

Exploring English Language Learning Challenges and English Needs for Academic and Professional Purposes in an EFL Context: Evidence from Applied College Students at King Faisal University

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Abstract

This study investigates the English language learning challenges and needs of Applied College students at King Faisal University within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Although English language learning challenges have been widely examined in Saudi higher education, comparatively less attention has been given to the challenges and language needs of students in applied and vocationally oriented programs. Using a mixed-methods needs-analysis design, the study integrates quantitative data from a structured questionnaire (n = 278) with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that language learning is shaped by the interaction of linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors. Vocabulary limitations and speaking difficulties were prominent, with a strong positive correlation between linguistic and affective factors ($r = .771$, $p < .01$). Limited communicative practice and active English use further constrained language development. Students reported strong English language needs, particularly in career-related skills ($M = 4.02$) and technical vocabulary ($M = 3.99$). By integrating multiple dimensions of language-learning challenges with students' perceived needs, the study provides a learner-centered account of English learning in applied higher education. The findings offer implications for more communicative and professionally relevant English provision in comparable vocational higher-education EFL contexts.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP), Applied College Students, Need Analysis, Linguistic Challenges, Affective Factors; Pedagogical Factors, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become increasingly essential for academic success and employability in higher education, particularly within applied and vocational programs aligned with labor market demands (Gan, 2021; Lambert & Zhang, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, national educational reforms associated with Vision 2030 have further emphasized the importance of English language competence for workforce preparation and professional communication (Al-Seghayer, 2023; Hasan, 2025).

Applied college students represent a distinct learner population whose educational priorities are closely linked to practical and vocational competencies. In such contexts, English functions not only as an academic subject but also as a foundation for discipline-specific language development and students' specialized fields of study (Khan, 2011; Albedaiwi, 2022). However, students in applied programs often experience limited exposure to authentic language use, teacher-centered instruction, and insufficient integration of vocationally relevant language support, which may reduce engagement and communicative development (Alrabai, 2022; Kibret et al., 2026). As a result, students may perceive English learning as disconnected from their professional goals, leading to reduced motivation and engagement (Alqahtani, 2015). Similar patterns have been observed in technical and transnational education contexts, where limited opportunities for interaction and participation contribute to learner disengagement in English-mediated environments (Kajan et al., 2025). These conditions underscore the need to better understand the specific challenges and requirements of applied college learners.

A substantial body of research on English language learning in Saudi Arabia has identified a range of persistent challenges faced by EFL learners (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Linguistic difficulties—particularly in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation—remain among the most frequently reported barriers (Alqahtani, 2015; Al-Shehri, 2018). These challenges are often associated with limited prior exposure to English and insufficient opportunities for meaningful language use (Alrabai, 2016, 2022). Recent empirical studies further confirm that restricted vocabulary knowledge, lack of speaking practice, and limited engagement with both receptive and productive skills significantly constrain learners' communicative competence (Alaraj, 2024; Mohanna, 2024). In addition to linguistic barriers, affective factors such as anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes play a critical role in shaping learners' participation and performance (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Contemporary research has also emphasized the importance of learner engagement, enjoyment, and perceived teacher support in fostering willingness to communicate (Rashid & Malik, 2026). Moreover, environmental constraints—including limited exposure to English outside the classroom and the dominance of Arabic in daily communication—further restrict opportunities for authentic

language use (Alrabai, 2016).

While these studies provide valuable insights into general EFL challenges in Saudi higher education, relatively little attention has been paid to applied college students, whose vocational orientation may reshape both the nature of their challenges and the language competencies they require (Al-Seghayer, 2023). In such contexts, language learning must be understood not only in terms of general proficiency but also in relation to academic, technical, and workplace communication demands.

Accordingly, this study investigates the English language learning challenges and needs of Applied College students at King Faisal University using a mixed-methods needs-analysis approach. The study focuses on three interrelated domains: linguistic challenges, pedagogical barriers, and environmental or contextual factors influencing language learning. In addition, it examines students' perceived needs regarding academic success and future professional roles, drawing on frameworks commonly used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP) research (Alqahtani, 2015; Simbolon, 2021). By addressing these dimensions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of learners' difficulties while identifying opportunities for targeted pedagogical and curricular interventions.

Within applied higher education, ESP and EAPP frameworks emphasize aligning language instruction with learners' academic and professional communication needs through context-sensitive and skill-oriented approaches (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Al-Jarf, 2007; Hyland, 2022). Such approaches have been shown to enhance motivation, engagement, and language proficiency, particularly in vocational and applied education settings where the relevance of English to workplace communication is paramount (Hasan, 2025; Klimova, 2015; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Simbolon, 2021). Moreover, integrating learner feedback and adapting instructional practices to address individual needs can contribute to more sustainable and effective language development.

Thus, this study seeks to contribute to this understanding by providing empirical evidence that can inform policy, teaching practices, and language support initiatives in applied higher education.

In light of the identified research gap, the study addresses the following research questions:

What linguistic challenges do Applied College students at King Faisal University encounter in learning English?

What pedagogical barriers hinder effective English language learning among Applied College students?

What environmental and contextual factors influence students' exposure to and use of English inside and outside the classroom?

What English language skills and competencies do students perceive as essential for their academic success and future professional roles?

How do students perceive the alignment between current English instruction and their applied and vocational learning needs within an EAPP framework?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multidimensional Challenges in English Language Learning

English language learning in EFL contexts is widely recognized as a complex and multidimensional process influenced by linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors. Rather than operating independently, these dimensions interact dynamically to shape learners' experiences and outcomes.

2.1.1 Linguistic Challenges

Linguistic challenges (LC) remain central to EFL learning, particularly in higher education. These include limitations in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and reading comprehension (Alqahtani, 2015; Al-Shehri, 2018). Among these, vocabulary knowledge has been consistently identified as a primary barrier to fluency, comprehension, and effective communication at the tertiary level (Alaraj, 2024; Mohanna, 2024). Insufficient lexical resources constrain learners' ability to construct meaning, participate in interaction, and perform academic tasks, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. These challenges are often exacerbated by limited exposure to authentic language use and inadequate opportunities for meaningful practice.

