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Perception in Teaching and Learning English for Special Purposes in Benin Public Universities

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PERCEPTIONINTEACHINGANDLEARNINGENGLISHFORSPECIALPURPOSESINBENINPUBLICUNIVERSITIES

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Perception in Teaching and Learning English for Special Purposes in Benin Public Universities

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I. Introduction and Research Background

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 Universities of Benin gathered over four years were presented in the previous paper (Hounnou Azoua, 2021). 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. 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, 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 in 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.

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II. Learners' Experience and Research Method

Students 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. There have been 23 respondents, and the findings are presented in percentage in the Table 1.

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 practise it with their peers. 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 students talking time would be limited to 2 minutes in 45 minutes class provided there was 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.

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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%

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.

III. 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 (Hounnou Azoua, 2021) 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.

The Table is divided into five sections (numbered 2.1 to 2.5 for convenience of analysis), which cover different language skills and applications.

Table 2: Language skills and areas of their application.

2.1

READING	UNIMPORTANT 1st year2nd year	IMPORTANT 1st year2nd year	ESSENTIAL 1st year2nd year
ESP texts	1-	25	54
Newspapers	-1	66	22
Magazines	32	46	11
Books	21	56	12

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2.2

SPEAKING	UNIMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	IMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	ESSENTIAL 1st year 2nd year
Presentations	51	-5	33
Formal conversations	-3	43	42
Informal conversations	1-	57	22
WRITING	**UNIMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year**	**IMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year**	**ESSENTIAL 1st year 2nd year**
Summaries	-5	74	1-
Formal letters	11	27	51
e-mails	51	17	21

2.3

LISTENING TO	UNIMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	IMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	ESSENTIAL 1st year 2nd year
Lectures	4-	28	21
TV/Radio	31	35	23
English speakers	1-	65	14

2.4

TRANSLATING	UNIMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	IMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	ESSENTIAL 1st year 2nd year
From English	2-	28	51
Into English	21	45	33

2.5

OTHER USAGE	UNIMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	IMPORTANT 1st year 2nd year	ESSENTIAL 1st year 2nd year
For telephoning	3-	59	--
For studies	1-	57	22
For traveling	2-	56	13
For exams	1-	47	32
Grammar	-2	25	62

Let us examine the data in the Table 2 closely. Professional reading (ESP texts) is a priority for both groups, while presentations are out of favour with the first year students. The second year students, who have already had some experience in making presentations in the classroom during the ESP course, are well aware of the importance of being able to speak in front of their peers, and in public for prospect.

Majority of the first year students are also unaware of the significance of electronic communication (e-mail), and they place more emphasis on formal letters, which is a consequence of the English training at school: writing a formal letter is one of exam tasks.

The issue of translation, both from and into English, is appreciated by all learners. For them, translation remains the main tool of comprehension. It implies that students are unable to grasp the meaning without translating from their mother tongue. Only proficient users of foreign language stop translating in using either productive or receptive skills. The examination-orientated learning remains a preference to nearly all students: only one person out of seventeen and the best student, as a matter of fact, too marked the exam question as unimportant.

Grammar also remains important or even essential to majority (88% of learners); listening to native

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speakers of English to 94%, and to radio/TV to 76%. An ability to participate in formal and informal conversations is marked by 76% of students. The second year students unanimously ranked telephoning skills as important while only two thirds of the first year students consider them important.

Finally, the important aspect in ESP learning remains an ability to understand lectures in subject matter. For obvious reasons, the second year learners they have had a two-term experience of listening to recorded lectures on their individual field of study matters ticked this item as their priority, while half of the first year students considered this item as irrelevant.

It would be interesting to rank preferences of all learners (by adding first and second year students' responses) in descending order of importance. To make the data easily perceptible the percentage approach has been used. The last column presents the sum of the first and second columns data. Thus, at least six items on the list are interpreted as important or essential. Quantitatively, other items are not far away.

Table 3: Skills in descending order of importance.

Skills	Important	Essential	Important or Essential
Reading ESP texts	42%	53%	95%
Reading newspapers	71%	24%	95%
Speaking informally	71%	24%	95%
Preparing for exams	65%	30%	95%
Listening to speakers	65%	30%	95%
For studies	70%	25%	95%
For travelling	65%	23%	88%
Grammar	41%	47%	88%
Writing formal letters	41%	47%	88%
Translation	35%	47%	82%
Telephoning	82%	-	82%
Listening to lectures	59%	18%	77%
Making presentations	30%	35%	65%

Ordering various aspects of proficiency by averaging responses presents a really interesting picture. The top rating of 95 per cent is given to reading ESP texts and newspapers, speaking informally, listening to native speakers, using English for studies and preparing for exams. Writing formal letters, learning grammar and using English for travelling is the learners' second priority (88 per cent), which is closely followed by necessity of telephoning skills and translation. However, the very important skills of understanding professional lectures and making presentations are at the bottom of the list, although majority of students realize their importance for future career prospects.

It should be emphasized that our interpretation is presented for a rather small sample of respondents and statistically can be considered reliable within the probability of 0.95 and 3σ error range. However, the significance of the findings lies in raising learners' awareness to the life-long learning process and formulating English learning priorities for their future career.

IV. Learners Difficulties in Learning English

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, and it will be discussed in the following section. A documented survey of students' major difficulties in ESP has been similar to one designed by Medgyes (1994) and modified to suit our settings. There were 23 respondents who participated in the survey and were requested to identify their ESP problem areas. The data are shown in the Table 4.

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Table 4: 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 5.

Table 5: 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%

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 our 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 are sure they know how to read. However, students do not seem to have been taught the reading sub-skills like skimming and scanning and prefer to translate ESP passages word for word. Such an approach does reading 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 difficulties in coping with professional materials.

The psychological aspect of language learning the fear of mistakes, which hinders learners learning 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

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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 native speakers 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.

V. Learners Self-Assessment and Self-Grading

There have been two parts to this part of investigation. In the first part, the findings have been obtained in a non-documented form through tutoring, which allows learners to speak to 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. The third of students admitted being lazy, failing to attend lectures without good cause and not doing any homework, basically because they considered lectures not compulsory. 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.

In the second part of investigation, learners graded their anticipated performance in all language areas. The data have been compared with their actual performance. The findings are presented in the Table 6.

Table 6: 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 percent of students give 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 6 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 that their more self-confident peers.

VI. 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 cater for their needs and foster proficiency in the ESP. Third, consciousness-

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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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