



TEACHING ESP OR EGP IN BOHICON TECHNICAL SCHOOL? BRIDGING THE TEACHER TRAINING GAP

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Abstract:

In Benin, although trainee teachers are trained to teach English as a Foreign Language for general purposes, some graduates are posted into vocational schools where the teaching of ESP is required of them. This paper aims at probing into the coping strategies of these EFL teachers. Without proper training in teaching English for specific purposes, without an appropriate curriculum, without adequate resources, do they teach English for general purposes or English for specific purposes? To answer this question the paper relies on documentary investigation, interviews with EFL teachers and focus group discussion with students at LyTeB. Qualitative data analysis discloses the major finding that despite their effort to bridge the teacher training gap, EFL teachers in vocational schools spend more time and effort on teaching English for general purposes, because of structural obstacles and the status of English as a 'second class' subject in vocational schools. This discrepancy flaws the training of graduates who acquire technical competences that they are unable to value in an English work setting.

Keywords: Teacher qualification, English for specific purposes, Vocational education.

Résumé:

Au Bénin, bien que la formation des élèves-professeurs d'anglais prépare souvent ces derniers à enseigner l'anglais général, après leur formation, certains sont affectés dans les établissements d'enseignement secondaire technique où les programmes exigent d'eux l'enseignement de l'anglais de spécialité. Sans formation spécifique, ni programmes d'études appropriés en anglais de spécialité et sans ressources documentaires, ces enseignants enseignent-ils l'anglais général ou l'anglais de spécialité? C'est à cette question qu'a tenté de répondre le présent papier en se basant sur la fouille documentaire, l'interview des dits enseignants et la discussion de groupe avec les élèves au Lycée Technique de Bohicon. A l'analyse de ces données qualitatives, il ressort que malgré les efforts individuels des professeurs d'anglais pour se surpasser, ils passent plus de temps et d'ardeur à enseigner l'anglais général. Des obstacles structurels ainsi que le statut de l'anglais, considéré ici comme une matière de 'second rang', sont à la base de l'écart entre l'enseignement de l'anglais général et celui de l'anglais de spécialité; ce qui fausse l'aptitude des élèves qui acquièrent certes des compétences techniques en sortant de ces établissements, mais compétences qu'ils ne peuvent hélas valoriser dans un environnement de travail anglophone.

Mots clés: Qualification à l'enseignement, Anglais de spécialité, Enseignement technique.

Introduction

Although Benin is a French speaking country, English has long been taught in its education system at secondary school level as a foreign language. In teacher training schools, teacher trainees are trained to teach English as a Foreign Language for general purposes, that is, for everyday use. Emphasis is put on how to communicatively teach the four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. After their training, most graduates get job in general secondary schools where they teach English for general purposes (EGP). Nevertheless, some graduates are posted into vocational schools where the teaching of English for specific purposes (ESP) is required of them. Without proper training in ESP teaching, without an appropriate curriculum, without adequate resources, which type of English do they teach, EGP or ESP? What are their coping strategies? What is the effect of this discrepancy on their students' performance in English?

The main objective of this research paper is to investigate the field of English teaching in Beninese vocational schools to address these research questions. Ultimately the paper aims at reflecting on how to bridge the teacher training gap as concerned the integration of ESP in the training component of EFL teachers. Taking Bohicon technical school (LyteB), one of the outstanding vocational schools in the country, the study deploys qualitative research techniques to probe both teachers and students' opinions, and examines available documents. The paper is structured as follows: it presents the difference between ESP and EGP as the analytical framework, then describes the research methodology, the description of the physical setting of LyTeB before presenting the key findings followed by the discussion section.