2.1.2 Affective Factors

In addition to linguistic barriers, affective factors (AF)—the emotional and psychological dimensions of language learning, including anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and fear of negative evaluation—play a critical role in shaping language learning. Anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes have been widely documented as key impediments to participation and communicative engagement (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). In Saudi higher education contexts, these affective barriers are particularly pronounced, contributing to students' reluctance to use English in classroom interaction (Almesaar, 2022; Al-Wossabi, 2024; Alzain, 2025). Such reluctance is frequently reinforced by fear of negative evaluation, limited opportunities for supportive interaction, and predominantly teacher-centered classroom practices, which collectively discourage risk-taking in oral communication (Özdemir & Seğkin, 2025; Al Asmari, 2015).

Recent research has advanced the understanding of affective variables by emphasizing their dynamic and multidimensional nature. Affective learning is now recognized as a core component of language acquisition, influencing motivation, self-efficacy, and learner autonomy (Algobaei & Alzain, 2025; He et al., 2025). Emotions are not merely peripheral but play a central role in regulating cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and engagement, thereby directly impacting learning outcomes (Zhang, 2022).

From a broader theoretical perspective, affective factors are shaped through complex interactions between individual, social, and contextual variables. Ecological and dynamic system approaches conceptualize language learning as an emergent process influenced by multiple interconnected systems, where emotional, cognitive, and environmental factors continuously interact (Li, 2023). Similarly, recent research conceptualizes classroom emotions as emerging from interconnected cognitive, psychological, and contextual dimensions (Wu & Kabilan, 2025). Furthermore, cognitive and affective processes are closely intertwined, with factors such as working memory, attention, and emotional engagement jointly influencing language acquisition and performance (Lustiyantie et al., 2025).

2.1.3 Environmental and Contextual Factors

Environmental and contextual factors (ECF) also significantly shape language learning experiences. In Saudi Arabia, learners often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, due to Arabic's dominance, which reduces opportunities for authentic communication (Alrabai, 2016). This environment restricts the development of communicative competence and reinforces the perception of English as an academic subject rather than a functional tool.

Research indicates that communicative competence develops more effectively when learners are provided with structured opportunities for interaction and authentic language use (Karimova et al., 2026). However, artificial learning environments and the perceived lack of relevance between English instruction and students' academic or professional goals can lead to disengagement and reduced motivation (Al-Wossabi, 2024; Mohanna, 2024). These contextual limitations are particularly significant in applied college settings, where language learning must align with practical and vocational demands.

2.2 English Language Needs in Applied College Contexts (ESP/EAPP Perspective)

Applied college students differ from traditional academic learners in that their language needs are closely tied to academic, technical, and professional contexts. Their learning requirements extend beyond general proficiency to include discipline-specific communication skills, academic literacy, and workplace-oriented language use. These needs are conceptualized within the frameworks of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP), which emphasize aligning language instruction with learners' target contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

ESP and EAPP are fundamentally need-driven approaches that prioritize relevance, authenticity, and functionality in language teaching. Contemporary perspectives highlight that language instruction must be tailored to learners' academic and occupational goals, as students are required to engage with specialized genres, disciplinary discourse practices, and professional communication tasks (Hyland, 2022). Similarly, ESP/EAP approaches emphasize the use of authentic materials and real-world tasks, enabling learners to develop skills that are directly applicable to their future academic and professional contexts (Wette, 2018).

From a broader perspective, ESP has evolved into a dynamic, context-sensitive field that integrates the linguistic, social, and professional dimensions of language use. It emphasizes the importance of analyzing target language use situations and aligning instruction with real-world communicative demands (Işık, 2026; Dou et al., 2023; Armnazi & Alegasan, 2024). Recent scholarship further challenges the rigid distinction between ESP and general English, arguing that all language learning is inherently shaped by learners' specific goals, contexts, and domains (Azalmad, 2023).

In applied college contexts, this alignment is particularly critical. Students in fields such as business, engineering, and health sciences require discipline-specific vocabulary, genre awareness, and functional communication skills relevant to their academic and professional tasks (Al-Jarf, 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that learners' motivation and engagement increase when English instruction is clearly linked with their majors and career goals (Alqahtani, 2015).

Needs analysis plays a central role in identifying these requirements and informing curriculum design. Research in vocational and applied higher education emphasizes that systematically identifying learners' linguistic, academic, and occupational needs is essential for developing effective language programs (Simbolon, 2021). International ESP studies further demonstrate that effective needs analysis should integrate present situation analysis, target situation analysis, and learning situation analysis to ensure curricular relevance and learner preparedness (Saputro & Savitri, 2025; Generoso & Arbon, 2020). Failure to address these needs may result in a mismatch between instructional content and real-world language demands, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of English education in applied colleges.

2.3 Pedagogical Strategies and Instructional Support

Pedagogical practices play a crucial role in mediating the relationship between learners' challenges and their language development. Effective instructional approaches in EFL contexts include communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and adaptive feedback mechanisms that take into account learners' proficiency levels and individual differences (Albedaiwi, 2022; Ellis, 2003; Nation & Macalister, 2009).

In applied college contexts, these approaches must be contextualized to reflect real-life communicative demands. Research in Saudi Arabia indicates that learners respond positively to interactive, context-based activities, such as role-plays, simulations, and content-based instruction, which bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical application (Alkhirbash, 2023; Eltaib et al., 2024). Such approaches enhance learners' engagement, confidence, and communicative competence.

Recent studies further demonstrate that increased exposure to authentic interaction, structured speaking practice, and targeted feedback can significantly improve fluency and willingness to communicate among EFL learners (Alaraj, 2024; Rashid & Malik, 2026; Alzain, 2025).

Moreover, technology-enhanced learning environments offer flexible, interactive opportunities for language practice, supporting both linguistic and affective development (Klimova, 2015; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

Importantly, pedagogical practices are not limited to cognitive instruction but also play a critical role in shaping learners' affective experiences. Supportive teaching strategies, positive feedback, and learner-centered approaches help reduce anxiety and enhance motivation, thereby facilitating more effective language learning (He et al., 2025). This highlights the need for integrated pedagogical models that address both instructional and emotional dimensions of language learning.

2.4 Research Gap

Despite extensive research on EFL challenges in Saudi higher education, limited attention has been given to applied college students, particularly within vocationally oriented programs. Existing studies have primarily focused on traditional academic contexts, often overlooking learners whose educational goals, learning orientations, and language demands differ significantly (Alrabai, 2016; Al-Seghayer, 2023).

