Evaluating English for Academic Purposes in some Cameroonian Universities

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the situation of EAP teaching in Cameroon State universities. The government language policy as well as some programmes and teaching methods were subjected to a needs analysis questionnaire of students' expectations and opinions (N=600). Results show poor management of the subject and discrepancy between learners' needs and the outcome of the programme followed. Finally, some suggestions for improvement are made.

Keywords: learners' needs, specific language, programme design, teaching methods, EAP

1. Introduction

The success of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes is judged by the extent to which learners in such programmes are able to do what the course was intended to help them do. To ensure the success of such programmes, they need to be designed with great care; taking into account the exact needs of learners (Benesh 1996). Because of the more specialised nature of EAP, its methods of teaching therefore need to be distinct from the ones used in English for General Purposes (Dudley-Evans & St Johns 1998), since ESP/EAP are usually scheduled for a very limited period. In Cameroon State universities, apart from students who do bilingual studies (combined French-English degree), all Francophone students are compelled to do EAP, and all Anglophone students FAP (French for Academic Purposes) to be able to attend lectures which can be given either in English or in French. But the effectiveness of EAP/FAP has raised a number of questions regarding among others the management of the subject, the course content, the teaching methods and class size.

After a description of the government language policy in Cameroon, this paper presents a needs analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of EAP/FAP teaching in some Cameroon State universities with focus on programmes of studies, teaching methods, class size, teachers' background and qualification, as well as students' expectations and opinions on the programme. The findings are then discussed, and finally, some suggestions for improvement are made.

2. Background: The government's language policy in Cameroonian schools

With its 237 local languages (Dieu et al. 1983) and two official languages (French and English), the linguistic landscape of Cameroon is among the most complex in Africa. Nevertheless, at primary and secondary school levels, the government has adopted an official language policy of making French and English the languages of instruction to all students with clear instructions, objectives, trained teachers and available textbooks.

In Cameroonian primary schools, from the reunification of West and East Cameroon (in 1961) to early 2000, English was not a compulsory subject in all classes of the Francophone subsystem of education[i]. Only children who attended urban centre schools studied it in the last three years of their primary school

education. In the Anglophone subsystem of education, French was taught/learnt in a similar way. It should be noted that for this order of education, the government has created numerous teacher training schools, and good course books were written and revised at regular intervals to suit the context of the country.

At secondary school level, the second objective for learning English in the French-speaking area of Cameroon is to contribute to the ''intellectual growth by the acquisition of language which is so significant in the field of literature, philosophy, science and technology'' (Ministerial Circular n°31/D/55/IGP/MINEDUC of June 4, 1975: 41). Attention to the communicative aspects of language use was later emphasised in the two subsystems of education of the country to provide study skills and strategies to cope with an ever-changing world. From these decisions and instructions, it can be understood that the government acknowledges the importance of language in the school curriculum.

The situation of EAP in Cameroon State Universities

In 1962, the teaching of EAP (English for Academic Purposes)/FAP (French for Academic Purposes) began at the Federal University of Cameroon. The subject is now given a yearly quota of 45-56 hours, which are taught only for one semester, 4 hours a week (Echu 1999:1) to all students during the first three years of their university studies. This is done not only for national unity, but also because most courses at tertiary level in Cameroon are taught interchangeably in French and English depending on the linguistic background of the lecturer. But in most Cameroonian State universities, the efficiency of EAP/FAP remains a matter of concern. Njeck (1992) remarks that students attend EAP class simply because it is compulsory subject. Kouega (2006:7) reports that at the University of Yaoundé II Soa, during lectures given in English 26.47% of his Francophone respondents reported playing truant or following lectures without taking down notes. He also mentions that only 8.82 per cent of his subjects reported discussing in English about a lecture taught in English.