1. Conceptual Difference between EGP and ESP

EGP is the term used to name the teaching and learning of English for no obvious reason, in a context where learners have no perceived reason to learn the language. It refers to English teaching and learning in school settings where emphasis is put on language structures and some lexis in order to pass academic exams (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). The main concern for EGP is to lay the foundation of the basic structure of the language so that various orientations can be given later. For that reason, Strevens (1988) prefers the term English for Educational Purpose (EEP) to name EGP, which is school-based learning of language as a subject of the overall curriculum.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) gained momentum in the western world after World War Two for three reasons. First, reconstruction needs after the war required scientific, technical and economic labour

who had to use English to communicate, as the language became international due to the global influence of the United States of America. In addition, during the oil crisis of the early 1970s, western capital and knowledge flowed into oil-producing countries across the world; as this knowledge was basically in English language, teachers of English as a foreign language were pressured to meet the demands of people outside the teaching profession. The second reason is related to the dramatic change in linguistics. In opposition to structural linguists who based their analyses on language features, functional linguists advocated for the description of language in use, and thus focused on real communication and contexts. A major finding of this linguistic trend in language teaching is that language teaching had to meet learners' needs in specific contexts. The third reason has to do with the pedagogic revolution that required learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning, and advocated to value learners' interests as well as their ability to communicate in the target language in real life situations. These three factors converged to the design of specific courses to meet learners' needs and to develop communicative competence in such specific fields as medicine, business, trade, finance and technology.

As for the concept definition, ESP is perceived as a language teaching approach rather than a new product, a particular language register rather than a new paradigm. ESP does not involve a particular kind of language teaching material or methodology; rather, it is an approach to language teaching and learning in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning (Hitchinson and Waters 1987). For Strevens (1988), ESP is to be defined along "absolute characteristics" and "variable characteristics" (in Mohseni Far 2008, p. 2). Along absolute characteristics, ESP is viewed as language teaching practice geared towards meeting learners' specified needs in particular disciplines, occupations and activities, making use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves. In addition, ESP focuses on language structure and function (grammar, lexis, register...). Along the variable characteristics, ESP may be restricted to the teaching of language skills to be learned, without following any pre-ordained methodology. Thus the methodology may vary from that of general English teaching; it is likely to be designed for adult learners either in professional setting or for secondary schoolers. ESP learners are often intermediate or advanced learners of English, supposing that they already know some basics of the language system, although there are ESP courses for beginners.

Robinson (1991) defined two criteria for appreciating whether an English language class could be termed ESP or not. An ESP class is "goal-directed" and developed from need analysis in order to specify what exactly students have to do through the medium of English. These conceptualizations share in common learners' interests and occupational

needs of English, thus assuming that ESP learners already know the basics of the English language in terms of syntax and lexical rules that govern the language use; what ESP adds to these basics is the set of communicative skills and functions required to perform professionally in a job setting. For that reason, some even term ESP English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) or English for Professional Purposes (EPP) or English for Vocational Purposes (EVP). Among these terms, specifications get sometimes more precise such as of English for Medical Purposes, English for Business Purposes, English for Science and Technology (EST) etc.

The conceptual differences between EGP and ESP are also reflected in classroom practice, as developed in Mohseni Far (2008, p.7-9). In an ESP class, the EFL teacher sets goals and objectives in terms of designing realistic syllabus and checking students' achievements. Then the teacher organizes course materials, focusing on key language skills. The teacher creates a learning environment that stimulates students' interaction by listening carefully to them, by providing feedback, by supporting them, and by focusing on the language skills that they need. Finally, the teacher evaluates them not just for grading their performance, but for identifying their problems and finding solutions. Likewise, learners too share responsibilities in ESP classes. Learners are expected to show interest and motivation for learning, and this expectation is met when they comprehend the teaching material and have opportunities to use the language. ESP learners expect to discover in English subject-content knowledge, that is, knowledge relevant to their field of expertise. For that reason ESP learners should have sound knowledge of their field of specialization so as to get meaning of the real context of the vocabulary and structures of the ESP class. Therefore, they take advantage of what they have already known about the subject matter to learn English. Finally, ESP learners develop their own strategies to learn English.

As it can be seen from this conceptual differentiation, the border between EGP and ESP looks evasive as a teacher of ESP has to be trained in EGP teaching first. Yet Widdoson (1983) put emphasis on key features of distinction such as the learner targets and the fields of intervention. ESP intends to meet the needs of adult learners who already have some basics of the English language; that is some EGP. EGP is suitable for general education whereas ESP is intended for training settings. ESP has some more perceived immediate utility than EGP. From this conceptual clarification, it is understandable that students in vocational schools learn ESP, while those in common track of high school are exposed to EGP.

