



Aligning CSS English Preparation with Exam Demands: A Linguistic Needs Analysis from the Perspective of CSS Mentors in Pakistan

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Article History:		<i>Central Superior Services (CSS) examination Pakistan is a prestigious but a competitive entry to civil service, where assessments in the English language, especially the Essay and Precis are a major hindrance for most candidates. Even after the long preparation, at least 90 percent of the aspirants are never able to meet linguistic standards desired by Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC). This paper, called Aligning CSS English Preparation with Exam Demands: Linguistic Needs Analysis through the Eyes of CSS Mentors in Pakistan, examines the attitudes of CSS mentors and tutors towards the language shortcomings of applicants, discrepancy between the existing teaching methods, and the conformity (or non-conformity) of curriculum and the requirements of the exam. With the qualitative research design, the researcher gathered data with the help of semi-structured interviews with CSS mentors in different academies and independent platforms. In the findings, it is established that there are big gaps between the knowledge instilled on language proficiency during training and the one tested in the actual exam. The common weaknesses cited by the mentors were the skills in academic writing, consistency in developing an argument, lexical resources, grammatical correctness and structuring answers within specified time. The same research area points to the high necessity of a context-based English curriculum that has examinable specifications in line with the real linguistic requirements of the CSS exam. It provides practical suggestions to the curriculum designers, trainers, and policymakers to improve instructional strategies and eventually increase the rate of student achievement.</i>
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Introduction

Central Superior Services (CSS) examination in Pakistan is a form of very competitive and demanding process in selecting civil service jobs through the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC). English is the most complicated item among the many subjects with the failure rate ever on the rise. FPSC annual reports show that 2023 has resulted in a high probability of failing both English Essay and precis & Composition papers at 90 percent or below the number of candidates passing per year (FPSC, 2023). These pathetic outcomes cast a big doubt on the efficiency of the current English language teaching methods, especially when it comes to CSS preparation classes and tutoring centers.

Besides the fact that English is also tested in the CSS examination, it is used as the main channel of written interaction, understanding, thought-provoking argumentation, and vapid articulation. Linguistic requirements of the exam are high and are represented by the academic writing, coherence and cohesion, range of vocabulary, grammar and rhetorical abilities. However, research studies show that the instructional models implemented at the preparatory places may not concur with these real linguistic needs (Rahman, 2002; Mahmood & Iqbal, 2010). Most of the coaching centers are based on old content, memorizing methods, and copy-paste methodologies that do not focus on different needs and competency gaps of applicants (Hassan, 2017).

In addition, there has also been minimal focus on the views of the CSS mentors who are most intently involved in getting the students ready to handle the examination. It is the responsibility of these mentors to recognize the recurrent linguistic vulnerabilities and teaching gaps. A needs analysis tailored along the mentor line is very pertinent for the guidance of a successful curriculum design and pedagogical reform. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), needs analysis is the backbone of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) since it provides information as to what the learners need to achieve success in a given environment, in this example, the CSS English papers.

It should be understood that in the Pakistani context, where English is being taught as a foreign/second language and linguistic competence and social privilege are often linked, a deeper insight into the teaching-learning environment must be employed. Hence, this research will help in filling in such a big gap in research by revealing the linguistic requirements of CSS applicants through the perceptions of mentors and instructors with an aim of aligning English language teaching with the exam requirements.

Problem Statement

One of the most prestigious but most difficult ways of entry into the public service is CSS (Central Superior Services) in Pakistan. Nevertheless, it is quite saddening to note that annually, the passing marks of more than 90 percent of candidates in English Essay paper and Precis & Composition paper are not notable (FPSC, 2023). Regardless of the number of preparatory academies and guidance platforms, candidates still show low performance rates, which implies that there is a systematic rift in between pedagogical methods and the veritable linguistic requirements of the CSS exam. Most literature has discussed performance or content of curriculum of the students but nothing much has been said about the observations of CSS mentors involved directly with candidates preparation. Their views are capable of providing useful diagnosing information regarding the language issues presented by candidates and the instructional gaps preventing their achievement. This paper will explore the linguistic requirements of the students of CSS in the perspective of the mentors and instructors in an attempt to fill in the gap between English language teaching and the need to fulfill the examination requirements.

Significance of the Study

The present study can be of both academic and practical importance in the Pakistani setting because once in the English-proficient society, social mobility and professional performance become important. This study will help to better contextualize linguistic requirements in high-stakes exams since it views the situation through the lens of CSS mentors who are in a position to know strengths and weaknesses of students. The results will guide curriculum developers, policy makers and preparatory centers about how to realign the teaching strategies, as well as, materials with the needs as they are based on the demands of the CSS English papers. Finally, this research seeks to help in the minimizing high failure rate, through the provision of practical recommendations, which is based on empirical mentor feedback, hence promoting the efficiency of English language training in competitive examinations in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What are the most important language problems that CSS mentors notice in their aspirants in preparation of the English Essay and Precis & Composition papers?
2. What are the perceptions of CSS mentors regarding the fit (or the lack/fit) of the current instructional practices as they concern the realities of the CSS English examination?
3. What are the policies and advises that CSS mentors suggest in order to enhance the teaching of the English language to the CSS aspirants in Pakistan?

