



Perception, Considerations And Evaluating English As A Teaching Unit In Higher Education

Azoua Mathias HOUNNOU

Université de Parakou (Benin)

mathias.azoua@yahoo.fr

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Ulrich Orlando Sena HINDEMIN

Université d'Abomey -Calavi, (Benin)

richdeme1@gmail.com

&

Pedro Marius EGOUNLETI

Université d'Abomey-Calavi, (Benin)

pedmarg@yahoo.com

Abstract : The investigations were carried out over a period of three academic years, i.e. from 2018 – 2019, 2019- 2020 and 2020- 2021. Research involved gathering data on learners' views on their learning needs and expectations, on encountered difficulties in learning at Universities, on the ranking of preferences for language skills, i.e. the degree of importance of proficiency in different areas of language, and collecting and analyzing learners' self-assessment data throughout the courses. The techniques of gathering data included different types of questionnaires administered to learners at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the courses. The aim of the research was to consider the issues of learning English on a University level and explore the ways of improving the quality of learning and consequently the teaching methods. For the findings, learners' attitudes, difficulties and production allow to creating the measurable needs and foster proficiency in language for professional purposes in some Universities.

Keywords: Perception, Consideration, Evaluating, English as Teaching Unit, Higher education

Perception, considérations et évaluation de l'anglais comme unite d'enseignement dans l'enseignement supérieur

Résumé : Cette étude a été entreprise durant trois années académiques. C'est-à-dire de 2018 à 2021. Elle consiste à collecter des données sur les points de vue des étudiants en termes de besoins et d'attentes de l'apprentissage. Aussi, s'est-elle focalisée sur les difficultés rencontrées dans cet apprentissage dans les Universités en prenant compte leurs priorités et préférences dans les modalités langagières, à savoir : le degré de progrès linguistique dans les différents domaines de l'anglais, langue de spécialité. En effet, l'analyse des données d'évaluation du niveau des étudiants à travers les cours, les techniques utilisées, lesquelles font l'objet de

discussions, tout en administrant des questionnaires aux étudiants en début, à mi-parcours et à la fin des enseignements. Le but vise par cette étude est de reconsidérer les préoccupations spécifiques liées à l'apprentissage de l'anglais de spécialité dans les universités tout en explorant les outils d'enseignement - apprentissage et évaluation de cette unité d'enseignement. Les résultats ont montré une apparition de fonction d'attitudes liées aux difficultés de production générées par des besoins mesurables qui sont aussi par ricochet fonction de leur performance en anglais de spécialité dans les universités au BENIN.

Mots-clés: Perception, Considération, Evaluation, Unité d'enseignement

Introduction

It is common knowledge that although students spend more than seven years (including kindergarten and primary schooling) studying English as a school subject, this is not sufficient for them to achieve an intermediate level of proficiency in English as a Foreign Language in Benin context. The data on the proficiency of newcomers to Public multidisciplinary Universities of Benin gathered over four years were already explored. The knowledge and usage of English that school-leavers possess gives rise to concerns. Students find it very hard to cope with learning English for Special Purposes or English for Specific Purposes basically because of lack of the General English skills. The ESP course introduces learners to English for economics, medicine, agronomy, and law etc. ...i.e. the kind of language they will face in their future profession. Learners have to master terms used in their field of study, to be able to understand formal professional texts and authentic recordings of lectures and produce formal pieces of writing as well as to be able to make professional presentations and participate in discussions on contemporary research field issues. The natural question that occurs is why school-leavers do not possess adequate language skills, and an attempt has been made to tackle this question through this research work objectives.

1. Research objectives, questions and hypotheses

The main objectives are to work out and analyze the target situation, the needs analysis, present situation analysis. The lack, the wants and the necessities in multidisciplinary universities regarding the learning - teaching and evaluating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and also to review and redesign the practices in teaching, learning and evaluating ESP in universities classes in Benin Republic.

Research questions:

- Is ESP a necessity in Universities programs of study?
- Did the learners really learn ESP in Benin multidisciplinary Universities?

Hypotheses:

- ESP is a transversal subject for Universities program in Benin
- In Benin multidisciplinary Universities, learners did not read at all ESP

2. Literature review

Language teaching has seen many changes in ideas about syllabus design and methodology in the last 50 to 70 years, and ESP prompted a rethinking of approaches to syllabus design and methodology. In Benin, ESP is a more recent trend. But unfortunately, neither the lecturers nor the students are interested in practicing these communicative activities; the main reason for this is that the final exams' formats which are currently being administered focus on only the writing and reading skills of general English.