Because each university organises the programme in its own way, the Ministry of Higher Education organised in 1999 a Meeting of a Group Experts to assess all EAP programmes taught across the country as well as other subjects programmes, and to propose concrete solutions to the problem. In their report, the experts commented that none of the documents submitted constitutes a coherent programme for EAP. "Indeed, the courses do not seem to be viewed and treated as a necessary and indispensable component of university studies" (Experts Group Meeting Report, p.483). They also addressed a number of important issues such as the necessity to design a good and coherent programme of EAP for all Cameroon State universities, the reduction of number of students per tutorial group (not exceeding 25 students), the training of special teachers as well as the necessity for universities to acquire indispensable tools and materials for teaching (e.g. language laboratories, video equipment and tapes, course books, etc.) (p.484). Similar concerns were raised by Biloa (1999:54-55) in EAP: ''...lack of up-to-date equipment, lack of qualified lecturers, cultural barriers, passive methods of teaching and lack of practice''. In the light of this ambitious governmental programme with few resources, we undertook a needs analysis to examine some individual teachers' and faculties' current programmes and teaching methods to see how far these recommendations have been implemented.

3. Methodology

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) aimed at gathering informants' needs, wants, expectations and opinions of their EAP programmes was administered to randomly selected first to third year Francophone students of the State universities of Yaounde I, Dschang and Maroua in two phases: 100 informants in 2007 from the universities of Yaounde I (N=50) and Dschang (N=50) in a pilot phase, then 500 informants in 2010 from the same universities (N=200 in each) and Maroua (N=100) in a control phase. The questionnaire was designed following Hutchinson's and Waters'(1987) framework for analysing target needs. The syllabuses designed by individual teachers or faculties (see Appendix B) were gathered during the same period from the universities of Douala, Yaounde I, Dschang and Maroua. This was completed by a longitudinal observation of classroom practice in the three levels mentioned above from 2005 to 2010. Unstructured interviews with 15 colleagues involved in the programme were conducted in which the informants were asked to give their appraisal of their own teaching, the programmes, class size and teacher qualifications

and background. Ten subject-matter specialists from the departments of Physics, Earth Sciences, Mathematics and Geography of the universities of Yaounde I, Maroua and Dschang were also interviewed about their learners' English needs and to give their appraisal of EAP teaching in their respective departments.

4. Results

4.1. The programmes

The present situation of EAP is similar to that prior to 1999 Report recommending integration of language into university studies. For examples guidelines at the Faculty of Science of the University of Dschang express the objective of the course not in terms of the skills learner should have, but in terms of norms(i.e. what lecturers should do), e.g. lectures (40 hours): grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary; tutorials (20 hours): reading comprehension, essay writing, translation. No mention is made of listening which is one of the four main skills. The programmes of the universities of Douala and Maroua (see Appendix B) are not very different from that of Dschang.

A look at some individual syllabuses currently followed by teachers in various departments at Yaounde I, Douala, Maroua and Dschang universities (see Appendix B) reveals that most teachers dwell more upon general elementary language and even literature (e.g. programmes n°s 2,4) rather than the specific academic English which students need in their various respective fields of study. Given that the majority of syllabuses generally consisted of sketchy list of items without mentioning any EAP reference book, it was not possible to use Hutchinson's and Waters'(1987:99-104) checklist for material evaluation to do an accurate assessment. Teachers interviewed reported that there are many useless repetitions, without taking into consideration the previous programmes of learners.

A careful analysis of several programmes reveals the lack of relevance to the overall subject studied. Indeed, no one can reasonably imagine an EAP programme for Chemistry students (see programme n°1 in Appendix B) which makes no mention of Chemistry items, or one for Economic Sciences and Management students which makes no mention of Economy or Management vocabulary and structures (see programme n° 2 in Appendix B). It is also reported that in some classes of the University of Dschang (e.g. History Level Two, Economic Sciences and Management Level Three) the programme is devoted to phonetics and pronunciation. None of the subject-matter informants report having been consulted by English teachers about students' needs and syllabus content despite this being a very important step in EAP/ESP teaching (Trimble 1985). This should be done to enable the experts to suggest and confirm students' needs and discourse analyses hypotheses (Huckin and Olsen 1984).

In ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987:53) insist that the programme ''should be based on an analysis of learners' needs'', an argument which accounts very well for EAP, since Geography students do not need the same vocabulary items and structures as Physics, Anthropology or Mathematics ones although some elements of the language are necessary to all of them (for example, correct conjugation of verbs, use of articles, adjectives, formal letters writing).For example, Tarone et al.(1981) acknowledge 'the passive' as a typical feature of English for science and technology. Johns (1991) quoted by Benesch (1996:723) gives an interesting reason why needs analysis should be done in EAP- since by identifying elements of students' target English situations and using them as the basis of EAP/ESP instruction, teachers will be able to provide students with the specific language they need to succeed in their courses and future careers. Citing a number of studies(e.g. Tarone et al.1981, Huckin and Olsen 1984, Dudley-Evans and Henderson 1990, Daoud 1991), Johns and Dudley-Evans(1991:300-301) suggest analysing genuine discourse of various academic disciplines in developing ESP materials. Thus, given the enormous language difficulties Francophone Cameroonian students continue to have after three years of EAP, it would perhaps be important to involve them in the design of their various EAP programmes as they better know their immediate (and future) needs.

In designing those programmes, the major difficulty will be that of textbooks. Swales (1980:14) notes that the majority of ESP textbooks are written to suit the needs in a particular educational environment, where they are supposed to be most effective because they attempt to cater for the cultural, academic, and linguistic characteristic of the original student. Because they are developed in a particular educational

environment, it is ''less reasonable to suppose that they will maintain their appropriateness on a global basis'' (ibid). Even if they cannot suit all educational contexts, reference books and journal articles, e.g. Jordan (1997), Hyland (2006), etc. should be consulted in an attempt to design local textbooks.

4.2. Classroom practice

Besides the lack of relevance of programmes earlier described, teaching methods are aggravated by overcrowding of classes. Most classes range from 100 to 500 students (e.g. Geography I and II classes at the University of Dschang in the academic year 2007-2008 had respectively 150 students for the first year and 134 students for the second year). Many classes from various departments are also combined into large classes of EAP without regard for the study fields of learners. In various faculties of Economic Sciences and Management as well as those of Law and Political Science across the country, classes usually range from 500 to 1000 students for a single teacher. For example, at the University of Yaounde II Soa, in the academic year 2009-2010 the Second Year Economic Sciences and Management had about 2,500 students (see Appendix C).This exceedingly high number of students per class gives room for all sorts of deficiencies. In such an uncomfortable situation, teaching becomes more a formality of attendance - and entertainment than knowledge-sharing. Classroom observation shows that there is no teacher-student/student-student interaction and that noise is one of the major problems.

Because of large classes, classes tend to be teacher-centred, aggravated by the lack of physical facilities. The majority of teachers interviewed report that they hurry through classes to get away. Even if they attempt to write on the board, only students sitting at the front can see. Without microphones in classrooms, teachers complain that they are also usually exhausted at the end of their classes. Some teachers report the use of tutorials though many are unable because of timetable constraints, but despite that classes are still huge, with over 50 students per group where no effective language activities can take place. It is worth remarking that dividing classes into smaller groups for tutorials also has its reverse side, as students finally find themselves (individually) with a reduced quota of hours. Apart from the noise which is reduced, most tutorial classes very well resemble formal lectures.