Although recent research has documented key challenges such as speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, and low communicative engagement (Al-Wossabi, 2024; Alaraj, 2024; Mohanna, 2024), these issues have rarely been examined within an integrated framework that considers linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors simultaneously. Furthermore, ESP and EAPP research in Saudi Arabia has largely focused on specific disciplines, with limited emphasis on comprehensive needs analysis across applied college programs (Alqahtani, 2015; Al-Jarf, 2007).

International research highlights the importance of context-sensitive needs analysis in aligning language instruction with academic and professional demands (Simbolon, 2021); however, comparable empirical investigations remain scarce in Saudi applied college contexts. This gap underscores the need for a multidimensional and needs-oriented approach that captures both the challenges and the specific language requirements of applied college students.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by an integrated conceptual framework grounded in ESP/EAPP principles and contemporary theories of affective and contextual language learning. The framework conceptualizes English language learning as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of linguistic challenges (LC), affective factors (AF), pedagogical factors (PF), environmental and contextual factors (ECF), and perceived English language needs (ELN).

Linguistic challenges, including vocabulary, grammar, and speaking difficulties, are considered core barriers to language development. These challenges are closely interconnected with affective factors, such as anxiety and confidence, forming a bidirectional relationship as supported by affective and willingness-to-communicate theories (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Pedagogical factors, including teaching methods, feedback, and classroom interaction, are conceptualized as key instructional variables that shape learners' experiences. Drawing on ESP/EAPP principles, effective pedagogy is expected to align instruction with learners' academic and professional needs, leading to a direct relationship between pedagogical factors and language needs.

Environmental and contextual factors, such as exposure to English and opportunities for authentic language use, are conceptualized as external influences that shape language development. These factors are assumed to affect linguistic challenges directly, as limited exposure and practice opportunities increase learning difficulties.

In addition, linguistic challenges are expected to influence perceived language needs, as learners who experience greater difficulty are likely to report higher language support needs.

This framework is further supported by ecological and dynamic perspectives, which conceptualize language learning as an emergent process shaped by the interaction of individual and contextual systems (Li, 2023). These perspectives emphasize that cognitive, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors operate as interconnected components within a complex learning system (Wu & Kabilan, 2025). Within this system, pedagogical practices mediate learners' affective engagement and learning outcomes (He et al., 2025).

Overall, the framework provides a coherent structure that informs the study's design, data collection, and analysis by linking theoretical constructs with empirically measurable variables.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method needs-analysis design to investigate the English language learning challenges and needs of students enrolled in Applied College programs at King Faisal University. These programs lead to diploma qualifications. The design integrates quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' linguistic difficulties, learning context, and perceived language needs. The quantitative component consisted of a structured questionnaire, while the qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews to capture in-depth insights into students' experiences.

3.2 Participants

The study targeted undergraduate students enrolled in English language courses at the Applied College. Students complete a sequence of three English proficiency courses—English 1, English 2, and English 3—designed to progressively develop their general English

proficiency from CEFR levels A1 to B2. Therefore, English language instruction continues into the second year and is primarily proficiency-oriented rather than specifically focused on academic or discipline-specific English. In addition, some programs offer discipline-related courses, such as *Selected Topics in Networking*, *Computer Applications in Accounting*, and *Selected Topics in Supply Chains*, which introduce students to selected English terminology and vocabulary relevant to their fields of specialization. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was used to select participants relevant to the study objectives. A total of 278 students participated in the questionnaire, representing a range of academic majors. As shown in Table 1, the sample included students from various applied disciplines, with the largest proportion from Human Resources Management ($n = 128$), followed by Executive Secretary and Office Management ($n = 63$). The majority of participants were second-year students ($n = 189$), and female students constituted a larger proportion of the sample ($n = 205$).

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

Category	Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Major	Human Resources Management	128	46.0%
	Executive Secretary & Office Management	63	22.7%
	Financial Management	26	9.4%
	Accounting	22	7.9%
	Supply Chain Management	22	7.9%
	Advertising & Marketing Communication	9	3.2%
	Media	8	2.9%
Academic Year	First Year	89	32.0%
	Second Year	189	68.0%
Gender	Female	205	73.7%
	Male	73	26.3%

Data collection was conducted in both the male and female sections of the Applied College. The questionnaire was administered electronically through an online link distributed to students in both sections. Female members of the research team facilitated access to and data collection from students in the female section, while male researchers facilitated data collection in the male section. Semi-structured interviews were likewise conducted with 36 students ($n = 36$) by researchers of the corresponding gender in accordance with the institutional context. All participants voluntarily took part in the study and provided informed consent. The research procedures complied with institutional ethical standards and ensured anonymity and confidentiality of participants' data.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

To address the research questions comprehensively, two data collection instruments—a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews—were employed.

The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data on students' perceived challenges and English language needs within the Applied College context. It was theory-informed and literature-driven, drawing on established research in EFL, ESP, and EAPP, rather than adopting a single standardized instrument. This approach aligns with needs-analysis practices commonly used in applied and vocational higher education.

The instrument comprised five domains. The first domain, Linguistic Challenges (LC), included vocabulary, grammar, speaking fluency, listening, and reading comprehension, which are widely recognized as core difficulties in EFL contexts (Alaraj, 2024). The second domain, Affective Factors (AF), captured variables such as language anxiety, self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes, which influence learners' willingness to communicate (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). One item in this domain was reverse-coded to enhance response reliability.

The third domain, Pedagogical Factors (PF), addressed teaching methods, feedback practices, classroom interaction, and the relevance of instructional materials, reflecting principles of communicative and learner-centered language teaching (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Ellis, 2003; Nation & Macalister, 2009). Although these pedagogical conditions may influence affective responses such as confidence, anxiety, and motivation, they were treated as a distinct domain because the items focused on instructional practices rather than learners' emotional or psychological responses. The fourth domain, Environmental and Contextual Factors (ECF), examined exposure to English, opportunities for authentic language use, and the influence of an Arabic-dominant environment, which are known to shape language learning in Saudi EFL contexts (Alrabai, 2016, 2022; Elyas & Picard, 2013).

The final domain, English Language Needs (ELN), focused on academic literacy, discipline-specific vocabulary, and professional communication skills, in line with ESP and EAPP frameworks that emphasize alignment with learners' academic and occupational demands (Hyland, 2022; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. The questionnaire was administered bilingually (English–Arabic) to ensure clarity and minimize comprehension-related bias among participants with varying levels of English proficiency. Prior to full administration, the instrument was reviewed for clarity, content relevance, and contextual appropriateness, thereby enhancing its content validity for the Applied College context.