Benin education system is wholly exam-oriented; therefore, the two other important skills are not taken seriously at all and are not practiced or assessed. Students are mostly interested in solving, practicing and memorizing the examination style, model examination questions. The main objective is to obtain a good mark, not to learn English for specific purposes. Therefore, students' results are very good as a large number of them are getting good marks in writing ESP but their aptitude to contextualize their English regarding their field of study is impossible for their large majority. As far as the learning outcome in terms of English proficiency is concerned, their proficiency is at the upper intermediate level and the majority of the high written levels are not proficient users of English for Specific Purposes at all and the main goal of ESP which is contextualized communicative competence (CCC) is not being achieved. Most of the students are not good at any of the skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, which we need for our survival today; and they are really prepared for the vast amount of reading and writing required at the higher education level.

Comprehending students' attitudes towards English for specific purposes courses is a motive to this research. To that end, such course were imagined, in part, under the belief that they would be inherently more motivating as they, ideally, correspond directly to students' interests and needs (Hutchinson Waters, 1987). Rather than accepting this view at face value. Stakeholders were motivated to study more and more the Complex Dynamic

System Theory (CDST). This theory allows for the analysis of motivation as a dynamic phenomenon, strongly dependent on all the factors present in a given system, namely, a language classroom.

Gardner's (1960) Socio-educational Model (SM) has long dominated studies in L2 learning motivation in various contexts, including ESP (Ushioda, 1996). Its main principle is integrativeness; a strong integrative orientation comes from a desire to identify with people of the L2 community and often leads to a strong learning motivation. The model also includes an instrumental orientation, occurring when one studies a language for professional gain or due to another external force (Gardner, 1960). Applying the SM to ESP courses at university, participants could report strong instrumental orientations, such as learning English for their future jobs, with many reporting negative feelings towards the L2 community. So, the useful insights on the general attitudes of students, researchers have called for more thorough analyses of the learning environment, given its capacity to cause frequent motivational changes during a lesson. Responding to this call, Dornyei (2009) devised the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) to focus more directly on a learner's attitudes towards the classroom environment. The model contains several concepts, but the concern is how motivation is affected by the learning environment. Such concern includes relationships with one's peers and teachers, the layout of the classroom, the nature of the learning activities, the manner of teaching in class, and immeasurable other factors that can affect students' attitudes towards learning.

To the point of Waninge (2015), students were asked about the emotions they felt during their lessons and among the most cited emotional states were interest (leading to active participation in the classroom), boredom, leading to disengagement, and neutral attention for passive listening. With many participants, Waninge found that interest was the result of contextual factors, such as learning activities, the teacher, and peers. Interest was also associated when activities related to students' personal interests and pre-existing non-language goals. While this latter finding may point to the potential for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to stimulate student interest, the former most definitely shows the need to consider all factors in the classroom when studying student engagement.

3. Methodology

The reliable information about learners' difficulties in learning can be obtained from students' self-evaluation and self-assessment. In our settings, various self-analysis techniques have been applied. Further on, the findings

from the conducted surveys are to be discussed. The first survey involves documented questionnaires aimed to investigate how students rank learning problems that they encounter in different ESP areas. The second technique involves learners' self-assessment and rating their own performance, which is for the purpose of discussion. A documented survey of students' major difficulties in ESP has been similar to one designed by Medgyes (1994) and modified to suit our settings.

3.1. Data presentation and research findings

There have been two parts to the investigation. In the first part, the findings have been obtained in a non-documented form through tutoring, which allows learners to speak to the teacher individually face-to-face and creates a relaxed atmosphere. In the second part, respondents were requested to grade their anticipated performance in their final test or exam, which has been done in writing.

During the first part of self-assessment, some revealing data on learners' attitudes to studies at Universities have been obtained. About half of students gave as an excuse for not carrying out assignments their work commitments. However, a failure to get credits in the first semester seems to be an effective factor to make students change their attitudes to studies on a University level.

