Learners' Writing Needs in the Professional World and the Writing Curriculum: An Evaluative Study

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Abstract

This study investigates how far the EFL major writing curriculum is designed to suit professional writing needs. The instruments are two questionnaires administered to EFL learners (72) and industry-based employers (21). Data analysis and results showed that the EFL major curriculum is not suited to the needs of the industry, so ended up investing in re-training and re-educating the EFL majors. The learners, however, are ignorant of the fact that the writing curriculum does not prepare them for professional writing needs. At the same time, they do have certain expectations from the writing course. The study also found that the industries that have expanding employment opportunities for EFL majors are tourism, hospitality, diplomatic missions, and call centers. Therefore, aligning the writing curriculum with their needs makes sense. The study recommends the necessity to evaluate the writing curriculum at Saudi Universities to cope with the needs of stakeholders.

Keywords: EFL major, employment opportunities, learner preparation, professional writing needs, writing proficiency

1. Introduction

The word curriculum is derived from the Latin racecourse, but with the passage of time, many teachers have come to associate it with diverse ideas. Tanner (1980) called it "the planned and supervised learning experiences and intended objectives, formulated via the methodical reconstruction of information and experiences under the auspices of the school, for the learners' ongoing and purposeful progress in personal social competence" (p. 13), while Hass (1987) defined it as   "all of the experiences that individual learners have in a program of education whose purpose is to achieve broad goals and related specific objectives, which is planned in terms of a framework of theory and research or past and present professional practice," (p. 5). Ornstein and Hunkins (2004), on the other hand, gave five different definitions for the idea of curriculum.

A curriculum can first be described as a documented plan of action or a written record that contains methods for accomplishing specific aims or objectives.

Second, a curriculum might be roughly characterized as addressing the learner's practices.

Third, a curriculum can be viewed as a method of dealing with people, along with the legislative structure for personnel and the methods for putting that method into practice.

Fourth, the curriculum may be thought of as a subject of research.

Lastly, curriculum might be seen in terms of its substance or subject matter.

Any organization's heart lies in its curriculum; hence schools and universities cannot function without one (Alvior, 2014). Having a clearly defined curriculum that also conforms to learners' needs is one of the most crucial requirements for offering an efficient and high-quality language education, as a curriculum free of ambiguity will make the path of learning clear to tread.

As far as the EFL scenario is concerned, to begin with, a language curriculum aims to give learners a general understanding of the English language, as well as knowledge of the society and culture of the native-speaking peoples. Only on this firm foundation can their communicative English skills be raised to a level that is roughly equivalent to proficiency in everyday social and professional contexts, ensuring that they can earn the necessary professional credentials to work successfully in language-based fields like interpreting or translating, business, tourism, and so forth. In particular, a balanced curriculum helps students improve their language proficiency and develop effective study techniques for higher education. Another goal of the curricula is to mould the perspectives that learners come to an institution with on the English language, literature, culture, and civilization (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

The current curriculum of EFL courses at Saudi universities do lay diligent emphasis on the four language skills of speaking, writing, listening, and reading. However, the subjects related to professional skills (such as those in business or tourism) are few. These subjects that allow students to gain the first foundations of language research (such as pragmatics, semantics, syntax, morphology, or phonetics).

They are selective and are taught in the very last semesters. Frequently, students choose those that have the shortest coursework among them. Whether, with the degree in hand, these graduates can compete in the occupations market is a question open to hot debate. During the delivery of lessons, strategies are incorporated by teachers if the material provided by instructors is sufficient for students in obtaining their educational aims (Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2021). It is also questionable if assessment procedures are synchronized with the instruction. It is apparent that the problem lies not only with the design but also with the interpretation of the term curriculum (Nils, 2019).

From an applied linguistics point of view, there are different definitions given by researchers for the word curriculum. For some researchers, it is understood as achieving the goal of any educational program, the content, teaching strategies, and learning which is most important. For some researchers, the curriculum word is defined as a means of assessing whether or not the educational ends have been achieved (Richards et al., 1992).

In the EFL context, writing is perceived as a particularly difficult skill to master. Graham (2016) presented a special issue on writing classrooms around the globe. With the different methodologies available, researchers described the writing practices in their countries worldwide. Through this investigation, Graham showed that though there is much similarity in writing instruction from one country to the next, there are also some differences perceptible. Guided by these findings, the author called for a novel international study of the teaching of writing, which is more focused on a descriptive approach rather than a comparative approach (Al-Ahdal & Abduh, 2021).