4.3. Teacher background and qualifications

Teachers who teach the subject across the country have various backgrounds. They are selected from among (a) university lecturers of English/Bilingual Studies departments, (b) secondary and high school teachers from neighbouring schools, and(c) English language/literature postgraduate students from nearest faculties of arts and social sciences. Commenting on the background of teachers of EAP/FAP at Yaounde I University, Biloa (1999:59) points out that postgraduate students who are members of the teaching staff have no teaching skills and very often, a course gives them the possibility of teaching for the first time in their lives without having ever been prepared for that task .They are still very busy with their own studies. Even secondary and high school teachers who teach the subject together with postgraduate students have not been trained for EAP. They have either been trained to teach literature, or other related subjects such as ESL (English as a Second Language), and very few, to teach EFL (English as a Foreign Language). For example, in the academic year 2010-2011, of the eight lecturers teaching EAP at the University of Maroua, only one (12%) reported having some training in EAP. Of the 12 teachers teaching the subject in the faculty of science of the University of Dschang, none reported having received any training in the domain. No in-service training or seminar is organised to help them acquire the basic teaching skills on the subject. Yet, EAP/ESP teaching is so specific/technical that training in the field is an absolute necessity. Trimble (1985:1) remarks that, before they (with Larry Selinker) could adequately teach the English of science and technology to non- native undergraduate students at the University of Washington (Seattle) ,they "had to learn something about it".

4. 4. Students' needs, expectations and opinions on the programme

Students' reasons for taking EAP courses and the various uses they will make of the language learnt are summarised in Table1 below.

Table1: students' reasons for taking EAP courses, and uses of language learnt

		Number of students N= 100, Year 2007		%	N= 500 Year 2010	%
Why do you need EAP? (Q1)	it is compulsory	100		100	500	100
	for studies	92		92	485	97
	for communication	64		64	360	72
How will you use the language acquired /learnt? (Q2)	in writing	100		100	500	100
	in speaking	72		72	400	80
	in reading notes/technical books	82		82	425	85
	in following lectures	98		98	500	100
With whom will you use the language acquired/learnt? (Q4)	lecturers	34		34	210	42
	Anglophone classmates	100		100	500	100
	other speakers of English in the world	42		42	240	48
	internet correspondents	25		25	130	26
Where will you use the language acquired/learnt? (Q5)	in lectures	52		52	260	52
	in the library	86		86	460	92
	in seminars	68		68	360	72
	in personal research	54		54	310	62
	in Cameroon	100		100	500	100
	abroad	21		21	160	32
When will you use the language acquired /learnt? (Q6)	during courses taught by Anglophone lecturers	100		100	500	100
	frequently	81		81	430	86
	seldom	12		12	40	08

It can be observed from the table that all the informants take EAP courses because it is a compulsory subject (100 %). Taking it for study purposes also has a very high percentage (92 % in 2007 and 97 % in 2010). It can also be observed that many students wish to use the language learnt in following lectures, with their Anglophone classmates, in the library, and as frequently as possible. The low percentage in the use of the language learnt with internet correspondents/people abroad/lecturers somewhat testifies to the poor quality of language learnt until then, as students doubt about their competence and performance in English.

As to the type of language students expect to learn in their various EAP courses (Q2 of Appendix A), all informants said that they expect English that is related to their various fields of study, and very little general English. This indicates that students are aware of the real nature of EAP courses. Table 2 below summarises their general expectations from EAP courses, i.e. the language skills and elements they need (Q7 of Appendix A).

Table 2: Students' general expectations from EAP (Q7)

	Number of students N=100, year 2007	%	Number of students N=500, year 2010	%
(a) Ability to read textbooks in English	87	87	397	79,4
(b) Ability to listen to lectures and take notes in English	100	100	460	92
(c)Ability to read scientific books	87	87	390	78

and journals in English				
(d) Ability to write articles in English	54	54	370	74
(e) Ability to ask and answer questions in English in class	62	62	415	83
(f) Ability to take part in seminars in English	75	75	340	68

Despite the slight gap between the various percentages in 2007 and 2010, on the whole, Cameroonian students' general expectations from EAP are very high. The low percentage in answer (d) in 2007 (54%) may be explained by the fact that then students never imagined that they could be required to write in English as they now do using internet.

Students' opinions and grievances on their past programmes (Q8 of Appendix A) simply express their dissatisfaction. Following are some of the expressions they used to describe them: *boring, noisy, inadequate, superficial, mediocre, insufficient, not beneficial, no follow up of students, revision of secondary school grammar, was not related to students' fields of study, was not at university level, etc*.