2. Bohicon Technical School (LyTeB), a Token of Vocational Education in Benin

Technical schools, also called vocational schools, are schools where students learn a specific skill or trade. They are a type of higher learning school that focuses on job skill training rather than academics in the liberal arts. Most trade schools focus on a particular set of skills that are taught to students looking to enter specific career fields.

According to the national education development plan, vocational education is declared the second national priority in education after primary education (MEN 2006, p. 49). In total, as of 2005, there were 16 public vocational schools throughout the country and 215 private ones were established in the country's major cities, according to the same source. Student enrolment amounted to 54,215 in 2011, the majority of whom were in the private sector. The 11,239 students enrolled in the public sector were trained by less than 1,000 teachers, most of whom were not qualified (MEN 2013, p. 25). From 2001, governmental policy in vocational education has been to formalize the traditional apprenticeship system by establishing a national certificate for those youth who are trained in the informal sector.

Bohicon Technical School (LyTeB) is a token of the new generation of vocational schools. It was created in 1997 with three main professional tracks: commercial, industrial and electronic. For the commercial track, high school students receive training in commerce, administration, management and accountancy for three years before taking a professional high school diploma (G1, G2 and G3). The main subjects of study for this track include economics, common law, accountancy, financial mathematics, French and English for Specific Purposes. While the organization is similar for students in the industrial track, they have options that vary from masonry to woodwork, including general mechanics, welding, electricity and air conditioning. This track lasts only three years and prepares graduates to get a DTI, a technical degree equivalent to the high school diploma. Here too, in addition to specialization classes, students have ESP classes. The electronic track prepares students in three years to get F2 or F3 baccalaureate; ESP is part and parcel of the curriculum as students need to be familiar with the computer and electronic vocabulary in English.

It is important to note that most students at LyTeB have a background of general English, as the majority has taken English at the lower secondary school level, before getting admission into the school for the higher level of secondary education.

3. Research Methodology

This study has followed a qualitative design supplemented with documentary investigation. The research targeted 15 teachers for interviews and 150 students for focus group discussions. With the teachers' authorizations, a few interviews were recorded and transcribed. In rare cases where teachers refused recording the interview, the researchers' notes were helpful. If interviews with EFL teachers were conducted using English language, students were less likely to meet this standard; as a consequence, focus group discussions were conducted in French and the authors took the responsibility of translating some of their verbatim into English for use in this paper. Although the fieldwork was conducted in Bohicon Technical School, EFL teachers in other vocational schools in the country were contacted for interview, because there were only two EFL teachers assigned to LyTeB, out of an estimated need of 8 teachers. Therefore, the research had to include EFL teachers from other vocational schools in Bohicon, Cotonou and Porto-Novo. The interview protocol for teachers includes 11 items ranging from their qualifications to their performance, the working conditions, resource availability and the problems that they encounter in the teaching process.

As for the student sample, it is basically from LyteB, with the representation of all the different training tracks in the school. As one of the researchers is teaching at LyTeB, arrangements were made to gather students, on a voluntary basis, during their free time. Due to students' busy schedule, focus group discussions took place in midday, sometimes in the evening and once on Saturday. Each focus group discussion took about an hour in average. Thus, 10 focus group discussions offered the opportunity to exchange ideas around 15 items ranging from need assessment, expectations, teacher evaluation, resource availability, teaching time, to lesson contents and language performance.

Data analysis took the form of analytic induction as developed in Ragin (1994, p.93) so as to assemble the emerging ideas and theorize in the form of grounded theory. Analytic induction is a research strategy that goes beyond the search for universals and commonalities to direct investigators to pay close attention to evidence that challenges or disconfirms whatever images they are developing. In addition to analytic induction which targeted the research participants' opinions and perceptions, content analysis enabled to examine the teaching materials available and draw conclusions.