Oral fluency remains the most difficult area for a vast majority of learners. Oral fluency implies the ability to speak about any topic without preparation. The same fact was highlighted elsewhere (Medgyes, 1994). Grammar in general and word order in particular are the important areas of language learning and cause difficulty for our respondents. The skill of writing is another problematic area because learners have already had some practice in writing summaries, essays or preparing formal presentations. The language areas of average difficulty are ranked closely: ESP vocabulary, tenses, and prepositions are problematic to nearly three fourths of the investigated students. Speaking skill is a priority to over half of the learners. ESP reading is not considered easy to almost two thirds of learners. Generally, students do not attach much importance to reading, since a vast majority is sure they know how to read specific English. However, students do not seem to have been taught the reading sub-skills like skimming and scanning and prefer to translate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) passages word for word. Such an approach does read slow and boring. The flaws in reading skills are easy for learners to conceal, because learners do all the reading as home assignments, and the speed of reading has never been checked in class due to the shortage of time. Only comprehension of reading the ESP materials has been checked on a regular

basis by different means - through vocabulary tasks, comprehension questions or creative assignments, all of which clearly revealed learners's difficulties in coping with professional materials.

The psychological aspect of language learning the fear of mistakes, which hinders learners' outcome, has also been incorporated in the survey. It received as many as 57 per cent of responses. This implies that more than half of learners are intimidated by having to perform in front of their peers. The causes of performance fears are very individual and quite often have deep roots in the previous unsuccessful experience of language learning. Moreover, shy and unconfident learners focus on form and correctness in producing language and are aware of their deviations from the established norms of English, but unable to generate appropriate pieces. Psychologically, the fear of mistakes is a fear of losing face, and this feature typically is of mature adult learners (Rivers, 1992). Such learners are concerned with how they are judged by others. They are very cautious about making errors in what they say, for making errors would be a public display of ignorance (Shumin, 1997).

The least difficult areas of language skills to the third of respondents are listening and reading, 39% and 35%, respectively. Typically, learners complain that the different lecturers speak too fast. The explanation lies in learners' perception of non-stop authentic speech, they are unable to process information as fast as they do it in their native language. Special training has been applied to develop students listening skills, which explains the relatively low percentage. The interpretation of the presented data is quite apparent: learners are aware of what skills are the most important in ESP, and their rating of difficulties is quite realistic.

TABLE 1: Learners experience of learning English at school.

Questions	Yes	No
The classes did not focus on oral skills	57%	43%
You only learned grammar rules	43%	57%
You only learned vocabulary	-	100%
You learned phrases and communication skills	71%	29%
You were too shy to talk to your friends in English	43%	57%
You were not stimulated by classes	86%	14%
You were not stimulated by classes	71%	29%

You never had a chance to speak out of class	86%	14%
You liked your teacher of English	86%	14%
You had 3 4 5 classes per week	86% -4 lessons	14% -3 lessons
The number of students in your class	86% - 12 stud.	14% - 22 stud.
You liked English and wanted to learn it	57%	57%
You learned enough to pass your exam	72%	28%
You think you are bad at languages	57%	43%
Your experience of learning English is positive	72%	28%

3.2. *Learners' Experience and research method*

Student's experience of learning English at school was investigated formally - through administering a questionnaire - and talking to students informally outside classroom hours. The questionnaire referred to learners perceptions about studying English as a school subject as well as to their attitudes to learning it and experience they had before entering University. The research findings are presented as follows:

Examining the learners' answers in the Table 1, some interesting conclusions can be drawn. More than two thirds of students enjoyed learning English, and 86% liked their teachers. Although 71% of students learned phrases and communicative language skills, 86% of them had never had a chance to use English outside the classroom. A vast majority of students liked English and wanted to learn it, but 43% were too shy to practice it with their peers. A staggering 86% were not stimulated by their classes. This factor is particularly disturbing, since motivation in learning is a major point for success. Although school children not only learned vocabulary and grammar rules, but their classes did not focus on oral skills (57%). In some schools, there were up to 22 learners in language groups. A simple calculation shows that in large classes the student's talking time would be limited to 2 minutes in 45 minutes class provided there were no teachers talking time which is unrealistic. In reality, there is a substantial gap between teachers and students talking time in secondary schools teachers use up half of the classroom time for instruction in a foreign language class. Even given an opportunity to use a target language in

pair or small group work, a vast majority of school children feel insecure and use a mother tongue instead. The lack of speaking practice deprives learners of developing adequate oral skills.

The issues discussed in this section are not only problematic in Benin schools. They are common in schools, where teaching is conducted in either French or local languages. English education in this country has been persistently inefficient - producing students equipped with a minimal command of English. A major reason seems to be an examination-orientated teaching. In their English classes, learners carry out various tasks that are included in the exam papers, e.g. multiple choice or gap-filling exercises for checking reading comprehension skills; learning to conduct dialogues on certain topics or performing role-plays, all of which are quite often irrelevant to real life communication tasks. The reality of exam-orientated education places the emphasis on learners' preparation for tests and examinations instead of highlighting the long-term English learning for further life-long needs, i.e. for studies, a future job, international communication, etc.

