Chapter 6  Summary and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary and conclusions to the study findings and contributions. The objective is to illustrate the extent to which the major questions of this study have been answered. The first section (6.2) summarises and draw conclusions based on the findings related to the empirical work. It discusses briefly some of the significant results. The second section (6.3) presents possible implications of the findings and some suggestions and recommendations.

6.2 Summary of the Findings

This study was presented in six consecutive chapters developed to achieve the study objectives. In chapter one, an introduction of the overall structure of the research was presented as well as a clarification of the purpose of conducting this study. In chapter two, general background information on the environment of the empirical study was provided. It provided a brief description of the use of English language in Saudi Arabia, the educational system, English textbook, and Alabna’a school. Chapter four presented the methodology for the empirical work. In brief, the study was conducted in Alabna’a School in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. The sample was students in first year secondary school. A total of 125 questionnaires were distributed and 112 responses were collected, representing a response rate of about 89.6%.

In chapter five, the findings of the empirical work were discussed in detail. Overall, the results indicated that there are a considerable number of students that use English outside the classroom. This indicates that the actual use of English is as a means of communication with non-Arabic speakers in Saudi Arabia. This emphasises the argument that English language is considered as a significant means of exchanging knowledge and information, and evaluated as an instrument. There is no integrative desire to adopt aspects of English speaking culture among aspects of the Saudis’ life.

The result of the analysis showed that the most important reason for studying English was to pass the final exam. The second most important reason was ‘English may be useful in the future’. The third was a desire to study English in order to enter a scientific college at the tertiary level.
The results also showed that speaking was found to be the most significant skill needed to accomplish most of the reasons for studying English. However, students think that the textbooks were not very helpful in developing their speaking skills. This result highlights the gap between the objective of the textbook and the actual emphasis of the teaching. While the objective of the textbook as defined by the designers emphasises speaking and listening, students think the textbook did not provide enough help to develop these skills. Similarly, the findings of this study indicated that most of the time spent in the English lesson was allocated to grammar, while speaking and listening received the least attention.

As mentioned before, the most important reason for studying English was found to be ‘for passing the final exam’ and the most significant skills needed to accomplish this objective were grammar and writing. When we look at students’ perception of how far the textbooks provide the necessary emphasis to develop these skills, the result indicated a satisfactory level of the role of the textbook. Moreover, the analysis showed that these two skills took most of the class’ time. Among the six language skills, grammar was allocated the most time and writing came second. This implies that students who are studying English to pass exams are satisfied with the textbooks and the time allocated to these skills. Also, these results indicated that, even though the syllabus of the textbook emphasises speaking and listening, teachers pay more attention to grammar and writing. These results raise the question whether there is an “unannounced conspiracy” between the teacher and the learner to change the focus of the textbooks or are there other factors that force the teachers to focus on grammar and writing? As mentioned earlier, there is a mismatch between what the test demands and what the textbooks focus on. This mismatch appears in the mark scheme, which has not been changed for a decade, and is followed even though the textbooks have changed. Teachers are asked to follow this marking scheme in designing their tests. In this situation, it appears that there is an imbalance in the educational process caused by the examination system. According to the literature, examinations have direct and indirect effects on teaching methods, called ‘the backwash effect’. The backwash effect on teaching occurs both before the test and after, depending on the type of test used. This impact, which the test has on teaching and on students as well, may be a positive or a negative one (Heaton 1990, Hughes 1989). Prodromou (1995: 14-15) classified the backwash effect into two headings: “Overt backwash” (which seems to be occurring in Al-Abna’a Secondary School, Riyadh) which means doing a lot of past papers or adapting the teaching methods used in class as preparation for an exam, and “Covert backwash” which basically amounts to teaching a textbook as if it were a textbook. Failure to take account of the backwash effect is one of the main reasons for the failure of the new communicative teaching methods to take root in language classes. Teachers and learners are trapped in the examination preparation cycles. The syllabus objectives are sacrificed in an attempt to cover the demands of the examination, and learners learn in a stressful, textbook-bound environment. This negative backwash is
experienced here. As mentioned earlier, teachers emphasise the skills needed for achieving success in passing the final exam, in order to fulfil the students’ desire to pass the test; accordingly the teaching methods are changed.

However, the results showed that more than half of the students thinks that the textbook needs some changes. Speaking was chosen as the most important skill that needs more attention in the textbooks. Consequently, it is obvious that there is inconsistency between the objective of the textbooks and the actual practice of teaching.