To augment the quantitative findings and obtain a more nuanced understanding of students' English language learning experiences,

semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of Applied College students. The interview protocol was developed in alignment with qualitative needs analysis frameworks widely employed in ESP and EAPP research (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Brown et al., 2025).

The interview questions explored key domains identified in the study, including linguistic challenges (e.g., vocabulary limitations, speaking fluency, and comprehension difficulties), affective factors (e.g., anxiety, confidence, and fear of making mistakes), and pedagogical practices (e.g., teaching methods, classroom interaction, and feedback). The inclusion of affective dimensions was informed by research highlighting their influence on learners' willingness to communicate and classroom engagement (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Almesaar, 2022; Al-Wossabi, 2024).

In addition, the interviews examined students' perceptions of the alignment between English instruction and their academic and professional needs, reflecting key principles of ESP and EAPP needs analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hyland, 2022; Simbolon, 2021). The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, enabling the collection of rich, context-sensitive data while maintaining consistency across interviews. In line with established qualitative research practices, note-based data collection is recognized as a valid approach for capturing key themes and insights (Pope et al., 2000; Brown et al., 2025). The interviews were conducted in Arabic to ensure clarity of expression and were translated into English for analysis.

3.4 Data Procedures

Data were collected during the first semester of the academic year 2025-2026 through an online questionnaire distributed to students enrolled in English language courses at the Applied College. Participants included both first- and second-year students. The survey was administered via a secure electronic link shared through institutional communication channels, including faculty networks and course instructors. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes.

The questionnaire remained open for 4 weeks, providing sufficient time for participation. Prior to accessing the survey, participants were presented with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained electronically. No personally identifying information was collected, ensuring full anonymity. Students completed the questionnaire independently using their personal devices.

For the qualitative phase, the purposively selected students participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in a supportive and flexible setting to encourage open responses. Due to contextual and logistical considerations, responses were recorded in structured notes rather than audio recordings and were subsequently organized and coded for thematic analysis.

All questionnaire responses were automatically anonymized and exported to statistical software for quantitative analysis. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the authors' institutional ethics committee.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As presented in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated acceptable to excellent reliability, with values ranging from 0.707 to 0.904. Linguistic Challenges ($\alpha = 0.904$) and English Language Needs ($\alpha = 0.904$) showed excellent reliability, while Pedagogical Factors ($\alpha = 0.856$) and Affective Factors ($\alpha = 0.734$) indicated very good and good reliability, respectively. Environmental Factors ($\alpha = 0.707$) met the acceptable threshold.

Overall, all constructs exceeded the recommended level ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), confirming the reliability of the instrument for subsequent analysis.

Table 2. Reliability of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Linguistic Challenges (LC)	6	0.904
Affective Factors (AF)	5	0.734
Pedagogical Factors (PF)	5	0.856
Environmental and Contextual Factors (ECF)	4	0.707
English Language Needs (ELN)	6	0.904

3.5.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among the study constructs. As shown in Table 3, all variables were significantly correlated at either the 0.01 or 0.05 level.

A strong positive correlation was found between linguistic challenges and affective factors ($r = .771, p < .01$), indicating a close relationship between language difficulties and emotional barriers. Moderate positive correlations were observed between linguistic challenges and English language needs ($r = .313, p < .01$), as well as between environmental factors and linguistic challenges ($r = .303, p < .01$). Notably, pedagogical factors showed a significant negative correlation with English language needs ($r = -.322, p < .01$), suggesting that more effective instructional practices are associated with lower perceived language needs. Environmental factors demonstrated a weaker but significant relationship with English language needs ($r = .134, p < .05$).

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Among Study Constructs

Variables	LC	AF	PF	ECF	ELN
LC	1				
AF	.771**	1			
PF	.195**	.205**	1		
ECF	.303**	.281**	.211**	1	
ELN	.313**	.250**	-.322**	.134*	1

Note. $p < .01$, $p < .05$

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and rankings) and Pearson correlation analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses were coded, categorized into themes, and interpreted to complement and explain the quantitative findings. An integrated analysis approach was adopted, where quantitative and qualitative results were presented together under each research question to enhance interpretation and ensure methodological triangulation.

4. Results

4.1 What Linguistic Challenges Do Applied College Students at King Faisal University encounter in Learning English?

As shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, the quantitative findings indicate a moderate level of linguistic challenges. Vocabulary ($M = 2.92$), speaking fluency ($M = 2.82$), and grammatical accuracy ($M = 2.81$) emerged as the most prominent difficulties, whereas listening comprehension was reported at a lower level ($M = 2.37$). These results suggest that students perceive greater difficulty in vocabulary, speaking fluency, and grammatical accuracy than in listening comprehension. Several factors may contribute to these difficulties, including anxiety during spontaneous communication, limited communicative practice, and insufficient active use of English.

Table 4. Linguistic Challenges

Item	Mean	SD
LC2: Vocabulary difficulty	2.92	1.25
LC3: Speaking fluency	2.82	1.17
LC5: Grammar difficulty	2.81	1.17
LC4: Pronunciation	2.65	1.23
LC1: Academic texts	2.52	1.11
LC6 Listening difficulty	2.37	1.17

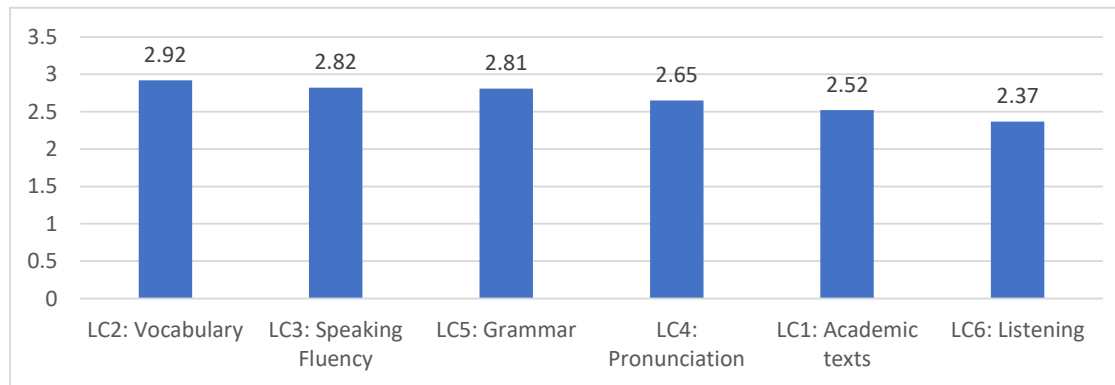


Figure 1. Linguistic Challenges (Mean Scores)

Qualitative evidence provides further insight into these challenges. Students frequently reported hesitation when speaking, difficulty forming sentences, and reliance on mental translation from Arabic to English. Vocabulary gaps were consistently identified as a major barrier, affecting both speaking and writing performance. In addition, students described challenges with grammar, pronunciation, and spelling, which were often perceived as complex and difficult to control in real-time communication. These findings confirm that linguistic difficulties are not isolated but interact across multiple skill areas, particularly in tasks requiring spontaneous language use.

