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Designing and Implementing an ESP Course During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Experience of This Teaching Modality in the Beninese Context



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Abstract

This study examines how the process of designing an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course registered by three EFL graduate students in didactics is structured along with participants at the University of Abomey Calavi (UAC). During the study, the designers should help a group of University of UAC workers to communicate in English effectively with international students who want to study at UAC or those who were already participating in international programmes there. This study introduces data about the trainees who benefit from this academic activity, tasks designed and taught, as well as the evaluation and assessment used. Finally, it suggests some recommendations for those who may consider the option of designing an ESP course as an effective strategy to promote the use of the English language in a work context.

Keywords: Course design; ESP; Language teaching; Evaluation.

1. Introduction

Today the English language has undeniably become the most widely preferred language for communication in academic settings among non-native speakers who share neither a common first language nor a common culture to carry out scientific interactions such as delivering a conference or university lecture, submitting a grant proposal, or writing a paper or dissertation, presenting a conference poster, to name just a few (Seidhofer, 2006). In many countries in which English is not the native language, most universities and institutions of higher learning adopt an approach called ESP (English for Specific Purposes) for English language teaching. ESP consists of tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of learners who belong to particular disciplines or professions and studies the language appropriate to such activities. Most universities have included ESP programs as part of their syllabuses because they acknowledge the importance of helping non-native speakers of English master the functions and linguistic conventions of texts that they need to read and write in their disciplines and professions (Hyon, 1996).

At the National University of Benin, in the first years of any course of study, students are taught with a variety of books written in English. This means that their exposure to the language starts at an early stage of instruction. In general, classes are face-to-face and in a classroom that is fit for that aim. Unfortunately, due to an unexpected pandemic, instruction was forced to adopt a mode of delivery.

During the last decade, an ever-increasing number of anglophone students have been enrolled in various programmes in Beninese universities. Some read foreign languages such as French, Spanish, German or Linguistics whereas others have been studying Economics or Technology (Iwikotan, 2021). As a neighbouring country to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Benin Republic, through UAC, offers both Francophone and Anglophone students not

only an academic opportunity but also a chance for language immersion. Once at the registration offices on the campus of UAC, students from English speaking countries face many difficulties in getting the necessary information required to complete their registration process. In addition, the UAC'S registrar office workers, despite 7 years of EFL learning in secondary schools are unable to communicate fluently with these anglophone students (Hndémé *et al.*, 2021).

Based on this reality, three (03) students, as a fulfilment for a requirement of the Master of English as a Foreign Language Didactics at UAC, decided to design and implement an ESP course for the UAC registrar office workers. This course intends to help them communicate fluently with the Anglophone students.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This study aims at examining the process of making decisions followed by three TEFL graduate students in designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers. Specifically, it explores the difficulties encountered by these TEFL graduate students in designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers as well as the problems related to the teaching and evaluating an ESP course planned for UAC's registrar office workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.3. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- What is the process of making decisions followed by three TEFL graduate students in designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers?
- 2- What are the difficulties encountered by three TEFL graduate students in designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers?
- 3- How can the designing, implementation and evaluation of the ESP course be fostered in a Beninese context?

2. Literature Review

2.1. English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is the teaching of this language in direct relation to the learners' working situation. Stevens, 1988 in [Dudley and St Johns \(1998\)](#) distinguishes between four absolute characteristics and two-variable characteristics of ESP. For this author, the four absolute characteristics of an ESP course are:

- Its close relation to the specific needs of the learners.
- It is content based on disciplines, occupations and activities.
- Its concern with centering language on those activities.
- Its contrast to what has been known as General English. The two variable characteristics of ESP are that the course may be restricted to one language skill and that it may be taught without any pre-ordained methodology. Students are expected to learn the language they need to communicate effectively in their job environment. "In contrast to students learning English for general purposes for whom mastery of the language for its own sake or to pass a general examination is the primary goal, the ESP student is usually studying English to carry out a particular role," ([Richards, 2001](#)).