Finally, one of the objectives of this study was to find out the students’ needs for studying English. The results were homogenous, and this suggests that the sample had similar needs and that even at their age, the students were aware of having specific needs, and were able to identify their present and future needs. Also, the students were able to show their own perceptions of their current textbooks and to provide a few suggestions to be taken into account in the process of change.

6.3 Suggestions and Recommendations

The findings of this study imply some significant suggestions and recommendations to policy makers and teachers. Firstly, in order to design appropriate syllabuses and adopt effective teaching techniques, it is necessary to define as accurately as possible the present and future needs of the students. As the results suggested, there is a “common core” among the learners. For example, the majority agreed that the most important reason for studying English is to pass the final exam. Also, they agreed about the importance of some future needs such as “to enter a scientific college at the tertiary level” and “it may be useful in the future”. Another common core that has been noticed was that they agreed about the need for changing the textbook, and that speaking is perceived as the most important skill. The findings show that it is possible to carry out a needs analysis in the general English classroom like the one conducted in Alabna’a secondary school, Saudi Arabia. Therefore, policy makers in the Ministry of Education could carry out a need analysis in the general English classroom, and they need to consider the students’ needs in any evaluation or in designing future textbooks. Students are one of the most important factors in the educational process and unless they are involved in the process of designing the syllabus, the benefits of the textbooks may still be questioned. That assurance of the students’ participation could be accomplished by conducting needs analysis that includes both teachers and students.

Also, the questionnaire formulated and used in this study can be used as a tool in conducting needs analysis for the whole secondary stage in Saudi Arabia including years 2 and 3. Minor changes would, however, need to be made to tailor it accurately to fit other levels.

Another point is that policy makers should think of decreasing the heavy load of teaching assigned to each teacher, and providing teachers with adequate in-service teacher education to enable them to conduct needs
analysis on a daily basis. This would give teachers the necessary time and skills to address other needs of particular groups of students that are not covered by the syllabus of the textbook.

In addition, policy makers are recommended to evaluate the current marking scheme (appendix G2). As the results showed, they seem not to support the current objectives of the textbooks. The objectives of the test and, therefore, the marking scheme must match the objectives of the textbook. If tests are based on the same objectives, they will provide a true picture of what has been achieved and what gaps need to be filled.

Secondly, the policy makers need to find some ways to encourage teachers to be critical and write comments, remarks or observations concerning their subject matter, and to carry out needs analysis in their classes and to respond to it. Such incentives could include providing the teachers with an adequate and suitable teacher education and the necessary instruments and supplementary aids to enhance their way of developing themselves and the students’ skills.

Thirdly, the policy makers need to reformulate the objectives for the secondary stage. The objectives need to be broken down to cover each year of the secondary stage. Also, the methodological framework (the oral approach, mentioned in the 1970 syllabus and never formally changed since), on which the current textbooks (EFSA) are based, needs to be changed. As mentioned earlier, the oral approach deals with the spoken language like the written language (structural phrases are introduced by repetitive drills, and there is no room for errors). The emphasis is on knowledge about the language or “declarative knowledge” (Johnson in Bygate ed. 1994), which is insufficient for the real communication that takes place outside the classroom in real situations. According to the results, the students use the language outside the classroom, they need to develop their speaking ability, and this is what the textbooks have failed in, even though they claim to focus on this skill. Also, teachers (Alshumaimeri 1999) pointed out that the students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation.

Moreover, a better attitude toward the language needs to be encouraged. Language is not an abstract of linguistic characters, but it is a culture. We should go beyond the mastery of structures, as in this course, to the point where our students can use them to communicate meanings in real life.

This research, like most empirical studies, is constrained by the data collected. The sample of this research was selected from Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia, and specifically from the first level of Alabna’a secondary school. This environment has its own kind of motivation. In other environments situations and motivations may differ. Thus, the results of this research are subject to cultural specificity. In other words, the results of this study can be generalised to students in the first level of Alabna’a secondary school in Riyadh in the year of 1999. Any change to some of these specifications could lead to different results.
Another point is that there might be a danger of focusing on the learners’ immediate needs. This danger best is explained by Cunningsworth, who pointed out, “An assessment of the immediate needs of learners in secondary schools runs the very real risk of leading to objectives which are of limited scope and rather trivial in nature. In the most extreme situation such objectives may lead to language teaching which involves little more than phrase-book type learning and brings about little or no competence in using the resources of the language to create novel utterances.” (1983: 150)

Finally, this research is believed to represent at least a small step forward in a largely unexplored area in Saudi Arabia, needs analysis. It is hoped that this study will lead to increased attention to this area, and provide a clear map to chart future inquiry.