Importantly, these linguistic challenges are closely intertwined with affective factors, which also emerged at a moderate level. As shown in Table 5 and figure 2, students reported noticeable anxiety when speaking English ($M = 2.80$) and concern about making mistakes ($M = 2.79$), while nervousness was more pronounced in unprepared speaking situations ($M = 3.19$). Although students indicated a relatively high level of general confidence in participation ($M = 3.58$), the perception that low confidence limits engagement remained evident ($M = 2.53$). This suggests that confidence is situational rather than stable and may decline in demanding communicative contexts.

Table 5. Affective Factors

Item	Mean	SD
AF4: Confidence in participation	3.58	1.08
AF3: Nervousness in spontaneous speaking	3.19	1.29
AF1: Anxiety when speaking	2.80	1.26
AF2: Fear of making mistakes	2.79	1.15
AF5: Low confidence limits participation	2.53	1.13

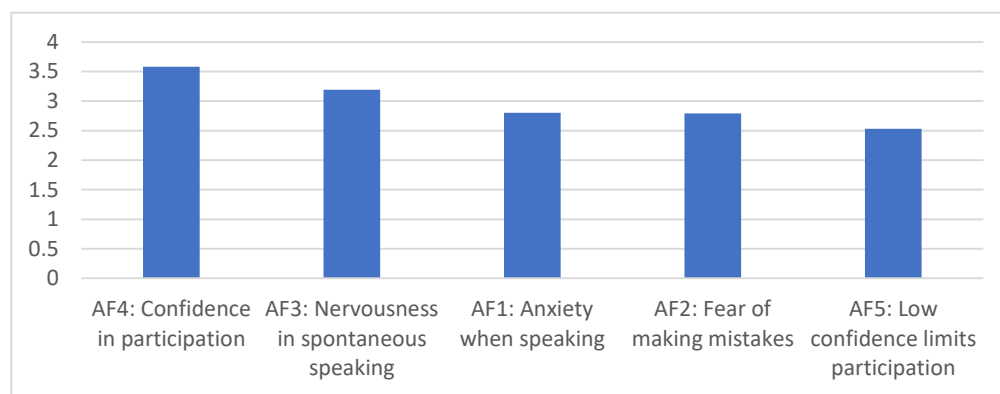


Figure 2. Affective Factors (Mean Scores)

Qualitative responses reinforce this pattern, revealing a mixed emotional experience. While some students expressed positive attitudes toward speaking, many reported anxiety, embarrassment, and fear of negative evaluation, particularly in front of peers. Several participants described initial nervousness that decreases once they begin speaking, whereas others indicated that fear of making mistakes leads to hesitation or avoidance of participation. At the same time, a smaller group demonstrated resilience, emphasizing their willingness to participate despite these challenges, often in classrooms that were encouraging.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that linguistic challenges among Applied College students are not purely cognitive but are strongly shaped by affective dimensions. Vocabulary limitations and speaking difficulties are closely associated with anxiety and reduced participation, indicating that emotional barriers can intensify language difficulties and restrict practice opportunities. This highlights the need to address both linguistic competence and affective support to improve students' overall English language development.

4.2 What Pedagogical Barriers Hinder Effective English Language Learning among Applied College Students?

As presented in Table 6 and illustrated in Figure 3, pedagogical factors were identified as high-level barriers to English language learning. Feedback ($M = 3.79$), teaching methods ($M = 3.74$), and instructional materials ($M = 3.72$) ranked highest, followed by limited speaking opportunities ($M = 3.64$). Teacher-centered instruction ($M = 3.37$) further indicates restricted opportunities for interaction and communicative engagement.

Table 6. Pedagogical Factors

Item	Mean	SD
PF5: Feedback	3.79	1.02
PF1: Teaching Methods	3.74	1.07
PF4: Materials	3.72	0.99
PF2: Speaking Opportunities	3.64	1.12
PF3: Teacher-Centered Learning	3.37	1.16

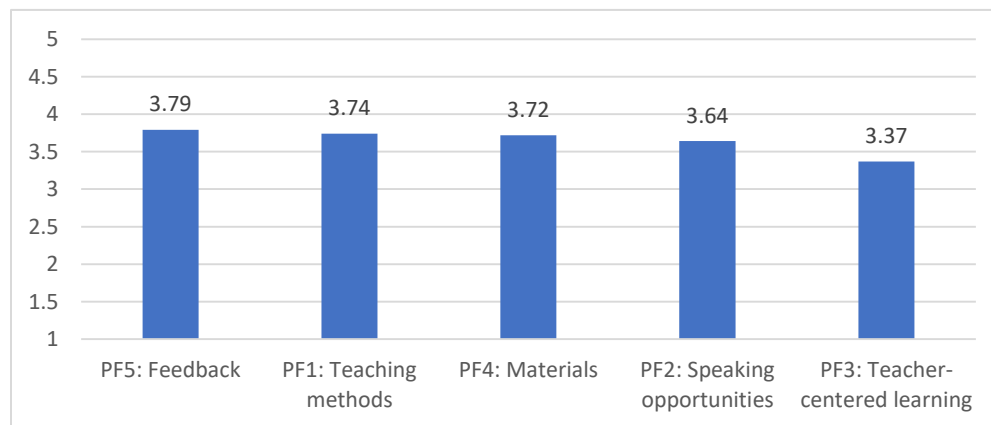


Figure 3. Pedagogical Factors (Mean Scores)

Interview data provide a more nuanced perspective. While students generally perceived teaching as clear, organized, and supportive, several limitations emerged. Feedback was widely regarded as useful in identifying errors and improving performance, and courses were seen as beneficial for developing foundational skills.

However, a key concern was the limited emphasis on practical language use, particularly in speaking. Students reported that instruction often prioritizes explanation over application, reducing opportunities for meaningful communication. Some participants also noted issues such as repetitive content, insufficient practice time, and limited alignment with their academic specializations.