Literature Review

Adequate command of English language is a main determinant of success in competitive exams with high stakes internationally, particularly with multicultural societies like that of Pakistan, where English is used to administer elite bureaucratic professional examinations like that of the Central Superior Services (CSS) examination. Yet, even with the official acceptance of English and its use as the main language of higher education and even in federal ministries, most candidates in CSS do poorly in English Essay and other language assessment papers, which leads to doubts about the their linguistic readiness (FPSC, 2023).

The papers delivered in CSS English demand accomplished writing, critical reasoning, argumentation, coherence, proficiency in grammar, and vocabulary management qualities-which are normally under-developed in Pakistani teaching situation (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2010). Conventional teaching of language in Pakistan and especially in government schools and colleges entails rote learning, teaching based on translation and shallow grammar practice as opposed to encouraging higher-order academic writing and discourse skills (Rahman, 2002; Shamim, 2008). This has led students proceeding to prepare to take the CSS without having the necessary linguistic base.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) asserted that needs analysis forms a key component of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching process and is essentially meant to give an account of what learners know, what they should know and thus how best the gap could be bridged. Such a framework can be applied in the preparation of CSS to give a diagnostic approach in explicating the shortcomings of linguistic competence. The systematic needs analysis, however, is not incorporated in much of the existing pedagogy in CSS preparatory academies but rather they tend to focus on generalized content delivery with little feedback (Hassan, 2017).

Mentors and instructors are an important mediating element in the process of leading students through CSS preparation, and their experience seldom appears in the academic publications. They may search out continuously occurring lingual norms and didactic disparity that are overlooked in

wider-scale assessment. Research done in other ESP situations has revealed the importance of the perceptions of instructors in designing curriculum changes to enhance the learning outcomes of students (Basturkmen, 2010). In Pakistani context, it has increasingly been realized that exam-based teaching frequently cannot suitably cater to the linguistic requirements of its learners (Mahboob, 2009), particularly in situations where English is by no means a mother tongue, and it is not used in the larger part of the communicative scenario.

In addition, these issues are worsened by socio-economic inequalities and regional imbalances. Under-resourced or rural students are usually deprived of effective English instruction at an early stage that leads to their poor academic writing and reading long-term skills (Mansoor, 2004). Within this milieu CSS mentors can act as a linguistic gatekeeper in that what they can offer is the experience, and this can be used to formulate more need-oriented teaching methods.

Though the level of failure is shocking and the key to CSS success is the language of English, there are few attempts at getting a deeper understanding through a research of preparation of exams in CSS. The past research has either engaged itself in analysing past papers (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2010) or in criticizing the exam in terms of ideological and linguistic biases (Rahman, 2002), thus failing to comprehend the pedagogical process itself. Thus, the research fulfillment reported in this study bridges an important research gap by examining the perceptions of CSS mentors concerning the linguistic needs of the candidates and where they may contribute to a more consistent, responsive, and efficient English language pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper will base its theoretical framework of survey on English as Specific Purposes (ESP) and Needs Analysis as theorised by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The focus of ESP involves enabling teachers to design their language teaching with regard to the needs of the learners in a specific context with regard to the communicative requirements of the target task. Here, the target behavior is the passing of the English papers of the CSS examination, which basically consists of the Essay and Precis papers.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), needs analysis is a procedure of tracing the shortcomings, needs, and wants of the learner. Necessities are what the learner requires in order to operate; shortcomings are what the learner does not know; and wants are the perceptions made by the learner on what is needed. Although the student perspectives have been researched extensively in a few ESP scenarios, the current study places more pedagogical and diagnostic needs analysis focus in the perceptions of the mentors- the ones actively involved in the preparation of aspirants.

Also, the study resorts to Stakeholder Theory of language education (Basturkmen, 2010), which maintains that other stakeholders, i.e. teachers, curriculum developers, and examiners, have a considerable influence on the language learning process. The study aims to ensure that the key stakeholders considered focus on CSS mentors in order to produce useful knowledge that can help ensure curriculum alignment and teaching strategies that can be applied in the CSS English preparation.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research study will use a qualitative exploratory research design in order to achieve a deeper understanding about the lingual requirements of CSS aspirants as they are visualized by the

mentors. Qualitative research would be useful as the researcher is dealing with multifaceted human experiences, subjective experience and teaching practices in given socio-cultural settings.