ESP has developed its methodology, and its research draws from various disciplines in addition to applied linguistics. The main concerns are needs analysis, text analysis, and making learners ready to communicate effectively in those tasks that are necessary for their study or work situation [Wenzhong and Fang \(2008\)](#). The ESP course must comply with such characteristics as meeting the particular needs of the learners, using the implicit methodology and activities of the learners' discipline, and centering the teaching of the language skills (grammar, lexis, register, skills, discourse and genres) appropriate to those disciplinary activities ([Dudley and St Johns, 1998](#)). In other words, each ESP group of students attends a unique course that has been specially designed for their language needs in a very specific context, while performing certain job tasks. [Dudley and St Johns \(1998\)](#) Also indicate that ESP courses also have such variable characteristics as the following:

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English.
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level of instruction or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at a secondary school level.
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.

Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used by beginners ([Martin, 2010](#)). Furthermore, for [Day and Krazanowsky \(2011\)](#), ESP courses can also be designed for working professionals; in such a case, the course takes into consideration the needs of the specific profession as well as those of the specific organization. Designing an ESP course is described by [Dudley and St Johns \(1998\)](#) as a set of phases. For the authors, "the key stages in ESP are needs analysis, course (and syllabus) design, materials selection (and production), teaching and learning, and evaluation. These are not separate, linearly related activities, rather they represent phases which overlap and are interdependent," (p.121). Those phases were the ones the three graduate students of the University of Abomey Calavi followed to come up with "An English Language course for Registry and Information Officers.

2.2. Needs Analysis in ESP

To design an effective ESP course, instructors require knowing the working conditions of the learners as well as their language needs. They also require knowing the tasks that will be performed in English by the students. The needs of the learners are central to the course design. This phase of getting closer to the group's actual situation is called needs analysis. [Dudley and St Johns \(1998\)](#) state that needs analysis in ESP helps determine the following information about the learners:

- Professional information: tasks and activities they will be using English for.
- Personal information: factors which may affect their learning (previous experience, cultural information, reasons for attending the course and expectations.
- Language information: their current skills and language use.
- Language lacks concerning their professional information.
- Language learning information: what they need to learn.
- How language and skills are used in the target situations identified in the professional information.
- Expectations about the course.
- Environment information in which the course will be run.

Accordingly, [Day and Krazanowsky \(2011\)](#), consider that there are at least ten (10) vital aspects the EPS teacher needs to know before delivering a course designed following the learners' preferences. These features can be implemented as questions that need to be answered by the course designers. Paraphrasing these authors, those questions are summarized as follows:

- Is the instructor expected to deliver a tailor-made ESP course or is it possible to adapt or modify an existing one?
- Who are the learners?
- Are the learners paying for the course or are they sponsored by their employer? If they are sponsored, the needs analysis should include the expectation of the employer.
- Do the learners expect to be consulted in the process of syllabus design?
- What is the learner's language proficiency level?
- Are they homogeneous or not?
- What particular forms of the language are used in their specific professional activities?
- Are there extra funds for the design of new materials to supplement the available ones?
- Where and how will the course be delivered? Will the learners have enough time for self-study or homework?
- What are the learners' learning styles and preferences?
- To what extent is the instructor familiar with the specific subject matter?

The results of the needs analysis will help the ESP instructor identify valuable information about the students. The teacher will know about their prospective professional needs, their needs in terms of language skills and their deficiencies in language skills. With this information, the instructor can determine the objectives of the language course and select material that meets those requirements. Therefore, needs analysis is basic to establishing curriculum content, teaching materials and methods that will motivate learners.

3. Methodology

This research analyzes the process followed by a group of 3 students in didactics when designing an ESP course for professionals working at the Registrar's Office at the University of Abomey Calavi. It also examines the teaching, learning and evaluation processes related to the implementation of this course. These three students knew about some difficulties faced by Anglophone students when looking for specific information at the Registrar's Office. The research methods used in this study are essentially qualitative. Two data collection instruments were used to collect data for this study and these include interviews with the 3 ESP course designers and ESP class observation.

3.1. Interview with the 3 ESP Course Designers

During the interview, three questions are asked:

- 1- What process did you follow while designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers?
- 2- What difficulties did you face in designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers?
- 3- How can the designing, implementation and evaluation of the ESP course be fostered in the Beninese context?

3.2. ESP Class Observation

The class observation helps the research team to eye-witness the way ESP teaching and learning process has been conducted in a classroom situation. During the class observations, the research team sat at the bottom of the classroom and recorded the instructor's teaching practices as well as students' reactions to the learning activities. Each class observation lasted 1(one) hour. At the end of the class observation, the research team and the instructor discussed some aspects of the observed teaching and learning process.

