The Pronunciation Component in Teaching EAP in Cameroonian Universities: Some Proposals

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Abstract

In Cameroonian universities, EAP is generally seen as a marginalised unit, and its teaching is abandoned to part-time secondary school teachers, or doctorate students who have little or no knowledge of the subject. Most of the time, these teachers do not know the real objective of the subject, and do not master it. In some universities, each teacher designs a programme for his / her classes, and where there is a faculty programme, it is usually inadequate (Safotso 2011). With the development of so many non-native varieties of English around the world, one crucial problem of EAP teaching is now that of pronunciation. The student who undertakes university studies will be exposed to several accents of English from local and/or native speaker lecturers. Some students will even leave their home countries to study in English-speaking ones. This paper aims to show the weaknesses of the pronunciation component of EAP programmes so far offered in Cameroonian universities. It concludes by making some proposals for a better impact of this subject on other academic subjects.

Keywords: EAP, pronunciation, programme, speaking, accents

1. Introduction

Since its institution at the Federal University of Cameroon at its creation in 1962, the teaching of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) called Bilingual Training in most Cameroonian universities, has always raised a number of problems. The quality of the teaching programmes and the teaching staff generally leaves to be desired. Due to the bilingual nature of the majority of universities in Cameroon, where at times French-speaking students are taught by English-speaking lecturers, and English-speaking students by French-speaking lecturers, the teaching of EAP aims to facilitate the effective participation in all lectures to French-speaking students.

When one talks of lectures, it means a university teacher dictating notes or explaining orally a number of issues to groups of students, usually in a large hall. The way the lecturer dictates his/her notes, i.e. the way he/she speaks in class generally matters a lot, as few things are written on the board. Students generally have to listen and take down notes. They are therefore exposed to all kinds of accents from their various lecturers. Lecturers who have never been in contact with native speakers speak with their local accent. Those who studied in Britain try to imitate the British, whereas those who studied in America or elsewhere endeavour to imitate the accents used there. American volunteers, who sometimes teach in some Cameroonian universities and secondary schools, naturally speak with their American accent. Besides the various lectures, the university student also has to take part in classroom discussions, seminar sessions, or to attend conferences. This entails being able to listen accurately to others, and to talk to them in an intelligible way. EAP objective thus goes beyond teaching students 'academic vocabulary' (Coxhead 2000; Hyland & Polly Tse 2007). One of the most important issues that the course has to handle is solving the learners' pronunciation and listening abilities problems, to make them fully benefit from all the university activities. In universities where this tradition is well established, the pronunciation component takes a good percentage of the EAP programme as can be seen in some British, American, and Canadian universities below.

Many universities in Britain, the USA and Canada take the pronunciation component of EAP programmes very seriously. For example, at San Diego State University, in a programme of 12 weeks in Summer, and 17 in Spring or Fall, two afternoons are devoted to speaking. In addition to daily speaking classes and pronunciation electives, the programme offers students free personalised articulation and accent modification using specialised software, customised lab activities, and teacher-created material. At the Queen's School of English, out of the weekly 22.5 hours of EAP programme, 2 hours and 40 minutes are devoted to pronunciation. The SCF State College of Florida dedicates three hours per week to speech / listening in its programme at all the three levels offered. The next section looks at some EAP programmes in some Cameroonian universities, and especially how the pronunciation component is handled in them before making some proposals.

2. Some EAP programmes in Cameroonian universities

Although the name of the EAP unit is still problematic in many Cameroonian universities (see Kouega 2006; Safotso 2011; Enongene 2013), that debate is beyond the scope of this paper. A quick look at the programmes used at the universities of Dschang, Yaounde I, Douala and Maroua reveals a number of weaknesses as to the pronunciation component (see Safotso 2011: 71-72). For instance, the programme of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Yaounde I makes no mention of pronunciation. Those of the universities of Douala and the Higher Teacher Training College Maroua, respectively mention vowels, consonants, diphthongs, triphthongs, and vowels, consonants, stress. The programme of the Faculty of Economics and Management of the University of Dschang mentions in parenthesis 'numbers pronunciation'. That of Saint Jerome Catholic University of Douala vaguely mentions in its pedagogic approach "students will have to learn the correct phonetics pertaining to pronunciation, tone and unit". But no phonology features in the programme details. An analysis of these programmes shows the little or no importance given to pronunciation as well as to speaking/listening activities in EAP teaching in Cameroonian universities. Even if this component figures in the programmes of the universities of Douala and the Higher Teacher Training College Maroua, the areas listed are less specific and limited. Wasting time teaching French-speaking Cameroonians how to transcribe all the consonants and vowel of English cannot really help them efficiently follow lectures, participate in classroom discussions, or actively take part in a seminar in English. In the programme of the Higher Teacher Training College where stress is mentioned, it is not specified which area of stress will be handled. In addition, English stress is also so difficult to non-native speakers that a few hours of EAP course cannot solve the problem. In fact, there are a few number of rules to apply (Gimson 1980; Giegerish 1992; Taylor 1996; Simo Bobda 1997), and for the vast majority of words, only a dictionary can help in word stress placement.