Participants consistently expressed the need for more EAPP-oriented instruction, including discipline-specific vocabulary, real-life communication tasks, and interactive activities such as presentations and group discussions. The use of authentic materials and additional support for low-performing students was also recommended. Although instructional practices are positively perceived, they remain insufficient in fostering communicative competence, highlighting a misalignment between teaching approaches and students' academic and professional needs.

4.3 What Environmental and Contextual Factors Influence Students' Exposure to and Use of English Inside and Outside the Classroom?

As shown in Table 7 and Figure 4, environmental factors exert a moderate to strong influence on students' English learning. Exposure to English materials recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.57$), followed by limited English use ($M = 3.37$) and the Arabic-dominant environment ($M = 3.27$). Opportunities to use English outside the classroom were reported at a moderate level ($M = 3.07$). These findings indicate that exposure to English input exists but is not supported by sufficient opportunities for active use.

Table 7. Environmental Factors

Item	Mean	SD
ECF4: Exposure to Materials	3.57	1.09
ECF3: Limited English Use	3.37	0.97
ECF2: Arabic Dominance	3.27	1.04
ECF1: Opportunities Outside Class	3.07	1.09

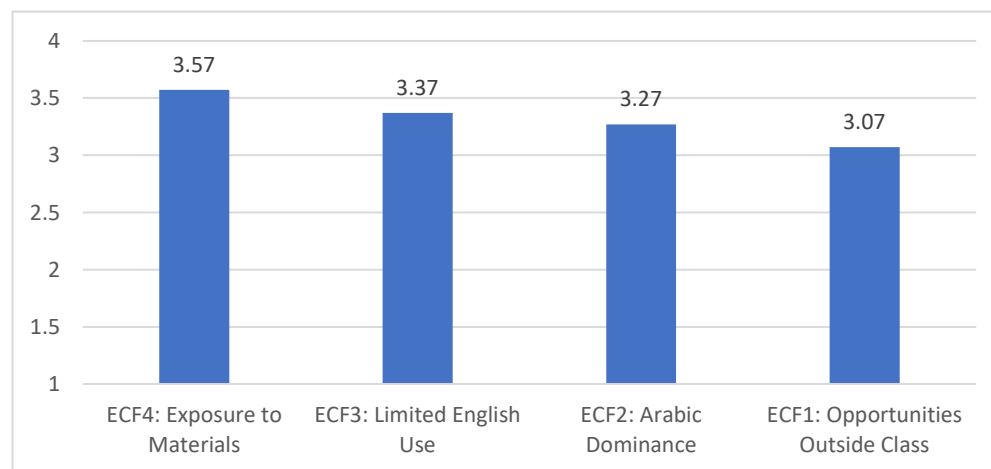


Figure 4. Environmental and Contextual Factors (Mean Scores)

Qualitative findings reinforce this pattern. Most students reported limited use of English beyond the classroom, with language use largely confined to academic tasks. English was rarely used in everyday communication, suggesting that it is perceived more as an academic subject than a functional tool.

A central issue identified was the dominance of Arabic in daily interactions, which significantly restricts opportunities for authentic language practice. This environment reduces both the need and motivation to use English, thereby limiting the development of fluency and confidence.

At the same time, students reported engagement with authentic English materials, such as videos, films, and online content, which were perceived as beneficial for improving vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening skills. However, such exposure was often inconsistent and dependent on individual effort rather than structured support. Overall, the findings indicate that environmental constraints significantly limit sustained English use, thereby restricting opportunities for meaningful communicative practice.

4.4 What English Language Skills and Competencies Do Students Perceive as Essential for Their Academic Success and Future Professional Roles?

As presented in Table 8 and illustrated in Figure 5, students reported high levels of English language needs across all domains. Career-related needs ranked highest ($M = 4.02$), followed by technical vocabulary ($M = 3.99$) and communicative skills ($M = 3.83$). Academic needs ($M = 3.76$) and professional communication ($M = 3.64$) were also rated highly. These results indicate that students view English as essential not only for academic purposes but also for future professional success.

Table 8. English Language Needs

Item	Mean	SD
ELN2: Career Needs	4.02	1.08
ELN3: Technical Vocabulary	3.99	1.02
ELN5: Communicative Skills	3.83	1.12
ELN1: Academic Needs	3.76	1.11
ELN4: Professional Communication	3.64	1.21

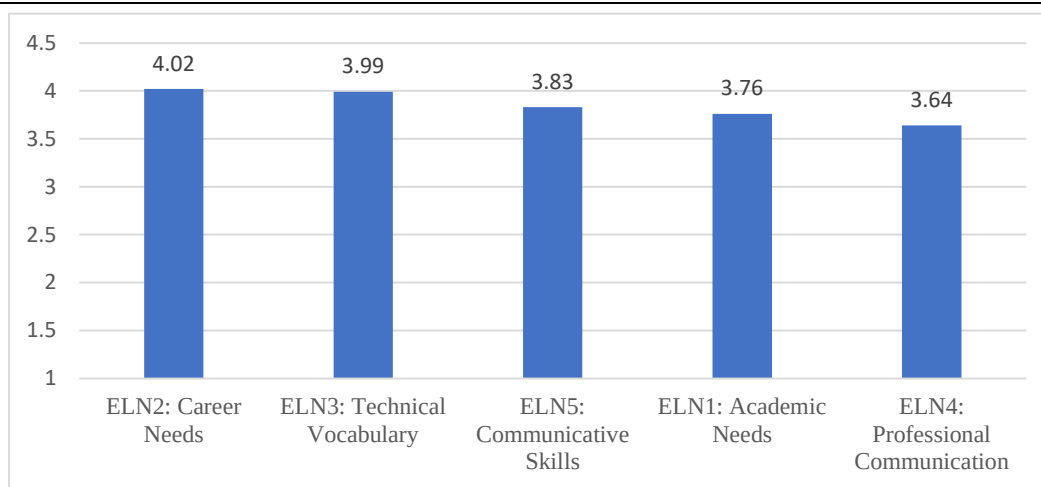


Figure 5. English Language Needs (Mean Scores)

Qualitative evidence further clarifies these priorities. A dominant theme was the importance of speaking and communication skills, which were identified as critical for classroom participation, presentations, and workplace interaction. This reflects a strong orientation toward English as a practical communication tool.