The idea of writing across the curriculum is not new. Schools would benefit if teachers were confident using writing exercises, prompts, and tasks across grade levels (McNulty, 2013). Students will benefit from writing reflectively and in response to open-ended prompts regardless of grade level. Students can create, inquire into, clarify, and even challenge their environments through these sorts of writing. Writing can be used in both core and elective academic areas. In essence, it requires some originality on the part of the classroom teachers, regular planning sessions, and content personalization. Yet, the fact remains that all instructors in the pool must be conversant with the curricula and standards from disciplines outside of their areas of competence, but most significantly, they must understand the occupational language standards.

The foregoing discussion has led to the conclusion that curriculum is a guidebook, a systematic plan that governs the learning environment, pedagogy, materials selection, and assessment methods. Therefore, it is important to evaluate it in terms of its relevance to the professional needs to ensure that the two are in perfect coordination. With this aim in view, the study has the following research questions:

What are the expectations of the EFL major learners at a Saudi university from the EFL writing course?

How do the occupations employing the EFL majors from a Saudi university evaluate their English writing abilities?

Does the EFL writing curriculum fulfil the professional writing needs of former learners at a Saudi university?

2. Literature Review

The objective of curriculum evaluation is to focus on enhancing the existing program and removing flaws already existing to move towards learning objectives (Hass, 1987). Another purpose of evaluating the already existing curriculum is to find out the overall impact of the available curriculum on the learning and motivation of students' professional life (Le & Tran, 2021). Curriculum evaluation is one of the best practices in reorganizing course content and improving teaching-learning strategies in a more efficient manner which can further improve the writing needs of learners in the professional world (Ornstein, & Hunkins, 2004). Earlier studies have shown that the current curriculum does not learners' writing needs when they start working/get employed in the real world, where they face issues in writing. Most of such studies show the gap between curriculum and needs (Broom, 2015; Hass, 1987; Le & Tran, 2021; McNulty, 2013; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Nils, 2019; Ornstein, & Hunkins, 2004; Rijlaarsdam, & Janssen, 1996; Tanner, 1980). Needs and curriculum must be well aligned to ensure learner engagement and professional success. The current study uses a mixed methods approach by comparing the curriculum to learners' actual English writing needs in the workplace.

Recently Le and Tran (2021) investigated EFL students' perceptions of an English language training curriculum. The purpose of their study was to study how EFL students in Vietnam perceived the English language training program for English language majors. They investigated the English language training curriculum at a Vietnam university to evaluate the perspectives of the students. The larger aim of the study was to contribute in modifying and enhancing the English language training curriculum as well as enhancing the English teaching and learning quality at the tertiary level in the future. The findings showed that, in the students' perceptions, five elements of the English language training curriculum for university English language majors had not yet been carried out to their full potential. These elements were objective, content, material, teaching style, and assessment. To improve the curriculum's effectiveness and better tailor it to the needs of the learners' occupational competence, the participants recommended making certain changes to these five components.

3. Curriculum Evaluation

The basic definition of curriculum evaluation is the systematic procedure for the collection and analysis of all relevant data, which further may be utilized for the purpose of judging and assessing the efficacy of the curriculum for the promotion and improvement of the teaching-learning process (Brown, 1995; Marsh, 2004; Nichols et al., 2006; Simons, 1987). Ornstein and Hunkin (2004) reported that to get information, curriculum evaluation is a procedure or cluster of procedures performed by researchers to decide whether to accept, change, or eliminate some part(s) of the curriculum. Morrison (2003) evaluated curricula and arrived at the conclusion that no curriculum was perfect in design and delivery. Further, if any finding showed in an evaluation that no further development was required in a

curriculum, then the method of evaluation or interpretation of the findings of the research themselves were doubtful, which does not mean that the curriculum should be in a constant state of change. For correction of deficiencies in the curriculum, the contents should be updated timely, and new strategies should be applied to enhance the efficacy of the curriculum, which may further improve learners' professional output. The importance of having codified standards for a curriculum is pointed out by (Aliakbar & Habil, 2012). They concluded that for any successful educational program, it is important to perform evaluation studies to comprehend the strengths and weaknesses of the programs, applying modifications, and determining the degree of consistency between standard educational systems and other systems in other contexts as essential elements of the educational mission. Kalfazade et al. (1989) surmised that to maintain a comprehensive overview of all aspects of the English language training curriculum, it is important to evaluate and analyze the beliefs and perceptions of EFL learners and lecturers for developing better language training programs.