2. The place of pronunciation in EAP /ESP

Morley (1991) remarks that pronunciation, which was viewed as an important component of English language teaching curricula in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, began to be questioned in late 1960s and continued through the 1970s and into 1980s. Many ESL (English as a Second Language) programmes dropped the component entirely. But beginning in the mid 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, there has been a growing interest in revisiting the pronunciation component of the ESL curriculum for the adults and young adults. As she further mentions, " an important part of this movement has been pronunciation developments in several ESP areas: that is programming for specific-purpose…(i.e. academic, occupational, etc.)" (Morley 1991: 487).
.   In EAP and ESP (English for Specific Purposes), the university student will learn the specialised vocabulary related to his study or specific field. A mining engineer will not learn the same vocabulary items like the psychology student. To be intelligible in class, during seminars, or at the job side, the student needs to accurately articulate those items. He also needs to match the spelling of those words with their pronunciation to be able to follow lectures, conferences, and attend seminars. Morley (1991: 489) points out that it has become increasingly clear in recent years that ignoring students' pronunciation needs is an abrogation of professional responsibility. In programmes for adults (and near adults) ESL learners in particular, it is imperative that students' educational, occupational, and personal / social language needs, including reasonably intelligible pronunciation, be served with instruction that will give them communicative empowerment –effective language use that will help them not just to survive, but to succeed. For example, in a geography class or seminar on some towns and mountains of the world, names such as *Leicester* [lɛstəʃə], *Worcester* [wʊstə], *Edinburgh* [ɛdɪnbrə], *Allegnenies* [ælɪdʒənɪz] can be very difficult to French-speaking Cameroonian students if the teacher does not insist on their pronunciation and write them on the board. The learners will experience the same difficulty, if in a history class, the teacher does not spend time articulating and writing the following names on the board: *Marlborough* [mɔ:lbərə], *Raleigh* [rælɪ], *Charlemagne* [ʃɑ:ləmeɪn]. The role of the EAP/ESP is thus to teach the learners the pronunciation of specialised vocabulary of his/her field of study. The lecturer should make sure that students know the language, particularly the pronunciation of familiar words of their own subjects (Gillet 1996). The success of the learner will be judged on the way he uses the language orally and in writing to perform the specified purpose in English. And the two forms of the language are absolutely necessary to survive in an academic milieu.

Spending time systematically teaching consonants, vowel, diphthongs, triphthongs and stress as required by the programme of the Higher Teacher Training College, and that of the University of Douala cannot improve students' pronunciation. In a short programme like EAP in Cameroonian universities, it may be a waste of tine. The unit is generally scheduled for one semester from first to third year. But the number of hours allotted to it varies from one university to another. For example, at the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences of the University of Maroua, the unit is only 20 hours for a whole academic year. So, before graduating with a

First Degree in that faculty, a regular student attends EAP lessons for a total of 60 hours only. At the Higher Teacher Training College of the same university, the unit is 24 hours per year, whereas at the universities of Dschang and Douala, it is 60 hours year. Yet, a sufficient time allotted to the unit and its adequate teaching can make it very beneficial to students as observed below by Baker.

Baker (2013) reports on an interesting case study where two lecturers experienced in the teaching of oral communication in the USA, had to teach EAP at the University of Wollongong. The video recording of their lessons showed that the first lecturer spent 69.7% of his teaching on pronunciation. The second one, who is of interest here, spent only 17.4 % of her own lessons on that skill. Following is the explanation she gave to the investigator:

> I have them repeat and they do drills and practice stuff…and then
> I do checks with them. I just call on them and they have to read the
> the word and then if it's wrong, then I'll say something, and then
> I'll repeat it, and then I'll have the whole class repeat it and not just
> that one student. I feel like it's my job in pronunciation time to
> highlight discrepancies […] (Baker 2013: 2049).