Students also emphasized the importance of reading and writing skills for academic tasks, including understanding course materials and completing assignments. Writing was additionally linked to professional contexts, such as report writing and email communication. Vocabulary development, particularly discipline-specific terminology, was highlighted as essential for both academic and professional contexts.

Furthermore, participants consistently associated English proficiency with employability, emphasizing its importance in professional communication, meetings, and presentations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students possess a clear awareness of their language needs. These needs include continued development of general English proficiency as well as communicative, academic, and professionally relevant competencies. This highlights the importance of an integrated approach in which EAPP-oriented instruction builds progressively on students' general English foundation.

4.5 How Do Students Perceive the Alignment between Current English Instruction and Their Applied and Vocational Learning Needs within an EAPP Framework?

As shown in Table 9, the quantitative results indicate a relatively high mean score for course alignment ($M = 3.64$). However, this should be interpreted as a concern indicator, reflecting students' perception of only partial alignment between current English instruction and their applied and vocational needs.

Table 9. Alignment of English Instruction with EAPP Needs

Item	Mean	SD
ELN6 Course alignment	3.64	1.06

Qualitative findings provide important clarification. While many students acknowledged that current courses, which use Pearson's *Roadmap* series (A1–B2), effectively support foundational skills, particularly in grammar, reading, and writing, they also highlighted significant limitations. Instruction was generally described as structured and clear; however, it was often perceived as insufficient for addressing practical and professional language demands.

A consistent theme was the gap between theoretical instruction and real-life application. Students reported that courses tend to focus on grammar and basic knowledge, with limited opportunities for communicative practice and workplace-relevant tasks.

Participants emphasized the need for more contextualized and skill-based learning, including speaking activities, group discussions, presentations, workplace simulations, and training in professional writing. These recommendations reflect students' perceptions of their learning needs and instructional experiences. The integration of discipline-specific content relevant to students' fields was also strongly recommended.

Taken together, the findings reveal a clear gap between current instructional practices and students' EAPP needs. While existing courses provide a useful foundation, they do not fully align with students' expectations for practical, communicative, and professionally oriented language use.

5. Discussion

This study examined the English language learning challenges and needs of Applied College students at King Faisal University through a mixed-methods needs analysis. The findings provide important insights into the interconnected roles of linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors, as well as students' perceived English language needs within an EAPP framework.

The findings indicate that students experience moderate linguistic challenges, particularly in vocabulary, speaking fluency, and grammar. This aligns with previous research identifying vocabulary limitations and speaking difficulties as persistent barriers to EFL development in Saudi higher education (Alaraj, 2024; Mohanna, 2024). Importantly, the results extend prior research by demonstrating that linguistic challenges are closely intertwined with affective factors, particularly anxiety and fear of making mistakes. The strong correlation between linguistic challenges and affective factors supports the theoretical perspectives of Horwitz (2001) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), which emphasize the role of emotional variables in shaping language performance. This relationship is also consistent with recent research in the Saudi context highlighting anxiety, communication apprehension, fear, and low self-confidence as important factors in students' English communication experiences (Almesaar, 2022; Al-Wossabi, 2024). This relationship is further supported by recent research highlighting the role of affective dimensions such as enjoyment, grit, and perceived teacher support in shaping learners' willingness to communicate in EFL contexts (Rashid & Malik, 2026). These findings suggest that linguistic deficiencies do not operate in isolation but are reinforced by psychological constraints that limit students' willingness to communicate. In applied college contexts, where students often prioritize functional communication, this interaction becomes particularly critical, as anxiety may directly inhibit the development of communicative competence.

Pedagogical factors emerged as a significant barrier, particularly in relation to students' opportunities for communicative and practice-oriented language use. Although students generally reported positive perceptions of teaching quality and feedback, the findings indicate limited opportunities for sustained speaking, interaction, and authentic language practice. This supports previous research emphasizing the importance of communicative language teaching and learner-centered approaches in fostering language development (Ellis, 2003; Nation & Macalister, 2009). From the students' perspectives, these limited opportunities for communicative practice suggest a need for greater integration of interactive and practice-oriented activities into English language instruction. This is consistent with concerns reported in Saudi EFL contexts (Alrabai, 2022). Similarly, recent research in applied and technical education contexts shows that participation barriers and classroom silence are often linked to instructional design and limited opportunities for interaction, particularly in English-medium and vocational settings (Kajan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the negative relationship between pedagogical factors and language needs suggests that effective teaching practices can reduce perceived learning gaps, reinforcing the central role of pedagogy in shaping learning outcomes. These findings align with ESP/EAPP frameworks, which emphasize aligning instruction with learners' communicative and professional needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Simbolon, 2021). The study also highlights the significant influence of environmental and contextual factors, particularly the dominance of Arabic and limited opportunities for English use outside the classroom. These findings are consistent with Alrabai (2016), who identifies limited exposure to authentic language use as a major constraint in Saudi EFL contexts. Although students reported relatively high exposure to English materials, this exposure was largely passive and insufficient to support active language use. This supports the argument that input alone is not sufficient for language acquisition without meaningful opportunities for interaction and practice.

This finding is reinforced by recent research indicating that structured language-learning environments, including opportunities for

interaction and engagement, are essential for developing communicative competence across different EFL contexts (Karimova et al., 2026). In the Saudi context, Mohanna (2024) identified environmental and linguistic challenges affecting English language learning. Similarly, Al-Wossabi (2024) linked students' reluctance to communicate in English to limited and artificial learning environments. The findings further suggest that English is often perceived as an academic subject rather than a communicative tool, reinforcing the need to create authentic, interaction-rich learning environments. This is particularly important in applied college settings, where language use should extend beyond academic tasks to include real-life and professional contexts.

The results reveal that students have significant English language needs, particularly in career development, technical vocabulary, and communicative skills. This finding strongly supports ESP and EAPP literature, which emphasizes the importance of aligning language instruction with learners' academic and professional goals (Hyland, 2022; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Students' strong emphasis on speaking, professional communication, and discipline-specific language reflects a clear shift from general language learning to functional, purpose-driven language use. This aligns with research indicating that applied college students are more motivated when English instruction is directly connected with their majors and career aspirations (Alqahtani, 2015). The findings also confirm that students have a high level of metacognitive awareness of their language needs, a key component of effective needs analysis in ESP contexts (Simbolon, 2021).