4. Structural Obstacles to the Teaching and Learning of ESP at LyTeB

Structural obstacles refer to the set of difficulties arising from the school system itself; they are different from the set of factors that depend on teachers and students'

personalities, also different from the set of socio-economic factors. The assessment of data from LyTeB indicates that structural factors include inadequate teacher qualification, lack of in-service training opportunities, inefficient work time allocation, lack of teaching materials and resources in the school library, and lack of appropriate ESP curriculum. This section illustrates each of these problems with data from LyTeB and the environment of EFL teaching and learning in Benin.

At LyTeB, there are only 2 teachers of English out of an expressed need of 8 teachers. This is the reason why the research design targeted 13 teachers of English in other vocational schools of the country. In addition to the 2 teachers of English at LyTeB, there are 10 teachers who hold the highest qualification credential for teaching general English, which is CAPES, and 3 hold a lower credential, which is BAPES. While all these teachers have the merit to have obtained professional teacher training, they are not placed in the right school. At the teacher training school where they get professional training, the curriculum for teachers of English has no room for ESP; rather they get lectures in English grammar, phonetics, literature, educational psychology, and didactics. It is clear from the beginning that these teachers were trained to teach EGP. By default, these teachers, who were trained to teach EGP in general secondary schools, are assigned to teach ESP in vocational schools, on the presumed basis of professional experience. In fact all the teachers reported that they had taught EGP in general secondary schools for some years, before being assigned to vocational schools. Of the 15 teachers, 9 have been teaching English in vocational schools for 6 years at least.

It is a fact that educational administration reassigns teachers when there is personnel shortage, but the common practice in such an emergency case is to provide in-service professional development opportunities to teachers. In the current research, almost all teachers (14 out of 15) deplored the lack of such opportunities in their career. Therefore, apart from the training that they got for their initial qualification, there are no other possibilities to update their knowledge. The only one teacher who was an exception got her in-service training in ESP abroad, in a teacher exchange programme.

Unanimously, all the teachers interviewed complained about the teaching time allotted to English. For them, education decision makers are neglectful in terms of resource allocation for some subjects considered 'alien' in vocational schools; such subjects include French, English and Physical Education. The maximum teaching time allotted to each one of these subjects is three hours per week, which is insufficient. In some vocational schools, the teaching time allotted to English is only two hours per week while favourite subjects like accounting and law could take up to 8 hours per week. The teachers interviewed in this research feel frustrated to be teaching a subject considered

as 'second class subject' in the school. This frustration is not only due to the paucity of the time allocation for English teaching in vocational schools, but is also the result of material neglect as far as teaching resources are concerned.

Although LyTeB has a library, the resources available for English teaching and learning are almost inexistent, and this situation for English is similar to other vocational schools. Interviews with teachers reveal that 12 teachers found the existing resources in their school library irrelevant for ESP teaching and learning. While there are hundreds of volumes on other subjects like accountancy, administration, commerce and industry, the volumes on ESP are scarce, not to mention audio-visual materials. Likewise, the teachers deplored the lack of appropriate ESP curriculum. The only one document in existence for ESP is a two-page syllabus designed for students in commerce and administration. By default, every teacher has to devise coping strategies using their own documents and resources.

5. Teachers' Coping Strategies for ESP Teaching in Vocational Schools

Participant observation through the practice of EFL teaching at LyTeB by one of the authors of the current paper, together with interview data, indicate that by lacking any formal ESP training, without any proper ESP resources available, EFL teachers content themselves with teaching English for General Purposes, as it is done in general education, even if some of them are willing to teach ESP. This section highlights the relevant coping strategies that they use.

Before my experience at LyTeB, I had felt quite confident teaching general English because I was familiar with most of the topics in general English textbooks. However my new field of intervention is alien to me and I had hard time preparing lessons. Some ESP scholars advise ESP teachers to rely on students' knowledge of specific domains. As for me, I disagree with this approach because when you have low level students, part of your job is to make sure that your students do not doubt your knowledge. Otherwise, put aside their demotivation and disrespect, you end up with a hell of classroom atmosphere; a noisy class. So, to prepare a lesson means at least four hours of painstaking reading any document related to the field of study, and occasionally efforts of phone calls to consult my friends who teach ESP. The most important thing I come to realize is content mastery. Content mastery is essential for ESP teachers for having a meaningful class. Of course, it happens that the students know the content better than the teacher. In this case the class becomes a learning opportunity for both ESP teacher and students. (Adapted from an interview recorded with an ESP teacher on 6th November 2013 at LyTeB)

The quotation above is illustrative of the hardship of teaching ESP in Benin vocational schools. The teacher is no expert of the different fields of study in the school; he or she is not an accountant, neither an administrator, nor an engineer. Yet they have to teach language contents related to the realities in these technical fields. Very often, this limit is overcome with ESP textbooks and teaching materials which are missing in this context.

