



REMODELING THE “USE OF ENGLISH” COURSE IN NIGERIA WITH THE ESP MODEL: A FOCUS ON AN ENGINEERING FACULTY



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ABSTRACT

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New undergraduates frequently puzzle over why they must take the Use of English course, which is usually inconsistent with their discipline. This study aims at a remodeling of the mandatory Use of English course in all Nigerian universities by implementing the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) model, ensuring its relevance to the various disciplines offered; this would replace “General English” that is not specific to any field and thus too vague to interest new students mindful of their chosen discipline. To prove ESP should be the approach taken to teach English to undergraduates from another discipline, the researchers designed two questionnaires for 50 final-year engineering undergraduates and 10 top managerial staff from a Nigerian engineering firm. The findings reveal that a large number of the students cannot efficiently write a technical report or execute other communication needs of an engineering firm, despite studying the Use of English course for two semesters. This study recommends the development of new and improved course outlines specific to the different fields and faculties in Nigerian universities.

Contribution/Originality: This study aims for a remodeling of the mandatory Use of English course studied in all Nigerian universities by applying the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) model, which would ensure its relevance to the various disciplines offered by universities. This would replace the concept of “General English,” which is not specific to any field and is too vague to interest new students mindful of their chosen discipline.

1. INTRODUCTION

To gain admission to any Nigerian university or tertiary institution of learning, applicants are required to have at least a credit-level pass in English language in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), which is available through various bodies such as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO), and National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB), or the General Certificate Examination (GCE) provided by WAEC and NECO for private (out-of-state-school) candidates.

The different examination bodies adopt similar examination structures for English Language, dividing it into four different papers. In Paper I, the student is expected to write an essay (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, or expository), a letter (formal, informal, or semi-formal), a creative story, or a speech. Although selecting just one from five options, they are tested on their ability to communicate in English while following a particular structure. Paper II provides passages about which questions are set to test students’ level of understanding and their ability

summarize a large amount of information in a few sentences, which will assess their ability to understand communication in English overall.

Paper III comprises 100 questions on grammatical components and their proper use, synonym, antonym, sentence interpretation, idiomatic expressions, spelling, and so on. The main objective is to evaluate the candidates' ability to use grammatical components such as adjectival arrangements as well as interpret idioms and lexical items in English. Finally, Paper IV examines proficiency in oral English, focusing on the identification of consonants and vowels (including their symbols), stress placement and silent consonants.

Moreover, to gain admission to a university, irrespective of course, all candidates must sit the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in the Use of English, available from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). Apart from SSCE Paper I, the structure of the UTME is similar to that of ordinary-level examinations. That is, comprehension; use of grammatical components, synonyms, and antonyms; oral proficiency; and sentence and idiomatic interpretation.

It is thus assumed that on completion of secondary-level education in Nigeria and admission to university, students are well grounded in all aspects of communication in English, having been a core element in their 12–13 years of education. It is paradoxical, therefore, that regardless of course, undergraduates in Nigeria are required to take two courses in English Language that focus on communication and the concept of “General English,” similar to the previous examinations in structure and content.

The 2017 course outlines for the Use of English I and II at the University of Benin incorporate: communication and sentence construction, parts of speech, study skills, oral skills, writing skills, and literary appreciation. It is evident that apart from study skills, there is very little difference between learning at this and earlier levels. As a result, researchers have observed that undergraduates, especially those studying subjects other than English, are not very interested, and consider it a waste of time; in fact, it is well known that the Use of English course is not taught or learned as rigorously as other courses. This is due to not only the lack of interest among both students and teachers but also crowded classrooms and general negligence, regardless of the importance of the Use of English or General English courses. Although there are no recent empirical studies into how large ESL classes affect learning and performance, in the past, [Otagburuagu and Nzewi \(1998\)](#), [Ogwude \(1993\)](#), and [Baba-Waziri \(1993\)](#) all investigated the best way to manage large ESL classes in Nigerian universities. This is obviously a long-standing problem that is still not resolved, owing to researchers also being those teachers of large ESL classes in Nigerian universities. [Oluikpe \(1993\)](#) also posits that most ESL teachers with a literature background or bias are too preoccupied with their specialist courses to pay much attention to the Use of English course; the same can also be applied to teachers with a language background, as well as students, who may focus on their main course and have little interest in “General Communication English.”