In addition, Al-Jardani's (2012) detailed investigation revealed that curriculum evaluation functions as the connecting link between all curriculum elements. This study illuminated the far-reaching benefits and repercussions of curriculum evaluation, encompassing the objectives, goals, and purposes across a variety of subject areas. The study focused specifically on the English language curriculum in Oman and emphasized the importance of curriculum evaluation in refining course design, enhancing teaching methodologies, and optimizing learning principles. Curriculum evaluation functions as a catalyst for enhancing the overall quality of educational programs by facilitating these improvements. In a similar vein, Tunc (2010) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the Ankara University Preparatory School Program from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Using Stufflebeam's (1971) CIPP evaluation paradigm, 406 students and 12 program instructors participated in the study during the 2008–2009 academic year. The investigation utilized a variety of data collection techniques, including student questionnaires, instructor interviews, and the examination of written materials. Using content analysis for qualitative data and descriptive and inferential statistics for questionnaire responses, the findings exposed the deficiencies of Ankara University's curriculum. In addition to these efforts, several studies have examined English language teaching methodologies and courses. Notably, Al-Jardani's (2012) research demonstrated substantial gains in linguistic and communicative competence among Oman's leaners enrolled in an English language curriculum.

Along these lines, Coskun and Daloglu (2010) looked at an English Language Teacher Education Program and discovered it helped future educators grow as professionals. The strong influence of language training courses on students' language abilities, confidence, and general proficiency was highlighted by Erozan et al. (2006). Collectively, these studies demonstrate the value of language programs in developing linguistic competence and equipping participants for careers in language instruction and intercultural exchange. To assess the implementation of the English language curriculum for the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) at a college of education in Ogun State, Nigeria, Tom-Lawyer (2014) carried out a unique study because a completed diploma is needed to work as an instructor in a research setting. The certificate awarded on completion of this program is the prerequisite for teaching in this research environment. Parents, stakeholders in education, and the government have continued to express concern over Nigerian pupils' poor performance in external English examinations. This issue has hampered many Nigerian students' journey to higher education. It was long felt that the efficiency of the training of English language teachers must be looked at to propose a solution to this issue. By assessing how the NCE's English language curriculum had been implemented, the study aimed to close this gap.

Furthermore, Saito and Ebsworth (2004) examined the perceptions of Japanese learners of English towards both their teachers and in-class activities. One hundred surveys with quantitative and qualitative questions were analyzed. The results showed that most Japanese students had positive opinions of teachers as approachable, appreciative of various cultures, and willing to modify lesson plans to suit their requirements. The comfort level with active engagement in class, the amount of time spent in class, the physical proximity to professors, and the recognition of student-centered conduct were among the variations between ESL and EFL students. Interestingly, EFL students valued lecturers who supported them in their mother tongue and avoided any potential embarrassment brought on by difficult or unexpected inquiries. Thus, flexibility was considered a valuable attribute of the EFL class.

Writing is a major concern of EFL course curricula because these courses are deeply rooted in occupational needs. When the learners' needs are identified, curricula can be revised so that the materials provided to them are relevant. Here, knowledge and beliefs act as mental "filters" (Kyriakides et al., 2009, p. 66). As these ideas and knowledge are ingrained in personal development and, consequently, in the history and culture of that region, research into teachers' and learners' beliefs and knowledge about writing, writing education, and education in general can show intriguing cultural and regional variance. Self-report surveys are one method of gaining access to teachers' beliefs (Elander & Harrington, 2006). Several academic articles published around the same time used questionnaires in different settings to investigate the same issues.

Three different teaching writing beliefs—correct writing, explicit instruction, and natural learning were evaluated using this scale (Deane, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2013; Graham, 2001, 2002, 2012; Kieft, 2007; Saddler & Graham, 2007; Schoonen & De Glopper, 1996; Tillema et al., 2011; Troia & Maddox, 2004; White & Bruning, 2005).When data ids

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative design using two questionnaires administered to two sets of participants: EFL major learners and employers of EFL majors. When data is presented numerically it facilitates pattern recognition, extracts meaning and verifies interpretations (Sandelowski et al., 2099), and allows findings to be generalized to other contexts. Quantitative data provides a 'snapshot'

in time of a particular phenomenon which allows the researcher to evaluate the prevailing setting and to examine the interaction among related variables (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2019).