A key contribution of this study lies in identifying a clear gap between current instructional practices and students' EAPP-oriented needs. Although students acknowledge the usefulness of existing courses in developing foundational skills, they consistently report that these courses do not sufficiently address practical, communicative, and discipline-specific requirements.

This mismatch reflects a broader issue identified in ESP research, where failure to align curriculum with learners' real-world needs leads to reduced engagement and limited learning outcomes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The findings also support Al-Wossabi (2024), who argues that the perceived irrelevance of instruction contributes to disengagement in Saudi EFL classrooms. The demand for practical activities, workplace simulations, and professional communication tasks highlights the need for a shift toward a fully integrated EAPP approach, where language instruction is contextualized, skill-based, and aligned with vocational demands.

Taken together, the findings support a multidimensional view of language learning in which linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors interact dynamically. This perspective aligns with contemporary research in EFL and ESP, which underscores the importance of holistic, context-sensitive approaches to language education. From a practical standpoint, the results point to the need for greater emphasis on communicative and task-based instruction, the integration of discipline-specific and workplace-oriented content, and the provision of authentic opportunities for language use inside and outside the classroom. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of addressing affective barriers through supportive and responsive teaching practices. Such pedagogical adjustments are essential to align English language instruction with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, particularly in terms of employability, skills development, and workforce readiness.

6. Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for pedagogy, curriculum design, and institutional policy within applied college contexts, particularly in relation to ESP and EAPP-oriented language instruction.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications

The strong interaction between linguistic challenges and affective factors highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that address both cognitive and emotional dimensions of language learning. Instructors should adopt learner-centered, communicative teaching practices that foster supportive classroom environments, reduce anxiety, and encourage active participation. Strategies such as structured speaking activities, scaffolded interaction, and formative feedback can help build learners' confidence and willingness to communicate.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that traditional teacher-centered approaches limit opportunities for meaningful language use. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on task-based and interaction-focused instruction, including role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving activities that simulate real-life communication. Such approaches not only enhance linguistic competence but also mitigate affective barriers by promoting engagement and collaborative learning.

6.2 Curriculum and ESP/EAPP Implications

The findings reveal a clear misalignment between current instructional practices and students' academic and professional language needs, underscoring the need to reorient English curricula toward ESP and EAPP frameworks in which instruction is explicitly linked to learners' disciplinary and occupational contexts. In this regard, curriculum design should incorporate discipline-specific vocabulary and genre-based instruction, alongside the development of workplace communication skills such as presentations, reports, emails, and meetings, as well as the use of authentic materials and real-world tasks relevant to students' fields of study. Such alignment has the potential to enhance learners' perceptions of the relevance of English, thereby fostering greater motivation and engagement. Furthermore, embedding needs analysis as an ongoing component of curriculum development can help ensure that instructional content remains responsive to evolving academic requirements and labor market demands.

6.3 Environmental and Institutional Implications

The findings further underscore the significant role of environmental factors, particularly the limited use of English beyond the classroom

context. To bridge the gap between students' need for authentic English use and the limited opportunities available in their current environment, institutions should cultivate language-rich environments that extend beyond formal instruction, for instance, through the establishment of English-speaking clubs and extracurricular activities, the adoption of blended and technology-enhanced learning platforms, and the provision of opportunities for authentic interaction via projects, internships, or simulations. In addition, institutional policies should encourage the integration of English within disciplinary courses, thereby promoting a more contextualized and immersive learning experience. Such measures can help bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world language use, ultimately enhancing students' communicative competence.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the English language learning challenges and needs of Applied College students at King Faisal University using a mixed-methods needs-analysis approach. The findings reveal that language learning in this context is shaped by the interaction of linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental factors.

Linguistic challenges, particularly in vocabulary and speaking fluency, were found to be central barriers to effective communication. However, these challenges are not isolated; they are closely intertwined with affective factors such as anxiety and low confidence, which significantly influence learners' willingness to participate in language use. Pedagogical practices emerged as a critical determinant of learning outcomes, with teacher-centered approaches and limited opportunities for interaction contributing to reduced communicative competence. In addition, environmental conditions, including restricted exposure to English and the dominance of Arabic, further limit opportunities for authentic language use. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated a strong awareness of their English language needs, particularly in relation to career-oriented skills, technical vocabulary, and practical communication.

A key contribution of this study lies in identifying students' perceived need for greater alignment between current instructional practices and their ESP/EAPP-oriented needs. While existing courses provide a foundation in general language skills, students expressed a need for greater emphasis on practical communication, discipline-specific, and workplace communication requirements. By adopting a multidimensional and needs-oriented perspective, this study provides empirical evidence that can inform the continued development of English language instruction in applied college contexts.

Although the study is limited by its single-institution context and reliance on note-based qualitative data, it provides valuable insights into the multidimensional nature of language learning in applied college settings. Future research should expand across institutions, incorporate more robust qualitative methods. Teachers' perspectives should also be included to complement students' views of instructional practices and language needs. Further studies could explore causal relationships using advanced analytical models.

In short, the study highlights the need for a more integrated, context-sensitive approach to English language instruction. It integrates linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and environmental dimensions while aligning instruction with learners' academic and professional realities. Such an approach is essential for enhancing language proficiency, supporting employability, and meeting the broader goals of educational development in line with national and global demands.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization, Elham Alzain and Shahab Ahmad Almaaytah; methodology, Elham Alzain and Shahab Ahmad Almaaytah; software, Maryam Alquraini; validation, Maryam Alquraini; formal analysis, Elham Alzain; investigation, Elham Alzain and Arwa Alawerdy; resources, Khadijah Saleh Almousa; data curation, Khadijah Saleh Almousa; writing—original draft preparation, Elham Alzain; writing—review and editing, Maryam Alquraini, Khadijah Saleh Almousa, Sarah Alkhaibary, and Arwa Alawerdy; visualization, Sarah Alkhaibary; supervision, Elham Alzain; project administration, Shahab Ahmad Almaaytah; funding acquisition, Elham Alzain, Shahab Ahmad Almaaytah, Maryam Alquraini, Khadijah Saleh Almousa, Sarah Alkhaibary, and Arwa Alawerdy. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Ethics approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of King Faisal University (protocol code KFU-2026-ETHICS4057).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data is not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data is available.

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AI Disclosure Statement

The authors confirm the use of AI-assisted tools, including Grammarly and DeepSeek, solely for language editing and to improve the clarity and readability of the manuscript. These tools were not used to generate the study's data, analysis, findings, or scholarly conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the content and integrity of the manuscript.

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