Considering such a situation, the employability of an average Nigerian graduate is not surprising, as none are well prepared for communicating in English; according to [Akanmu \(2011\)](#), unemployment in Nigeria is a serious challenge. Many graduates cannot find work because of their lack of communication skills in their field, not a shortage of jobs. Moreover, employers expect graduate recruits to be competent not only technically but also in complementary life skills, such as problem-solving, reflective and critical thinking, interpersonal and team-working skills, effective communication, and strong character. As much as we expect the government to initiate policies for job creation, the universities should improve the standard of graduates entering the economy. Teaching undergraduates the specific communication skills needed for their chosen career by using the ESP model could help universities achieve such improvement. This study takes the view that the teaching of the Use of English in Nigerian universities currently lacks a clear purpose, which should be to boost students' communicative performance. This raises many questions relating to the difference between the level of communication achieved before entering university and that learned specific to their field on graduating.

Therefore, this study intends to: propose a new template for teaching and learning on the Use of English course in Nigerian universities; solve the problem of duplication between the SSCE, UTME, and Use of English/General English university courses; arouse the interest of teachers and learners; and propose the English for Special/Specific Purposes curriculum for teaching English at university level. As a pilot study, it focuses on the Engineering Faculty at the University of Benin, Benin City.

1.1. English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific (or Special) Purposes refers to a model of teaching English that targets “specific” needs of the learner. Since the early 1960s, ESP has become one of the most prominent areas of English Language Teaching (ELT). According to [Hutchinson and Waters \(1987, p. 140\)](#), ESP is “an approach to language in which all decisions as to the content and methods are based on the learner’s reason for learning.” In the ESP model, the course is thus designed to take account of learners’ needs; therefore, we have to ask what the undergraduates need to learn from their English course, which will probably not be general communication.

According to [Umera-Okeke and Okeke \(2014, p. 148\)](#), “ESP is the need to take into account from the very beginning the communicative purpose for which a language course is being designed. Such questions like: What will the language be used for? What is it that people want to do with language? are asked prior to the design of the course.” It is evident that different needs are served by varying syntactic devices, so ESP identifies those relevant to a particular social situation. These syntactic structures are chosen from all those used in General English (GE) because of the function they perform in specific situations, such as healthcare, law courts, hotels, oil companies, science classrooms, which means that a student could choose to learn passive syntactic structures where relevant. This conforms with information available on the website of Johannesburg’s University of Witwatersrand that states their ESP courses concentrate on the development and use of communication in English for particular disciplines, such as Engineering, Banking, Management, and Health Services. The purpose of this type of course stems from the fact that it is not sufficient to master the technical abilities in a specialized field, as employees are expected to communicate coherently on various aspects.

[Cristine \(1993\)](#) points out that the design and implementation of ESP involve concepts and practices in line with, and thus of great importance to, what is required in modern business. In other words, central to an ESP program is tailor-made courses, specific objectives, needs analyses of target learning situations, continuous feedback, and formative and summative evaluations that are, as in business, purposeful.

[Robinson \(1980\)](#) has defined ESP as teaching English to learners with specific goals, which might be professional, academic, or scientific. [Mackay and Mountford \(1978\)](#) also view ESP as teaching English for “clearly utilitarian purposes,” meaning that it is aimed at the usefulness of the language to the learners’ various careers. Neither of these definitions confines ESP to any specific field, discipline, or profession, and recognizes its broader relevance. A more comprehensive definition, as provided by [Stevens \(1988\)](#), identifies its absolute and variable characteristics.

[Stevens \(1988\)](#) distinguishes between four absolute and two variable characteristics of ESP. The absolutes consist of: a design to meet learners’ specific needs; content (i.e., themes and topics) related to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities; a focus on the syntax, vocabulary, dialogue, semantics, and so forth, appropriate to those activities; and an analysis of that dialogue, in contrast to the aforementioned concept of “General English.” The variables include, but is not necessarily restricted to, the language skills to be learned (e.g., reading only), which is taught according to a predetermined methodology ([Stevens, 1988](#); quoted in [Javid, 2013](#)).

This definition identifies ESP in contrast to General English by emphasizing “Specific English” that belongs to a particular discipline, occupation, or activity and making it mandatory that ESP courses concentrate on the language appropriate to that particular discipline, occupation, or activity.