Participants

Data were obtained from EFL majors at Saudi University via a questionnaire administered in the physical mode over a period of three days as the learners were variously available for feedback. Participants were randomly selected, and the total number of responses was 72; all participants were males in the age range of 20=21.5 years. The researcher examined the job classifieds across three months before the start of the study and identified the occupations that placed requirements for English majors from Saudi universities. The industries/ occupational fields that appeared in these classified inserts more than twice a month were zeroed on as possible professional openings for Saudi university EFL majors. The keywords used for identifying possible job openings were: Communication skills, English writing proficiency, international language, creative writing, and EFL major. The industries identified were: Tourism, hospitality, diplomatic missions, and call centers. Accordingly, the researcher contacted the firms that had placed these inserts and sought their consent to answer the questionnaire on the writing abilities of the EFL majors employed by them over the past two years. Twenty-one reverts were found viable and included in the data analysis.

4.2 Instruments

Two five-frequency questionnaires were built. Consistency and accuracy of responses were assured for the two instruments. Before the start of the study the researcher examined the employment patterns for EFL majors to test instrument reliability.

In the study, the two questionnaires were examining only one construct each: For learners, it measured to what extent their professional needs are likely to be fulfilled by the current EFL writing curriculum at the Saudi University; for employers, that the EFL majors they employ have adequate English writing skills to dispense of their professional duties. The responses were sought on a five-point frequency scale ranging from never-always, the responses were numerically converted to 1-5 to make the data usable. The data were collected on eight items focused on the construct. Since only one construct was evaluated per survey, each was the target of this study. Therefore, Cronbach's alpha was computed to check the internal consistency of the survey items. The results for each of the computations were as follows: i. Employers' questionnaire, 0.766; ii. Learners' questionnaire, 0.794. These values were obtained after three items from the former, and two from the latter were redacted for want of a high enough alpha value. Validity of the items was sought from three professors of ESP courses at the university whose suggestions for minor changes were incorporated. The questionnaires were administered in English only.

5. Results

RQ1: What are the expectations of the EFL major learners at a Saudi university from the EFL writing course?

Table and Figure 1 below summarize the learners' expectations from the EFL major writing course curriculum at the Saudi University.

Table 1. Learners' perspectives on the efficacy of the EFL writing curriculum to fulfill professional needs

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
After obtaining my major in English, I will be able to write effectively to communicate	0	0	0	72	6
My course will equip me for a variety of job opportunities that require English language skills	0	0	2	0	76
My writing curriculum allows adequate practice to review and edit my writing in English as part of my writing course	18	46	11	3	1
I use the product of translation apps such as Google Translate to produce English essays etc.	10	7	16	17	28
My EFL major curriculum will enable me to produce a logical and coherent piece of writing in English	10	8	17	24	19
On completion of my major, my curriculum will make me adequately proficient to work in places that need English writing skills	2	6	14	37	19
Given my writing curriculum, I will be able to write clearly in English, especially in the workplace	6	7	5	28	32
My writing curriculum will prepare me for professional writing such as writing of emails in English to current and potential clients	3	7	4	33	29
Total	6.125	10.125	8.625	26.75	26.25
Percentage	7.85	12.98	11.05	34.29	33.65

Of the responses, 33.65% reported that they always found the writing curriculum efficient, while 34.29% said that the writing course was often suitable. The first item of the learners' questionnaire directly aired the ambition of the EFL major learners as the communicative ability to write in English, which was supported by 72 of the participants, establishing the fact that learners opt for this course with the clear aim of becoming good at writing in English and that too, towards vocational use of the skill as reflected in the responses to the following item, unanimously supported by the sample. However, the shortcoming of the curriculum is reflected when 18 and 46 respondents reported disagreement with the statement (My writing curriculum allows adequate practice to review and edit my writing in English as part of my writing course). Here, it appears that the course designers are not in sync with the professional world that will likely

employ these EFL majors. Moreover, the flip side of tech use is apparent in the participants' acknowledgment of relying on automatic apps for translating content in EFL writing which turns into a handicap for them in the professional world where they are expected to be proficient at writing in English. The following three items deal with preparing learners in the basics of writing i.e., logical, coherent, clear, and proficient writing, all of which are high on the learners' expectations from the EFL major course. However, when the employers' responses are triangulated with those of the learners, the vast chasm between the writing curriculum and professional needs becomes apparent.