Participants

The target audience is five mentors of the English language in the best CSS academies in Lahore, Pakistan, that worked with students in the 2023-2024 session. These tutors are versatile in quality with respect to guiding students through the CSS English Essay and Precis & Composition papers. They were chosen due to purposive sample which aimed at the professional who has experienced cases of teaching and has met a number of CSS aspirants most of the time and is aware of the past trends in examinations.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data because it provided both a standardized process of asking questions and more probing questions. The duration of each interview was about 45-60 minutes and these were carried out either in-person or through Zoom, according to the availability of the respondents and their wish.

The interviews covered:

1. Mentors perception of how CSS candidates are likely to be exposed to common linguistic problems
2. Notes on the mismatch between what was taught and what was on the exams.
3. Interviews were all conducted in English written with the consent of the participants being taped and verbatim recorded to analyze.

Ethical Considerations

The information about the intended research was given to all the participants and the participants signed an informed consent form. Their names and institutions that they represent are anonymous for confidentiality. .

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was characterized by orienting oneself to the data, creation of initial codes, detection of any repeat patterns, as well as interpretation of the results in relative relation to the theoretical perspective. The most important themes were the following: grammatical weakness, absence of skills in academic writing, issues with selection of arguments, vocabulary scarcity, and deficient instructional strategies.

Theme 1: Weak Grammatical Foundation

M1: Only very few students are able to build even a simple error free sentence. Their tenses and subject verb agreement is always a problem.

M4: Students still make tense-recombination and misuse modal even after months of training. Grammar has never before been systematically taught to them.

Grammatical deficiency was a major linguistic weakness as all the mentors agreed. Problems with coherence and grammatically correct construction of sentences is a factor that greatly damages the

performance of students in both Essay and Precis papers. It points to systematic pathology of earlier schooling and inability to provide focused training of grammar in CSS preparation.

Theme 2: Inability to Structure Arguments and Essays

M2: They do not know how to plan an essay. They make jumps without transitions to another point logically.

M5: They do not have introductions, thesis statements and conclusions in their writing. Their arguments are usually enumerated instead of being argued.

The mentors highlighted that there was no training in the conventions of academic writing. In the CSS exam, essay writing necessitates administrative skills as well as language skills, hence these traits of language performance are both linguistic and rhetorical. This is as a result of incoherent and disorganized responses due to failure of teaching essay structure.

Theme 3: Weaker Vocabulary and Lexical Resource

M3: They speak with most basic words and tend to repeat vocabulary. Others even memorize words with fancy names and meanings, and--high-sounds--without comprehending context.

M4: Use of vocabulary is either painfully simple or unnatural. They seldom apply collocations or higher education phrases correctly.

Lexical variety and the use of words in context is a challenging issue of the candidates. Their rote learning instead of using logic and truly acquiring vocabulary does not help their skills in expressing themselves in complex situations very well and accurately.

Theme 4: Mismatch between Instruction and Exam Demands

M1: The essay topics provided by the coaching centers are outdated and concentrate on clichés. It is critical thinking skill rather than information dumping that is expected of us on the actual exam.

M5: Our curriculum is not unified. Every mentor teaches in a different manner and there is no coordination with FPSC expectations.

There is a significant gap between teaching and what the CSS test requires. The lack of uniform teaching resources and test-driven approach leads to the lack of an effective preparation. What has to be done is the matter of developing a curriculum based on what is on the actual examinations.

Theme 5: Lack of Reading Habits and Exposure to Quality English

M2: They do not read newspapers and journals. They are exposed to little good writing and this shows up in their essays.

M3: Their language can hardly improve, even reading as many essay templates as they can remember, unless they read quality material on regular basis.

All the mentors associated poor reading with poor standards of writing. Internalizing grammar, vocabulary, style and argumentation depends on authentic high-level exposure to English. Book reading should also be included in CSS preparatory courses.

Summary of Findings

Theme	Description	Implication
Weak Grammar	Frequent errors in basic sentence structure	Need for intensive remedial grammar instruction
Disorganized Essays	Lack of logical flow, poor structure	Essay planning and cohesion training required
Limited Vocabulary	Overuse of simple or inappropriate words	Vocabulary building must focus on usage, not memorization
Instruction-Exam Gap	Outdated or unfocused teaching	Standardized, exam-oriented curriculum development
Poor Reading Culture	Minimal exposure to quality writing	Integrate reading practice into curriculum

Systemic and instructional gaps found in the responses of the mentors enhance high rate of failure in the English papers in CSS. These are structural deficiency in grammar, in scholarly training in writing and in lexical variety. There is inadequacy of teaching; matching with examination requirements, and reading exposure. The results justify the fact that a needs-oriented English curriculum that reflects the demands on the CSS examination would be necessary and should include remedial grammar, essay building, contextual use of vocabulary and reading critically, as part of the curriculum.