The consequence of irrelevant programmes, non-existent syllabus, unskilled teachers, poor teaching methods and large classes, is students' output, which is far below expectation. Up to the third year, many Francophone students are still unable to adequately follow lectures in English. Most of the time, they ask questions on what is going on or copy notes from their Anglophone peers.

Although respondents could not be accurate as to what to do to improve the EAP classes (Q9 of Appendix A), some of their proposals were nonetheless quite sensible. Over 80 per cent of the subjects mainly insisted on the amelioration of programmes content, reduction of class size, more tutorials, and qualification of teachers; most of the lecturers should be bilingual (French and English) given that the vast majority of them speak only English. This at times might help explanations in the students' own language. Following the same line of thinking, a lot can in fact be done to ameliorate that situation as discussed below.

5. Discussion and recommendations

In well structured and organised EAP programmes (e.g. Martin 1976, Jordan 1989 and 1997, etc.), elicitation and analysis of learners' needs, teaching of specific and academic vocabulary, are essential. Our data quantifies students' needs and expectations from the programme, and their appraisal of past programmes clearly expresses this dissatisfaction. The large size of classes, poor classroom equipment and poor teaching methods are some of the weaknesses of the programme as noted early by the recommendations of the Experts Group Meeting of 1999 and the findings of Biloa (1999) and Kouega (2006). Findings of all the aspects analysed in this study show a stagnant situation. Some suggestions and recommendations for improvement are made below.

Although they have been largely ignored, some of the recommendations and proposals of the Experts Group Meeting deserve to be echoed here : (a) design a model national programme and propose it for adaptation and use by all Cameroon State universities: this may help avoid the confusion observed in the syllabuses currently in use in some universities, (b) make efforts for EAP tutorial groups not to exceed a manageable size(25 per group), (c) train special teachers to ensure a good implementation of the proposed course programme, and get all universities to acquire the necessary tools and materials for effective teaching/learning of the subject (language laboratories, video equipment, course books etc.), and (d) encourage universities to solicit the assistance/participation of embassy cultural centres, public and private language institutes /centres (p. 484). This should be done because the present situation is similar to that

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prior to the Experts Group Meeting recommendations. In addition, some trained EAP lecturers should be recruited to teach and co-ordinate the teaching of the subject in various universities; teachers in charge of the subject should be encouraged to write local textbooks which take into account the exact needs of students and the particular setting of Cameroon; subject-matter specialists should be associated to English teachers in a sort of 'team teaching' (Robinson 1989) to enable EAP teachers to gather more information on learners' language needs from their subject specialist colleagues; in-service training and seminars should be organised from time to time by universities to enable academic authorities and teachers to up-date their knowledge in the field; the course should also be scheduled at the beginning of the academic year to enable students to feel their impact on other subjects. Universities libraries should be equipped with internet facilities and EAP/ESP books on various academic disciplines. This may enable students to fill in the gap caused by inadequate syllabuses and teaching methods. Finally, the programme should regularly be evaluated by both national and international experts to oversee its development.

6. Conclusion

Due to a number of factors, the situation of EAP is a major cause for concern in Cameroon. They include lack of a clear governmental language policy and instructions at tertiary level, lack of adequate and coherent programmes, lack of national co-ordination of the programme, irrelevant teaching methods and marginal qualification of teachers, large size of classes, lack of course books and other teaching /learning materials, and lack of language laboratories, to name but a few. The absence of those factors leads to deficiencies in the programme, and the language class, whose impact on other academic disciplines is capital, otherwise becomes a waste of time to students. Therefore, urgent remedies recommended in Section 5 quickly need to be applied to avoid further prejudice to students in Cameroonian State universities.

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APPENDIX A

Students' questionnaire

Please, answer these questions about your English for Academic Purposes Programme.

Tick as many answers as possible. Cocher autant de réponses possibles.