While the students are somehow familiar with their field expertise in French language, the teacher of ESP is lacking in technical expertise even in French, but has some control of the English language that they want to teach. The situation places the teacher in the dilemma of whether to teach EGP or to teach ESP. An overview of the students' notebooks and the official record book of the class proves that both teachers of English at LyTeB devote more time teaching English language structure and some aspects of technical lexis related to commerce, banking, and management. For 3rd year students preparing their high school diploma in accountancy and administration, Table 1 summarizes the different classroom activities within six weeks of English class.

Table 1. English Class Activities for Students at LyTeB

Date	Time	Activity
8/10/2013	8h-10h	First contact, Introduction, Revision Exercise in Grammar
15/10/2013	8h-10h	Language structure revision: verbs, tenses, tense markers
22/10/2013	8h-10h	Language structure revision: If clauses, Adjectives and comparisons
29/10/2013	8h-10h	Text: Commerce (Text comprehension, vocabulary)
5/11/2013	8h-10h	Text: Commerce (Continued)
12/11/2013	8h-10h	Language structure revision: Active-Passive voices, Pronouns

This synthesis of activities shows the predominance of lessons in language structure, as compared to ESP contents. In addition, the class includes students from other specialization tracks like industry and electronics, who have no obvious interest in learning the lexis in commerce.

As for the resources in the library, the teachers of English at LyteB mentioned the availability of only four volumes in the library. A close examination of the titles of the four volumes suggests that only four are related to ESP, specifically to commerce and management; these are Koussouhon, Kilahoungo and Mensa (2000), Sweeten and Kitti (2007), Feraud and Champion (1972), and Lefranc and Sladen (1971). The other volumes are books for general English, full of communicative activities, texts and language structure lessons, such as the volumes of the series *Go for English* (Cripwell, Keane, Taylor, Nama, and Tamla, 2000), and the series *Ways and Means* (Gary, Cohen-Cheminet, Starck, Daugeras and Stromboni, 1988). In addition, there are textbooks in general English full of drills and exercises to prepare for exams; these include the volumes of the series *Top in English*. As it can be seen of the existing documentation in the library, ESP is only possible with students in commerce and administration. For those in industrial tracks, there is no appropriate textbook or documentation for ESP teaching and learning.

With all these limitations, the coping strategies for teachers is to teach general English, and those who are ambitious about ESP, like the teacher in the illustrative quotation, use private resources to add some ESP to their teaching. But how about students' response as regards the type of English that they are taught?

6. LyTeB Students' Perception of ESP

Fieldwork also consisted of 10 focus group discussions with sample students from all the different specialization tracks of the school. The objective was to examine their perception of English as a school subject in vocational education. The emerging trend of students' perception of ESP is that, though they acknowledge the necessity of ESP, most are happy with general English for purely academic reasons.

Before getting admission to this big school, I have learned English for four years; but I cannot see the difference between what I learned before and what we are learning here now.

(Authors' translation from French, of a fifth year student's verbatim in a focus group discussion on 23 November 2013; the student is in the specialization track of management).