Discussion

This research report identifies various pertinent linguistic areas of concern which are a major reason behind the high failure pattern in the CSS English papers. These encompass the root grammatical disadvantages, inadequate structuring of essays, inadequate vocabulary, lack of correlation between teaching methods and assessment requirements and inadequate exposure to reading. The identified gaps by mentors coincide with and are extensions of the problems noted in the literature on prior studies regarding English language teaching and exam preparation in Pakistan.

First, the fact that weak grammar skills have been repeatedly observed in the CSS aspirants confirms what previous research states has been a lack of competence in the basic level English language education in the country as a whole. In Pakistan, specifically in the teaching of English in the public schools, Rahman (2002) claims that there is an ineffective practice that makes such training predominantly ineffective as a result of orientation towards translation and rote-memorization. In the same manner, Shamim (2008) indicates that the way grammar is usually learnt in a vacuum without substantial context, results in shallow comprehension. The responses of the mentors during this research prove that such shortfalls prevail into superior education phases even to the preparation of competitive examinations, and it goes a long way in affecting the capabilities of the students to write legible and error-free English.

Second, the inadequate use of academic writing skills and poor structures of essays as noted by mentors signify what Mahmood and Iqbal (2010) discovered in their research of CSS essays. According to them, the majority of students cannot get most arguments right not because they lack ideas but because of flaws in organization, the development of thesis and weak coherence and cohesion. The current study improves on the above by demonstrating how the CSS mentors observe a training deficiency when it comes to arguing and logical arrangement, which implies that even on the preparatory level, such skills may not be effectively taught..

The indefinite and improper use of vocabulary is another concern that has been present in this study and reflects the same as was stated by Mansoor (2004) suggesting that this is a result of sociolinguistic inequality and lack of exposure to English in non-elite institutions. The rural or less privileged candidates who have been denied the chances to enhance their richness of vocabulary and the correct usages of words and, therefore, use simple or forced words in a given writing assignment. This result supports the importance of the content-specific vocabulary learning that should focus on the practical use and not on cramming.

Worst of all, as it has been shown in this research, there exists a significant gap between teaching methods and reality in the form of assessment requirements guarded by the CSS English exam. According to Hassan (2017), the preparation of CSS usually uses outdated teaching materials and strict patterns that do not teach students to write papers in the style that demands nuance, criticism, and analysis in the exam. The absence of the standardized or needs-based curriculum in the CSS academies adds even more seriousness to the problem, as mentors are forced to confine to the personal experience instead of the single and cohesive instructive pattern. In their study, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) focused on the need to analyze the needs in ESP so that they could control harmony between teaching and learner needs. The present study uses the same principle in the CSS case and shows that such alignment is in dire need yet clearly not there.

Also, missing regular reading absorption of the mentioned by the mentors reflects the concerns of Basturkmen (2010) who highlights the input role in acquiring the language. It is necessary to read not just to develop language but also to build the ability of critical thinking and awareness of content that is required to write the essay paper. Those who do not indulge in regular readings continue to be linguistically underdeveloped and ill prepared to absorb abstract or social-political themes that are usually featured in CSS exams.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the views of CSS English mentors in Lahore on the language requirements and exam readiness issues of candidates who appear in CSS examination. With the help of qualitative interviews of five experienced instructors at different academies, the study revealed the inconsistency that has continued to exist between what is required of the English paper (Essay and Pr.& C. on composition) and what the available methods have been able to teach in the preparatory academies. Typical shortcomings on the part of the candidates in the basic areas of written communication, deficient control of grammar, poor vocabulary and failure to develop coherent arguments were marked as being the main causes making the pass rate to remain low in English. The results compel the need to clarify the content of the instructional content with the stipulated requirements of the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC). The research affirms that several applicants enter the English paper without any sense of the genre writing needs or the cognitive and language skills they should have with the goal of writing analytically and argumentatively.

Recommendations

- The CSS preparatory academies need to come up with specific curriculum premised on assessing the needs of the exam requirement and candidate constraints. The teaching should focus on argument framing, mental abilities, and high-level designing of writing elements.
- Workshops targeted at formatting the teaching ideologies of instructors all over Pakistan must be conducted so that the pedagogy can be adjusted according to the assessment standards of FPSC. There might be a greater focus on coherency in the instruction through standardized modules or the standards used by mentors.

- Frequent mock tests, peer evaluation, and evaluation systems ought to be institutionalized in order to enable the applicants to have a hands-on experience and attempted exam-style questions as well as to obtain constructive criticism.
- Writing should not teach grammar on an ad hoc basis only; structuring genres like argumentative essay, reports, precis and comprehension strategies should be taught with explicit model using scaffold.
- It is imperative that more interaction exists between FPSC and CSS preparatory institutes. The expectations would be understood by mentors and candidates alike through periodic seminars, feedbacks by examiners, and attraction of model papers with comments.

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