1. *Why do you need English for Academic Purposes (EAP)?*
   it is compulsory   for studies   for communication

2. *How will you use the language acquired /learnt in EAP courses?*
   in writing   in speaking   in reading notes/technical books   in following lectures

3. *What type of language do you expect to learn in EAP classes?* _____
   _____

4. *With whom will you use the language acquired / learnt?*
   lecturers   Anglophone classmates   other speakers of English in the world

   internet correspondents

5. *Where will you use the language acquired /learnt?*
   in lectures   in the library   in seminars   in personal research   in Cameroon abroad

6. ***When will you use the language acquired/learnt?***
during courses taught by Anglophone lecturers   frequently seldom

7. ***What do you expect in general from English for Academic Purposes?***
(a)   *Ability to read textbooks in English*
(b)   *Ability to listen to lectures and take notes in English*
(c)   *Ability to read scientific books and journals in English*
(d)   *Ability to write articles in English*
(e)   *Ability to ask and answer questions in English in class*
(f)   *Ability to take part in seminars in English*
8. ***What do you think of English for Academic Purposes programmes that you have covered so far? e.g. first year, second year, etc.***
9. ***What do you think can be done to ameliorate them? e.g. teachers, teaching methods, contents…***

APPENDIX B: Five programmes (by individual teachers, faculties or

universities)

1. ***Third year chemistry (University of Dschang, year 2008)***
* <u>Tenses</u>: present continuous tense, present tense, past simple tense, past participles, present perfect, active/passive voice.
* <u>Questions</u>: conversation, making suggestions, forms of questions, auxiliary verbs, question words, subject/object question, question tags.
* <u>Agreement</u>: do and does, since and for, by and until, as and like, too and enough, some and any, many and few.
* <u>Preposition</u>: in, on and at
* Rules for forming comparatives and superlatives.

2. ***Second year Economic Sciences and Management (University of Dschang, Year 2007)***

o Rules and variations
o Why do we learn English?
o Variation according to use
o General principles of English grammar and their applications (sentence type, parts of speech, numbers pronunciation, the verb, suffixes, auxiliaries).
o Conjugation of verbs
o Letter writing
o Literature: *The Black Cat* by John Milne

3. Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (University of Douala, year 2008 /2009)

Level One	Language and function
Pronunciation	- saying greetings and farewells
- vowels and consonants	- introducing people
- diphthongs and triphthongs	Comprehension
Vocabulary	- examination techniques
- some masculine and feminine	- reading and understanding a text
- some idioms, proverbs and idiomatic sayings	Essay
- register of banking	- mechanics of composition
- register of law and the court	- letter writing: general principles
Grammar	**Level Two**
- the genitive	pronunciation
- the comparative and the superlative	- intonation

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- determiners - indefinite pronouns - use of tenses	<u>Vocabulary</u> - Phrasal verbs - synonyms and antonyms - some idioms, proverbs, and idiomatic sayings

4. University of Yaounde I, Year 2006: Psychology, Geography,

Anthropology, Sociology, Spanish, French Modern Letters

- *First Year:* Literature: *Of Mice and Men* (abridged version), John Steinbeck
- *Second Year:* Literature: *Great Expectations* (abridged version), Charles Dickens
- **Third Year**: Literature: *Corail Island* (abridged version), Ballantyner, M.

5. Higher Teacher Training College, University of Maroua, Second Cycle

Programme (for all classes, 2009 – 2010)

- pronunciation: vowels, consonants, stress.

- socialising: greetings, apologies, leave taking …

- tag questions, yes/no questions

- active and passive voice

- Essay writing.

- Reading comprehension

Appendix C: Examples of EAP classes from four Cameroon State Universities

University	Academic year	Class	Total number of students in class
Douala	2008-2009	History I (N=185) + Communication I (N=168)	353
Dschang	2008-2009	First Year Earth Sciences (N=62) + First Year Biochemistry (N=68) + First Year Animal Biology (N=56) + First Year Vegetal Biology (N = 72)	258
Yaounde II Soa	2009-2010	Second Year Economic Sciences and Management (N=2,500)	2,500
Maroua	2008-2009	Second Cycle Counsellors (N=600)	600
	2010-2011	Second Cycle Computer Sciences (N=120) + Second Cycle Mathematics (N=90)	210