Most students acknowledge the importance of English as a value-added to the professional qualification that they are looking for, and expect it can boost their future career if they can communicate effectively. This expectation remains their major motivating factor to learn English. But students get disappointed as they attend English classes because they realize that "the lessons as well as the teaching approach are not communicative". If most of them are glad to be taking the same grammatical lessons again, and this enables them to get good grades at the beginning of the school year, when the fieldwork took place, some of them acknowledge the difference in terms of new vocabulary, what they called "professional lexis". Even though they know the new words, pronunciation is another hurdle; they cannot help pronouncing new words like in French, which makes communication very hard for them. For students, the basic difference between ESP and EGP is the vocabulary register. "Professional vocabulary" is what makes ESP different from EGP, otherwise "English is English!" But given that teachers grant less priority to teaching field-specific vocabulary, students have the impression that English lessons do not meet their communicative needs. Yet, most of the students, however, think that they would not have bothered to attend the English classes, if English had not been planned for the national examination. The emerging idea among discussions was that English lessons become less interesting as the teacher departs from teaching professional lexis, and devotes the time to teach grammar. While mentioning the obstacles that they encounter in learning English, students list similar problems as their teachers (shorter teaching time, lack of materials, teachers' preference for teaching grammar, lack of communication, inappropriate teaching method...)

Paradoxically, many students reported to have obtained good grades in English the previous year, which makes them like the subject.

7. Discussion

So far, field data have shown that though vocational education amounts to the second national priority in education, teaching English in these schools is far from the ideal of ESP teaching and learning. Major structural obstacles include the lack of appropriate ESP curricula, lack of teaching and learning materials, inadequate teacher qualification and the lack of in-service training. As a consequence, teachers of English in these schools, as evidenced by the coping strategies of LyTeB teachers of English, just teach EGP instead of ESP and students show less interest for English lessons. EGP emphasizes the teaching and learning of language structures and a few lexical items for common communicative purposes. But in reality, students prefer learning language structures for language drills rather than for communication. During fieldwork, no single student was able to hold one minute conversation fluently in English, and the research had to be conducted in French with students, with the authors own translation in this paper. For LyTeB students, there is no significant difference between ESP and EGP, "English is English", as they have the same perception of the English lessons that they used to have in general education before getting admission into vocational education, and the English lessons that they are taking now.

When we examine both teachers and students' attitudes about ESP in Benin vocational schools within the framework of Strevens' (1988) ESP absolute and variable characteristics, it appears that priority is given to language absolute characteristics to the detriment of variable characteristics. In fact language variable characteristics are what make the basic difference between EGP and ESP. While EGP gives priority to language absolute characteristics as it occurs at LyTeB, ESP requires the combination of both absolute and variable characteristics. When teachers of English in Benin vocational schools are examined through the lenses of the different roles of ESP teachers, as defined in Dudley-Evans and St Jones (1988), it is clear that they are far from fulfilling these roles, because they are lacking in adequate qualification and training on one hand, and in adequate resource on the other. For Dudley-Evans and St Jones (1988), as ESP requires teachers of English to play several roles at a time, the term "ESP practitioner" suits them better. Thus, ESP practitioners are teachers in that they help students learn, they are course designers and material designers as they have to search for adequate materials or design contextual materials where there is none; sometimes, ESP teachers have to adapt existing materials. Moreover, ESP teachers are researchers as they have to investigate a wider field which is ESP; without being business persons, they have to

teach business English; without being medical doctors, engineers, or agriculturalists, they have to teach English to all these professionals, using the register (lexis and manners) appropriate to each field. Being able to carry out such a wide range of functions requires deep research, not only in English language, but also in the different specializations. This is where ESP teachers become collaborators with specialists of all walks; sometimes they need the assistance of specialists so as to teach some types of contents, thus teaching both skills and the language related to the field. Finally, ESP teachers are evaluators as they have to design tests and evaluate materials and curriculum. Lacking in qualification and training, lacking in appropriate resource, teachers of English in Benin vocational schools rarely fulfill some of the functions related to these roles; or even if they do, they are not conscious of it, doing it unconsciously as a coping strategy.

Conclusion

The current study is an exploration of the practices of teachers who are supposed to teach ESP in Beninese vocational schools. Flawed by inadequate qualification, lack of teaching resources, and teaching time shortage, these teachers of English engage with various coping strategies which make them teach general English by default. As a consequence, students are less motivated for English classes which they consider as a “second class subject”. Findings from this study suggest that educational decision makers get convinced of the theoretical difference between and ESP and EGP, and thus offer teachers opportunities of appropriate training in ESP. For this to occur, teachers of English in vocational schools have to raise awareness so as to raise their issue to the agenda of decision makers. This research is just one of such awareness raising initiatives.

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