3.3. Implementation of an ESP Course

Once the course was designed, it was implemented through a three-month training. This ESP course is designed following the most relevant tasks identified through the needs analysis applied to the group of UAC workers willing to participate in this experience.

The instructors of this specific course were three EFL students enrolled in the Master's Program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the University of Abomey Calavi. The participants in this training were 12 workers of the registrar's office of the University of Abomey Calavi. At the end of this training, a questionnaire was administered to know the perceptions and opinions of the participant students (workers of the registrar's office) as regards the materials, teacher performance, testing, and the online modality adopted.

The methodology adopted for this teaching project was mainly based on the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach (TBLT). This approach is based on the identification of different tasks that would be basic for the planning and instruction of the language. Richards (2001) state that these tasks are proposed as useful instruments to apply vehicles for applying the following Communicative Language Teaching principles:

- Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning.
- Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.
- Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. The tutors designed the course using the learners' working tasks as starting points. The instruction used realistic, authentic student-centred activities grounded in the communicative language teaching foundation. Since the course lasted only 14 weeks, the teachers decided to promote the learning of "language chunks" or prefabricated routines that enabled transactionally focused conversations with English speakers.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

In this section, the data collected during the designing, teaching, the learning and the evaluation processes of this ESP course are analysed in the light of the procedures exposed in the literature review. The presentation of data is structured as follows: results of the needs analysis, the results of analysis of the ESP course, course design, material design, the teaching methods and evaluation.

4.1. Results of the Needs Analysis

As stated before, the process of the needs analysis took place during the designing stage. The graduate students based their needs analysis on Graves (2000) who states that the main purpose of the needs assessment is to gather information about the learner's abilities, attitudes, and preferences before the course and about the desired abilities, changes and outcome expected from the academic activity. The needs analysis was conducted on a group of 12 university workers mainly from the Registrar's Office. Some of the relevant results were that their average language proficiency was very low. Learners felt that they needed to learn English to give information about admission to UAC and to get the main idea of incoming emails. Learners also wanted to listen to recordings, study grammar and watch videos. The analysis of the assessment allowed the graduate students to conclude that to perform those tasks, the 12 learners also needed to accomplish some other activities such as greeting and offering help to English-speaking individuals, getting the main ideas and specific information of job-related electronic communications, give directions on the UAC campus, explain the process of enrolling for the Admission Test and applying for transcripts. All these tasks had to be learned in a context where learners would feel comfortable and motivated; therefore, instructors decided that they would use different language learning activities; for example, they would use controlled practice, pair-group work, role plays, speech recording, reading authentic and adapted emails, and keeping language learning logs. Another relevant aspect of the decision-making process was the fact that the ESP course would last only 16 weeks, so the student-instructors decided to work mainly on their speaking skills. This decision was also made because most of the international students asked for help in person.

As to their interest and language learning preferences, learners showed that they were very traditional since they preferred teacher-front classroom activities. Therefore, the instructors had the challenge to create a friendly and trusting learning environment in which students could develop speaking skills such as risk-taking and negotiation of meaning more confidently.

Robinson (1980) in Richards (2001) explains that ESP students usually study to perform a role. The measure of success for these students is whether they can perform convincingly in their working tasks. As stated before, prospective learners perceived that their main language needs were related to the following tasks:

- Giving information about admissions to the University of Abomey Calavi (UAC).
- Getting the main ideas of the incoming emails.
- Giving directions on the UAC campus.
- Applying for transcripts at UAC.

Those four main tasks were subdivided into smaller elements that became the course content units. Based on the previous information, the student - instructors concluded that the group of workers of the UAC Registrar's officers needed specific English training to carry on the following job-related tasks:

- Greeting international students and offering help.
- Reading job-related texts, e.g. emails, to get the main ideas.
- Locating the main offices of the Administrative Building.
- Locating the main buildings on the UAC campus.
- Clarifying information when this is not clear or understandable.
- Determining international students' status at UAC.
- Relaying the majors provided by UAC.
- Relaying the important dates related to the admission process at UAC.
- Sending international students to the appropriate office for admission processing.
- Explaining the process of enrolling for the Admission Test.

- Explaining the process of applying for transcripts.
- Explaining the process of admission to UAC.