The ESP model is quite different from the General English approach currently used in Nigerian universities. Okoh correctly points out: "... there is at the moment, no strong tradition of ESP teaching in several Nigerian universities..." (1993, p. 32). This is the major reason why the Nigerian university system continues to produce graduates who are not suitable for either the local or international labor market: the universities are not catering for the communication needs of the various industries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Javid (2013) viewed English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a significant branch of English Language Teaching (ELT), encompassing various linguists' definitions, tracing its development, discussing its characteristics, and trying to identify its scope and purpose in addressing the specific needs of English as either a Foreign (EFL) or Second Language (ESL) learners. Javid (2013) stated that despite the numerous contradictory views and definitions of ESP, there seems to be agreement that it is confined to teaching English to learners with specific goals. In other words, it is not a particular discipline but the specific goal of certain learners that is central to ESP, enabling them to function adequately in target situations. Thus, an ESP program should be goal-directed, learner-directed, and situation-directed, and incorporate the following three features: authentic material, purpose-related orientation, and self-direction.

Oladejo (1993) examined some of the problems faced by teachers and students in teaching and learning ESP in multilingual nations, such as Papua New Guinea. A survey of 125 new students at the University of Technology in Papua New Guinea revealed that although 98% knew that English was the sole language of instruction, only 49% expected to study English as a subject in their curriculum. Many students considered it necessary to study English for admission to university only and had no incentive to progress to a higher level. The study also discovered the problems faced included: the multilingual background of the learners, lack of cooperation from teachers of other subjects, need to import language materials, poor levels of language teacher training, and large class sizes (p. 34). An alternative approach to ESP is therefore suggested: changing from English alone to incorporate learners' native languages as the languages of instruction, importing culturally and educationally relevant materials, and the urgent reform of teacher training. Oladejo (1993) stressed that these suggestions were not a demand for the abolition of teaching English or ESP in multilingual English-speaking societies but a call for the modification of ESP to bring it in line with reality. Learners need to be proficient in English to both access the modern world of science and technology and express their knowledge to a global English-speaking audience; therefore, undertaking ESP courses is worth the time and effort to ensure their linguistic and communication skills are adequate.

In a study focusing on the need to effectively market and manage ESP programs in Nigerian universities for efficient results, Okoh (1993) identifies the creation of an ESP unit in every Nigerian university, overseen by an ESP practitioner and either the Director/Dean of General Studies (GES) program or Head of the Department of English. He believes that as course coordinator, an ESP practitioner would manage and market the program better than the Dean/Director of GES, who is also responsible for other GES courses, such as Philosophy and Logic, and Nigerian People and Culture. In addition, Okoh advocates close links between the ESP unit and English Department, as the latter would provide human and material resources to the former, though not for the conventional teaching of General English currently conducted in most Nigerian universities: "The contention here, then, is that university English departments in the country have reached a crucial stage in their development, a point at which a break with the past in terms of both course content and administration is demanded" Okoh (1993, p.39)

The study continues with solutions to the potential problems arising when establishing an ESP unit, and marketing and managing ESP programs. For example, Okoh (1993) states that the major issue of insufficient staff, due to the economic recession stopping the government employing new teachers, can be immediately resolved by training, retraining, and motivating the teaching staff currently available to ensure effective performance.

In a later study, Okoh (2013) focused on the ESP method for teaching the Use of English course in Nigerian universities. He personally views the teacher as a kind of passive mentor or overseer to the students, who are active players in control of the discourse in class. This indeed would be a novel idea for most Nigerian students, who have come to believe the “teacher knows it all,” resulting in their passivity in class and, in turn, reducing their learning (Olaofe, 1993). According to Okoh (2013), teachers should be able to produce a needs analysis chart before any class to determine what the students need to learn and how best to teach them; however, teachers should also adopt different teaching techniques to ensure learning is interesting and enjoyable. Rather than addressing the core aim of ESP teaching methodology, field-specific teaching, Okoh focuses on that used for the General English course, which he himself admitted had achieved little for Nigerian undergraduates. This study aims to move from the concept of General English to Specific English for different fields, which is believed would enhance the communication skills of undergraduates in their respective fields, beyond the General English already learned.

Umera-Okeke and Okeke (2014) undertook an evaluation of ESP, the modern trend in ELT, which they argued has progressed from the grammatical, or linguistic, approach to the communicative approach, as used in ESP. Unlike earlier trends in ELT, in which the syllabus was sacrosanct and the teacher merely implemented it and had no input, the results of the needs analysis in ESP could be used to adjust the syllabus in an ongoing process of refinement to realize the objectives of the language course. Umera-Okeke and Okeke (2014) further state that:

It is also important to remember that needs analysis is not a once and for all affair. It should be a continuous process in which the conclusion drawn are constantly checked and reassessed. Authentic texts and the task-based syllabus are advocated for in the classroom and the willing co-operation of the participants in the learning process encourages team-teaching between the content teacher and the ESP teacher. Finally, ESP as a recent trend in ELT has been discussed in this paper as communicative approach to language teaching as against the earlier linguistic approach to English language teaching.