The responses of the industry are summarized in Table and Figure 2 below. In all, twenty-one viable responses to the eight questions were prepared around the construct that the EFL major course prepares prospective employees for professional language use needs.
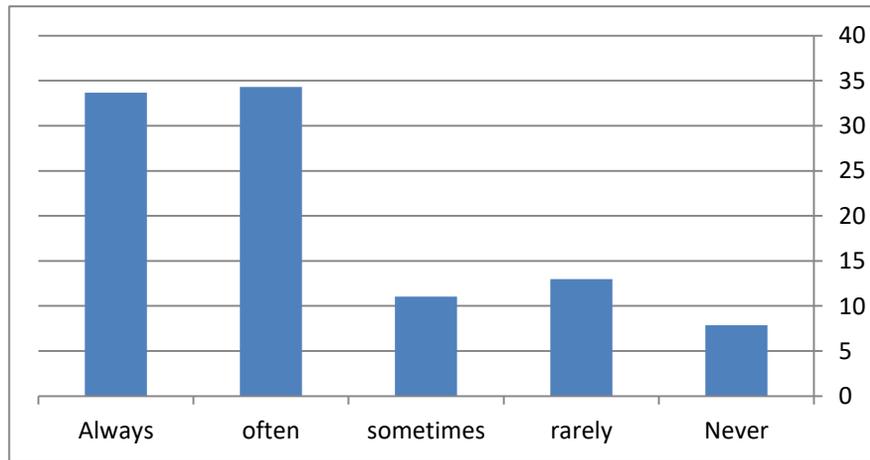

Figure 1. Learners' perspectives on the efficacy of the EFL writing curriculum to fulfill professional needs

Table 2. Industry perspectives on EFL majors' writing performance for professional needs

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
EFL majors can write emails effectively in English	8	9	1	3	0
EFL majors demonstrate proficiency in maintaining business records in English	13	6	0	2	0
EFL majors fail to elicit information from native speakers of English in written communication	0	2	4	9	6
EFL majors can structure and organize in English information related to my industry	12	7	1	1	0
EFL majors frequently seek guidance on writing in English for professional purposes	0	0	1	8	12
EFL majors not need to be re-trained in English to perform their professional duties	0	0	0	8	13
EFL majors are a communication asset to my industry	6	8	6	1	0
The language needs of my industry are not possible to be taught in an institution such as a university	9	5	5	2	0
Total frequency	6	4.625	2.25	4.25	3.875
Percentage	28.57	22.02	10.71	20.23	18.45

As can be seen from the data, industry response is highly dissatisfactory from the EFL majors whom they employ. Nearly half of the respondents negatively perceived the efficacy of the EFL major course in writing ability. Basic skills such as writing business emails are absent in these incumbents, even maintenance of office records in English is not achievable for them. It may be noted that the learners expressed the expectation of being able to write clear and coherent English sentences in the professional situations, but employers reported in the negative when asked about this ability of the English majors (elicit information from native speakers of English in a written communication; can structure and organize in English information related to my industry). In fact, they reported that even with higher education degrees in English, newcomers have to be constantly guided or re-trained in English to perform their professional duties. This leads to cost to the company, which forces employers to offer lower pay packages than those offered to the native-English users. Lastly, industry experts opined that the fault lies in the educational institutions and their inadequate curricula as those very EFL majors learn the tricks of the trade when they are re-trained on-job.
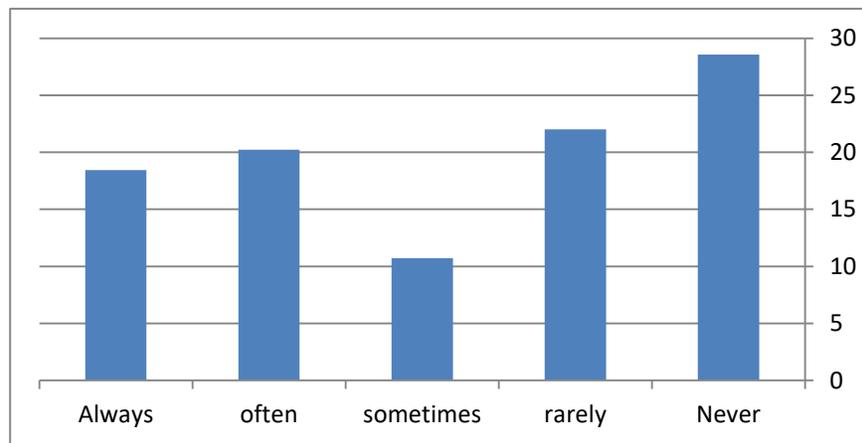
Figure 2. Industry perspectives on EFL majors' writing performance for professional needs