3.3. *Learners Priorities in Studying English and data presentation*

To obtain a clearer idea of learners' priorities in different aspects of language learning, the respondents were requested to indicate how important it was for them to become proficient in various areas of language use. The questionnaire administered at the two multidisciplinary Universities of Benin has been adapted for this purpose. The respondents were asked to prioritize the importance of different skills in certain areas. The data are presented in the Table 2. For comparison, the first and second year students' ratings (unimportant, important and essential) are given in the same column. All the figures in columns show the number of students who ticked appropriate answers. The questionnaire was administered to the first year students after the first term of doing ESP at university, and to the second year students after three terms of ESP, i.e. before the final exam. It is of interest to compare how learners' attitudes change in the course of studies.

TABLE 2: Difficulties in using ESP (after P. Medgyes).

Skills	The most difficult	Average	The least difficult
ESP vocabulary	1. 4%	18. 74%	5. 22%
Speaking	6. 26%	12. 52%	5. 22%

Listening	4. 17%	10. 44%	9. 39%
Writing	10.44%	12. 52%	1. 4%
Reading	1. 4%	14. 61%	8. 35%
Grammar	12.52%	9.39%	2. 9%
Oral fluency	16. 70%	7.30%	-
Fear of mistakes	7.30%	13.57%	3. 13%
Skills	The most difficult	Average	The least difficult
Tenses	6. 26%	17. 74%	-
Word order	11.48%	10. 44%	8%
Prepositions	6. 26%	17.74%	-

There are two figures in all three columns of this table. The first one gives the number of students and the second the percentage of respondents who ticked appropriate answers. The frequency of occurring difficulties is ranked on the triple scale the most difficult, average and the least difficult. Similarly, as in the previous section, it is worthy to rank the responses in order of significance. The ranking has been conducted and presented in the Table 3.

TABLE 3 Ranking the significance of common problematic areas.

Language area	The most difficult
Oral fluency	70%
Grammar	52%
Word order	48%
ESP Writing	44%
Language area	The average
ESP vocabulary	79%
Tenses	74%

Prepositions	74%
ESP Reading	61%
Fear of mistakes	57%
Speaking	52%
Listening	44%
Language area	The least difficult
ESP Listening	39%
ESP Reading	35%

TABLE 4: Students self-grading data vs. teachers' grading in tests or final exams.

Language area	The same mark	Ms > Mt by 1 point	Ms > Mt by 2 points
Listening	22%	78%	-
Speaking	22%	56%	22%
ESP vocabulary	60%	22%	18%
Grammar	60%	20%	20%

The abbreviation Ms means marks given to themselves by students, and Mt given by a teacher in appropriate language areas, respectively.

The general overview of the data shows that learners tend to overestimate their performance in listening and speaking skills by one point, and only 22 per cent of students gives themselves the same mark as a teacher. However, it is important to highlight that one point difference is not really significant, because just 2 wrong answers in a test of 20 items lose one point in a mark. Thus, the interpretation of the data in the Table 4 is very straightforward, learners are quite realistic about their future performance.

Students' self-estimation is based on how confident they are before taking a test or exam. This sense of self-esteem is a very viable factor in the process of learning and should always be encouraged. It has been noticed that unconfident learners do themselves injustice, they usually perform worse than

their more self-confident peers. The findings can be summarized as follows: more than 44% of newcomers to Universities in Benin are false beginners and minimal users; 24 per cent are very limited users, 27 per cent are limited users, and 5 per cent are at post-elementary level.

Conclusion

It is tempting to use these specific concrete results for decision-making to make recommendations for changes in how teaching and learning should be carried out. Unfortunately, there is no the best way that suits everybody. Small amounts of data, carefully analyzed, can be beneficial in terms of interpretation. The data presented here are from a dynamic study of different groups of learners over three academic years. Although statistically there have been small samples in all groups for drawing reliable statistic correlations, nevertheless, some reliable conclusions can be drawn.

First, responses of individual learners are related to their learning attitudes and aptitudes. Second, an essential part of the learning process is monitoring, or to be exact, monitoring the progress of each learner individually throughout the academic year. Examining each learner's attitudes, difficulties and production in different language areas allows to catering for their needs and foster proficiency in the ESP. Third, consciousness-raising in students to ways of mastering language skills is a valid part of pedagogic strategy. It implies encouraging learners' initiative and taking over responsibility for their own learning. Given space, time and clear directions, learners are bound to succeed.

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