(p. 187).

Despite Umera-Okeke and Okeke (2014) revealing the importance of ESP in modern ELT, they did not examine its application to teaching and whether it improves the teaching and learning of English. In contrast, this study does apply ESP teaching methods and evaluates the outcomes and effect on students.

The Nigerian government has made efforts, especially through the National University Commission (NUC), to incorporate ESP into the teaching of the Use of English course in Nigerian universities. Accordingly, a conference was held in March 1993 at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to brainstorm the idea and implementation of ESP in Nigerian universities. One of the speakers, Olaofe (1993), argued about a missing link between reality and the myth of implementing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) under the ESP program: many things that would enable EAP to take root are not available in the Nigerian educational sector. For instance, the lack of human resources, with most Nigerian academics remaining untrained in the EAP model, while the few who are trained are extremely inadequate. Furthermore, there is the lack of material resources, classrooms, lecture halls, and learning materials, due to insufficient government funding, which creates problems in implementing the program. Consequently, Olaofe states that it is a myth to believe that EAP teaching can be effective under such adverse conditions, or that all the well-articulated theories behind EAP are put into practice properly in the actual class (p. 29). It is worth noting that these problems still persist due to the continuing lack of adequate staff and funding.

As a result of this literature review, particularly the failure to find any other study, we felt justified in conducting this study to design a template for using the ESP model to teach English in Nigerian universities.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study is a quantitative pilot study and is therefore restricted to one faculty at one university and the employers of engineering labor. We will use this small sample to test whether the ESP model works before conducting a larger study across more faculties and schools.

3.2. Area of Study

The pilot study involved the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria and top managerial staff from Dantata & Sawoe (Nigeria) Ltd.

3.3. Study Population

The study population was all the final-year engineering students in every department of the faculty, as well as all employers of engineering labor.

3.4. Sample Population

The sample population included 50 final-year students (Group A) from across the faculty: Electrical and Electronics, Mechanical, Civil, Production, and Petroleum Engineering. In addition, 10 top managerial staff from Dantata & Sawoe (Nigeria) Ltd. with responsibility for constructing Yenagoa International Airport formed Group B.

3.5. Sampling Technique

The simple random sampling technique was applied to the study population for the selection of the participants. Data were randomly sampled from all the departments in the faculty of Engineering, namely Electrical & Electronics, Mechanical, Civil, Production and Petroleum Engineering. The other group (Group B) comprises the employers of engineering labor. Ten (10) top management staff of Dantata and Sawoe Nig. Ltd in charge of the construction of the Yenagoa International Airport were respondents to the questionnaires.

3.6. Research Instrument

The research instrument consisted of two questionnaires, designed by the researchers, for each group in the study: 50 final-year students (Group A) and 10 top managerial staff (Group B) in engineering. Each questionnaire was administered by the researchers, holding discussions with all participants in addition to putting seven questions to the final-year students and five questions to the managerial staff.

3.7. Data Analysis

Responses were presented as simple percentages: the number answering YES = $50/50 \times 100 = 50\%$. The data was then analyzed using the inferential method: conclusions were drawn from the inherent features of the data.

3.8. Data Presentation

Group A: Table 1 shows the statistical analysis of the responses from the 50 final-year students.

Table-1. Data analysis of responses from final-year engineering students

S/NO	Question	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
1.	Have you heard of English for Specific/Special Purpose before?	12	24%	38	76%
2.	Were you taught the Use of English course in Year 1?	50	100%	0	0%
3.	Was the Use of English course related to the engineering field that you studied at university?	5	5%	90	10%
4.	Are you aware of such communication processes as report writing, minute taking, and bid tendering in the engineering field?	42	84%	8	16%
5.	Can you confidently execute some of these communication processes?	4	8%	46	92%
6.	Do you think it profitable to be taught the English that will help you in your engineering career?	38	76%	12	24%
7.	Would you prefer to choose the English concepts to learn, due to your weakness in that area?	46	92%	4	8%

Source: the present study.

Group B: Table 2 shows the statistical analysis of the responses from the 10 top managerial staff.

Table-2. Data analysis of responses from managerial staff at Dantata & Sawoe (Nigeria) Ltd.