4.2. The Results of Analysis of the ESP Course

Motivating learners' participation was crucial for the Master's students group. Prospective students were consulted in the process of syllabus design as a strategy of knowing the tasks they performed in their job environment. This information served to prepare each content unit. Through the different sessions, instructors could learn more about students' learning preferences and styles as well as their language levels. All materials used in this course were provided by the instructors; some were adapted from those used for general English courses to fulfil the purposes of this specific course. Even though the needs analysis was conducted on a group of twelve prospective students, at the time the course was implemented, only 12 individuals started and finished the course; all of them belonged to the Registrar's Office.

4.3. Results Related to the Course Design

The group of student-instructors agreed that the fundamental purpose of the course was to help registrar officers overcome the necessity to communicate in English with international students who went to the UAC Registrar's Office. The different steps recommended by Richards (2001) were core activities of the course design. During the course design process, the student - instructors constantly met with the potential students to have a clear idea of those processes carried out in the UAC Registrar's Office. Those processes were subdivided into phases which were relevant to defining the different teaching units. Each unit had one general objective with its corresponding specific objectives. Additionally, each unit was divided into different tasks that the student had to perform along the course to attain the proposed goals.

4.4. Material Design

All materials used in class were provided by the group of instructors, who prepared them in a way that students would be able to work on each step using their target language. In most of the cases, they adapted those used for courses in general English to suit the needs of this specific instance.

4.5. Teaching Methods

As mentioned above, the ESP course was designed following the most relevant tasks identified through the need analysis applied to the group of UAC workers willing to participate in this experience. The methodology adopted for this teaching project was mainly based on the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach (TBLT). The instructors used different tasks to involve students in the class activities.

4.6. Evaluation

The participating instructors used several instruments and strategies to evaluate the students' progress along the course. These instruments and strategies include Language – Learning Log, role plays, techno- homework, techno-homework audio and video recordings, portfolio, and final oral project.

4.6.1. Language – Learning Log

Every week, students had to fill out a form with phrases and expressions they learned during that specific week. They also had to mention those aspects that presented some problems for them as well as include some phrases and expressions they would like to learn in the course. Through this instrument, the teaching team could assess if the use of vocabulary and structures studied was correct or not. During the subsequent planning sessions, the team analyzed the logs and designed several activities to provide feedback accordingly.

4.6.2. Roleplays

The development of the speaking and listening skills was the main focus of the course; learners were continuously asked to make up and present conversations. The instructors provided feedback to students regarding the strategies used to convey meaning as well as language use.

4.6.3. Techno- Homework

Students were asked to keep an electronic reflection journal about their learning process. They also received electronic messages from their instructors, and they had to answer back to them. The electronic reflection was reviewed every week. Since students' language proficiency was very low, they could write their reflections in French. The main objective of this activity was to allow expressing feelings regarding the learning process.

4.6.4. Audio and Video Recordings

The midterm evaluation was based on analyzing the students' oral performance while helping international students at the window. Students were taken to their job area and were asked to help international students who would approach the window asking for specific information. The activity was taped. The information provided by the recording helped the instructors to design several activities to work on such areas as communication strategies used during the conversations, content, language use, and pronunciation. These activities were incorporated into the subsequent lesson plans.

4.6.5. Portfolio

Students kept a portfolio with all the material used in class, their reflections on their learning process and their vocabulary lists.

4.6.6. Final Oral Project

At the end of the course, as a requirement of the course, learners had to present an oral activity that would show how much they had learned along the course. This activity would be attended by the didactics lecturers and the students enrolled in the ESP course. To lower their anxiety, learners rehearsed a conversation that would take place between an international student and a worker from the UAC Registrar's Office. This conversation was recorded by the instructors and was used to provide feedback. The presentation was a success. The result was due to hard work and continuous practice.

4.7. Participating in Students' Feelings about this Learning Experience

At the end of the teaching and learning process, all the 12 students were asked to give their feelings about the course they attended. All of them expressed total satisfaction with attending this course which is the first experience in the history of the UAC.

5. Discussion of Findings

The discussion of the findings is based on the answers to the three (03) research questions and the conclusions of previous studies related to the present study.

5.1. The Process was Followed by Three TEFL Graduate Students in Designing an ESP Course for UAC's Registrar Office Workers.