6. Discussion

Among the participants, 33.65% reported that they always found the writing curriculum efficient while 34.29% of them said that the writing course was often suitable. This is in line with Le and Tran (2021), who found that five elements of the English language training curriculum for university English language majors had not yet been carried out to their full potential. These elements were objective, content, material, teaching style, and assessment. In order to improve the curriculum's effectiveness and better tailor it to the needs of the learners' occupational competence, the participants recommended making certain changes to these five components. Al-Jardani (2012) investigated the English language curriculum in Oman and found that the exercise also helps improve guidelines for course design, teaching, and learning principles and other elements to enhance the quality of the educational programs. Likewise, Tunç (2010) investigated the efficacy of the Ankara University Preparatory School Program from the learner's and teachers' points of view. The study's findings showed that the curriculum at Ankara University was not adequate.

Nearly about half of them negatively perceived the EFL major which they considered were poorly equipped in writing. This finding aligns with the previous research findings and beliefs (Aliakbar & Habil, 2012; Kalfazade et al., 1989; Morrison, 2003). Morrison (2003) concluded that no curriculum was perfect in design and delivery. Furthermore, to correct deficiencies in the curriculum, the contents should be updated timely and new strategies should be applied to enhance the efficacy of the curriculum, which may further improve learners' professional output. Aliakbar and Habil, (2012) reported that for any successful educational program, it is important to perform evaluation studies to comprehend the strengths and weaknesses of the programs, applying modifications and determining the degree of consistency between standard educational systems and other systems in other contexts as essential elements of the educational mission. Further, Al-Jardani (2012) showed that curriculum evaluation supports connecting all other elements of the curriculum. It also highlighted the pros and consequences of issues related to curriculum evaluation like aims, goals, and purposes of different subjects.

7. Conclusion

Stakeholders can see that the educational process is heading in the right direction when they have access to a well-designed curriculum. It is important to acknowledge that students may lack the intrinsic motivation to pursue particular academic majors or minors if they are not directly related to their future professional goals. Therefore, it is the duty of schools and educators to equip students not only for academic but also for occupational success. In order to accomplish this, educational programs must prioritize long-term success over immediate gratification through grades. The survey was designed to see if students were attending a certain class because they thought it would help them get a job that required them to be able to communicate effectively in English. Jobs in the tertiary sector (tourism, hotels, diplomatic missions, and call centers) are growing at an annual pace of 18% in KSA. A large number of Saudi university students take English as a foreign language (EFL) class because they recognize its value in the workplace. This trend has been greatly bolstered by the Vision 2030 plan, which has placed more emphasis on the importance of a globally qualified workforce.

The study's findings and the anticipated growth in these industries make it clear that the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) major curriculum at Saudi institutions needs substantial reform. There is a disconnect between what students need and what businesses want in the current curriculum. Schools that don't update their curricula to reflect the demands of businesses may see a fall in enrolment if they don't equip their students for success in the global job market.

8. Recommendations

Based upon the results in this study, the researcher recommends that academic councils take it upon themselves to fund independent projects to understand the current and projected jobs market and needs. Thereafter, all professional or specialization courses such as EFL should be redesigned with the emerging needs in mind.

Language is all about use, and this principle should guide the pedagogy, materials, and assessment processes. Learners should be encouraged by all means to attain proficiency in language use and counselled that this will be more beneficial to them int eh long run

rather than getting good grades with little knowledge.

9. Limitations

This study was unique as it took the research beyond the classroom and university environments into the real world. However, qualitative data could not be included here which is seen as a limitation. It is hoped that future studies that replicate this are sensitive to this fact.

Ethics declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The present study adhered to ethical considerations in educational research by obtaining informed consent from the participants and also by ensuring them regarding the confidentiality of the collected data.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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