S/NO	Question	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
1.	Do you have communication needs such as report writing, minute taking, and letters of inquiry in your organization?	10	100%	0	0%
2.	Can engineers execute these communication processes on behalf of the organization?	8	80%	2	20%
3.	If engineers execute these communication processes, are they trained for the purpose?	3	30%	7	70%
4.	Do you think new Nigerian graduates have the ability to efficiently execute these communication processes without training by the organization?	9	10%	1	90%
5.	Do you think these new graduates would have been taught by the university the English that will enable them to efficiently execute the function in Q4?	10	100%	0	0%

Source: the present study.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 summarizes the responses of the 50 final-year students. Many are unaware of ESP as a method for teaching and learning English language, or what the acronym means, while the same number (76%) agree they should be taught English that would help them in their career, rather than the General English already learned during their formative education. Although all the respondents (100%) stated they were taught the Use of English course in Year 1, only 24% had heard of the term ESP, possibly from their extensive reading.

With regard to whether the English taught was related to the engineering profession, 90% of students responded "No." It is difficult to understand why the communication needs of the engineering field are not met when 84% of students recognize there are specific needs. The majority of final-year engineering students (92%) cannot efficiently write technical reports or execute other communication processes required by engineering firms, despite being taught the Use of English course for two semesters.

The majority of respondents (92%) want to choose which concepts of the English language that would benefit their career to learn; this learner-centered choice is central to the ESP model.

To investigate the validity of the communication needs in the engineering profession, top managerial staff in a Nigerian engineering firm were also surveyed. It can be seen from Table 2 that all respondents (100%) agree there are communication needs in engineering firms, and 80% stated that professionally trained engineers can fulfill these needs and understand the technical terms used in the field—apparently through in-service experience rather than in-house training (70%). In fact, 90% of respondents assert that new Nigerian graduates cannot work effectively in an engineering firm without training on how to write technical reports and in other communication processes. All (100%) believe that these graduates can be taught the English required to communicate efficiently by universities using the ESP model.

5. DISCUSSION

Although the aim of this study was not to determine the recognition of ESP among Nigerian undergraduate students, it is evident from the data in Table 1 that it is not that familiar to students, never being heard of by most. This reveals they have not been taught English using the ESP method, which is surprising considering ESP is adopted worldwide in most ESL teaching contexts.

According to Falaus (2017), “ESP is presently taught in universities all over the world with the express purpose of preparing future specialists in various fields of activity, and it is also promoted by international corporations which organize specializing courses meant to enhance their employees’ level of English and competence in various professional areas.” (p. 3) Nigerian universities are thus retrograde in this area.

As the data demonstrates that the Use of English course does not fulfill the communication needs of the engineering field, it is essential to either modify this course or introduce a new one alongside. These study results suggest that the Year 1 Use of English course be converted to the ESP model and its content be changed according to particular fields. Moreover, this could resolve the issue with lack of interest among students and teachers. Students in an ESP class would be more motivated to learn owing to the relevance to their career and advantage in the labor market.

Teachers’ interest would increase because of the need to specialize in ESP teaching methods for the various subjects available at the university. An ESP teacher would thus focus on this course only and no longer teach in the English Department, as is currently the case in Nigeria.

Furthermore, a core aim of university education is to produce high-quality, all-around graduates who can effectively communicate within their chosen profession, providing a sustainable specialized manpower capacity to society. As elsewhere, the use of English in Nigeria is not restricted to general communication needs alone: English meets the specific communication needs of different fields. The engineering profession is no exception, as an engineer needs to know specific terms and possess skills in writing technical reports, safety tips, project proposals, summaries, and other specialized communications.

If Nigerian undergraduates are taught using the ESP method, it would save their future employers the difficulty and cost of training them. This study found that engineering firms spend millions of naira on training new Nigerian graduates in certain aspects of English that relate to the field because they lack the required skills.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A complete remodeling of the current Use of English course offered during the first year in Nigerian universities to reflect the core tenets of the ESP model for teaching English. This would not only improve the quality of the graduates but also reduce the time and money spent by firms on training new employees in the communication needs of their field.
2. A new template be written: there should be a new course outline that takes account of the communication needs of different fields and faculties in the Nigerian university system. Linked to this is the development of texts

consistent with the contents of the various courses, which would inevitably lead to General English textbooks no longer being used in most Nigerian universities.

7. CONCLUSION

New undergraduates frequently puzzle over why they have to take the Use of English course, which is usually not suited to their discipline. This study therefore investigates how to use the ESP model for ESL teaching in Nigerian universities to make it more relevant to the needs of their field. The study concludes that the Year 1 Use of English course be converted to the ESP model and its content changed according to particular fields, which could also resolve the issue with lack of interest among students and teachers.

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