As Baker notes, **systematic integration** of pronunciation instruction into content-based curriculum can be problematic. The example of the first lecturer, who dwells on systematic teaching of pronunciation, shows that only 30.30 % of his teaching time is left for all the other skills (reading, writing, listening, etc.). Field observation in some universities in Cameroon shows that some teachers do exactly what this first lecturer did (Safotso 2011:64).

3. Some Proposals for EAP teaching in Cameroon

Teaching pronunciation in EAP classes does not mean spending lengthy time on consonants and vowels with drillings, as would be the case in English for General Purposes (EGP) classes. Very little time should be spent on this. What is more important is the example words, i.e. three to five words per segment. The example words should be selected from the students' study field. This quick review of English consonants and vowels will equip the learners with the capacity to accurately read any entry in specialised/general dictionaries. In this review, more emphasis should be on (phonetic) consonants and vowels which do not exist in the Roman alphabet, since those which are attested in it are somehow easy to pronounce. In vowels, the teacher should insist on / æ, ɔ:, ɒ, ʊ, ɛ, ɜ:, ʌ, ə /, which are new symbols that learners will see in dictionaries, and from which diphthongs and triphthongs are formed. In consonants, emphasis should be laid on /ŋ, ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ, θ, ð/, which are new symbols for students. To non-native speakers of English in general, word stress is a source of unintelligibility (Taylor 1981; Benrabah, 1997). Simo Bobda (1986) notes that in Cameroon English (the variety of English spoken by Anglophone Cameroonians), word stress generally moves forward. Safotso (2012 & 2015) remarks that, French-speaking Cameroonians, who are the learners to be taught here, stress almost all the syllables of English words. This results in a jerky rhythm. Given that in Cameroon most EAP teachers, whose own pronunciation is problematic, are Cameroon English speakers, teaching word stress to their French-speaking compatriots can be quite difficult. Nevertheless, since the majority of those teachers have some notions of English phonetics/ phonology, if they are willing to do so, before each class, they can check the pronunciation of some specialised vocabulary of their lessons from dictionary. It is true that they will teach something that does not reflect their own accent, but they can teach this in a contrastive way, i.e. telling their learners how the various items are pronounced in Cameroon English, RP (Received Pronunciation) or General American. This can easily be done, and does not take time, as it concerns just a few words of the lesson. It is rather the preparation of the lessons that will take more time. Knowing how some specialised items of the field are pronounced in Cameroon English, RP or General American will better equip the learners even in international contexts. The teacher should also be ready to monitor the bad pronunciation of learners during their participation in class, if it hampers intelligibility. So, there **should not be any systematic teaching of pronunciation**, **but all the difficult specialised words of the lessons must serve as a pretext for it**. In word stress, as a general rule, the teacher can let the learners understand that, unlike French where all the syllables of the word have equal stress, in English only one syllable of disyllabic and polysyllabic words receives a high pitch. From time to time, a few remarks can be made on the rhythm and intonation of English, contrasting them with those of French.

Conclusion

In EAP as in ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) the pronunciation component is very important. Before the learner reads or writes, he first needs to listen to lectures and to take down notes. He also needs to

ask questions in class for clarification, or to take part in seminars and conferences where he will listen to all sorts of accents. For learners to feel the impact of EAP on their specialised courses, the teacher of this unit should thus ensure that they are able to listen accurately to the various specialist lecturers. Ignoring the pronunciation component as many EAP programmes in Cameroon do, or spending lengthy time systematically teaching vowels, consonants or stress as prescribed by a some programmes would be very prejudicial to learners, because little time will be left for other important components of the course. The aim of the unit is to teach learners the maximum of specialised vocabulary items of their study field in addition to general study skills (e.g. taking part in a seminar, using books, writing formal letters, invitation letters). Even if the learner masters all the academic vocabulary and the specialised vocabulary of his study, but is unable to pronounce them, he will remain handicapped, since university studies are mainly based on discussions. Academic topics are either discussed with other students or the various lecturers. To achieve this aim, Cameroonian teachers of EAP do not need to transform their classes into phonetics/phonology ones. After a quick review of difficult consonants and vowels, they simply need to use each of the skills (listening, speaking, reading) of their various lessons as a pretext to teach the pronunciation of a few specialised vocabulary items, and to correct their learners' pronunciation if it causes intelligibility problems.

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