a senior instructor pointed out:

Although the teaching of English is given a lot of importance at the Academy but due to other heavy professional demands of the PMA on the part of the cadets, the teachers also just try to cover the course without any serious dedication. In my opinion, if the teachers are made aware of the modern concepts of teaching then they would involve the students in learning more effectively.

Another instructor suggested:

Teacher training should be given top priority. Interactive training/discussion sessions should be held in the department...The department presently lacks an academic environment. There is no concept of providing guidance to the young instructors by their seniors. No academic discussion is carried out for the standpoint of discussing the prevalent trends in language/literature teaching. If a junior officer's class is visited, hardly any feedback is provided to him with the result that he is unaware of his weak or strong areas.

Some of the instructors stressed the need for polishing the analytical abilities of the cadets by using suitable teaching methodology. As one of the instructor stated:

Cadets should be taught how to read effectively by making use of newspapers and interesting short stories written by authors of the sub-continent. They should be taught what information to look for. The aim of teaching should be to enhance analytical abilities because an army officer really needs to develop his analytical abilities through various strategies. Grammar and vocabulary should be incorporated into the four skills and taught in context and in a meaningful way.

The main drawbacks of the course as mentioned by the instructors were lack of teacher training in the area and shortage of time. With regard to Phonetics module, one of the instructors expressed his views in these words,

It is taught at very basic level. Audio visual aids are played without providing any guidelines to the students. The time allocated is too short. A teacher hardly gets time to do justice with the individual sounds. The intonation of a complete sentence or passage is often not done either because of limited time or lack of proficiency of the teacher himself. If he is not a role model himself, how can he deliver? Moreover, there is practically no time for interactive practice sessions. Cadets usually sleep during that time.

Another senior instructor pointed out that the attitude of the authorities and the students also has an effect on the teaching of academic subjects. He believed that the PMA is a professional institute so the authorities and the students give more importance to the professional training. He expressed his views in these words:

... the biggest drawback is the yoking together of military and academic training. Secondly, the time allocated for public speaking is too less. Proper feedback by the instructor can't be given due to paucity of time.

Theme 3: Cadets should be placed into groups according to their proficiency level

Some of the instructors indicated that one of the reasons for inadequate language competency of the cadets is that the cadets coming from diverse educational backgrounds are taught the same course without considering their varied language backgrounds. They reported that some of the cadets have very high language proficiency, whereas, quite a large number of them have low language proficiency.

The instructors suggested that placing cadets in the right level will help them predict the language needs and their progress in the program. In this regard one of the instructor's pointed out:

Initial division of the cadets should be on the basis of their proficiency so that separate doses of treatment should be given to separate groups. Subsequently they should be amalgamated.

IV. Conclusion and Implications

The present study was concerned with identifying and assessing the English language needs of prospective army officers at PMA from their instructors' perspective. The findings indicate that knowledge of English is a decisive factor for success as it is the working language of Pakistan Army. In identifying the language needs of cadets, most of the instructors had ranked writing and speaking skill as the most important language skills required followed by reading and listening. The results also revealed that there is plenty of scope for improvement in the present courses that are being taught at the PMA and that a literature oriented general English course does not help the cadets achieve the required proficiency in English language. It was also found out that some changes need to be made in teaching style in order for courses to be more effective.

The findings have important implications for English teaching at PMA, and other Armed Forces Training institutes. First, it is important to take into account the target learners' level of proficiency in English before they may start the English course. This significantly helps in determining the academic linguistic needs of the cadets. Placing cadets in the right level will help instructors predict their language needs and their progress in the program.

Second, while there is a need for improving the cadets' language proficiency in all four basic English skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), the language materials offered at PMA, Kakul should place more emphasis on teaching the two skills of writing and speaking. All of the participants considered these two skills as the most important skills required by the cadets in academic and professional military settings. Moreover, grammar and vocabulary should be incorporated into the four skills and taught in context and in a meaningful way.

Third, authentic materials should be used to teach language because the real world situations learners will face or are already facing are best prepared for, with authentic texts. The choice of any language teaching materials must be made with the proper context in which the materials will be used. If the learners can see a

close connection between the content of the material and their academic/professional/general needs, then there will be a strong motivating force for the language learners and better results will be achieved. Therefore, instead of heavily literature based content, subject specific/general material should be included in the course.

Fourth, teachers need to be properly trained to teach ESP courses. They should adopt the role of facilitator or counselors for fostering a learner-centered environment, which would help the cadets develop problem solving and critical thinking skills. They may also be trained in new teaching methods and should make use of both mentalist and humanist assumptions about language learning such as problem solving and a student centered approach, as they need to become autonomous learners of English in the future. Maximum opportunities must be provided to the cadets to experiment with the target language in context. Military cadets must be made to think critically and to use both oral and written forms of communication. Although more mature students can learn from lecture formats, other students often do not have the same concentration skills to sit for extended periods. Therefore, multi-tasking and activities using the lessons and materials in a variety of formats and approaches might prove useful.

It is hoped that the results and implications of this study could serve as guidelines to what should be done in the review and re-development of the English course offered to the cadets at the PMA.

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