In the process of designing an ESP course for UAC's registrar office workers, the designers conducted a need analysis of their prospective learners. This step helped them to identify the professional information, personal information, language information, language lacks concerning their professional information, language learning information, how language and skills are used in the target situations identified, expectations about the course, and the environment information in which the course will be run. This observation agrees with [Dudley and St Johns \(1998\)](#) who pointed out that *"each ESP group of students attends a unique course that has been specially designed for their language needs in a very specific context while performing certain job tasks"*. Moreover, once the needs are identified and analysed, the findings show that the ESP designers translated their future learners' needs into teaching and learning objectives which have been implemented and evaluated by 3 teachers during an ESP class attended by 12 workers of the UAC registrar office. This finding is in agreement with [Day and Krazanowsky \(2011\)](#) who proposed at least ten(10) essential features the EPS teacher needs to know before delivering a course designed following the learners learning styles.

The findings are also in line with [Richards \(2001\)](#) who established the different levels of the process in planning a course and designing the syllabus are processed: developing a course rationale, describing entry and exit levels and choosing course content.

5.2. The Difficulties Encountered by Three TEFL Graduate Students in Designing an ESP Course for UAC's Registrar Office Workers

The analysis of the ESP course designing and the implementation process as well as the ESP class observation and the interview conducted with the ESP course designers helped to identify three major difficulties.

5.2.1. Selection of Teaching and Learning Materials

Due to potential English teachers' lack of experience in the subject area, the material selection can provide them with the fundamental principles to be tackled. However, the teaching and learning materials available are not fully adapted to the students' social and professional needs. This finding is under [Jeremy Day and Krazanowsky \(2011\)](#) who suggested in their study suggested that if *"a coursebook is not adequate for the learners' specific needs, the teacher may use different materials from various courses utilizing a 'blended learning platform'"*

5.2.2. The Challenges Related to the ESP Course Designing and Implementation

This work explores factors pertinent to ESP course designing that must be considered by course designers. Among these, specifically, are the failures to recognize that learners are not necessarily reliable sources of information about their own objective needs or that their objective needs are prone to change. Moreover, the interview with the course designers revealed their inability to ensure a link and strike the right balance between the cognitive and affective sides of learning. In addition, a deep analysis of the course content has shown the designers' failure to incorporate in the course design opportunities for providing meaningful feedback. These findings are not in line with the conclusion of the research conducted by [Richards \(2001\)](#) who established the key roles of ESP practitioners as follows: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator. However, all these roles are not played by the instructors involved in the present study.

One of the obstacles faced by the designers of this ESP course was the consolidation of the group of potential pupils. The first step was to visit the authorities of several UAC offices to offer a "free" English course and ask for their permission. If the authority agreed on allowing the implementation of the course, the next step was to convince

the workers to attend. Those stages were not easy because enrolling in such a course meant staying after work, two times a week for two hours. This situation could be lessened if the graduate students could look for pupils in other public institutions. Another difficulty faced by the three instructors was the risk of not being able to implement the lesson plan. This was mainly because participation was voluntary. In the experience of the present study, there were instances in which only one student showed up to class, forcing an abrupt change in the lesson plan. Therefore, there is a need to promote a sense of commitment among the participant. This finding reflects the outcomes of Nalan (2015) when he posited that *“the course syllabus should be organized in such a way that continuous recycling of language structures and content is promoted.”*

5.2.3. How Can the Designing, Implementation and Evaluation of the ESP Course be Fostered in the Beninese Context?

The data collected during this study has revealed positive perception of ESP designers and instructors about the various potentials of ESP for developing effective communication in a working place. This perception may justify why designers were very careful while designing/adapting the materials to include the target language and promote its use in the specific working tasks. This is buttressed by Dudley and St Johns (1998) when they say: *“ESP practitioners often have to plan the course they teach and provide the materials for it. It is rarely possible to use a particular textbook without the need for supplementary material, and sometimes no suitable published material exists for certain of the identified needs,”* (p.14).

Moreover, in this learning experience, the teaching approach used is the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach which is based on the identification of different tasks that would be basic for the planning and instruction of the language. This is following Richards (2001) Richards and Rogers (2001, p. 223) who state that these tasks are proposed as useful instruments for applying the following Communicative Language Teaching principles:

- Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning.
- Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.
- Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

In addition, the instruction used realistic, authentic student-centred activities grounded in the communicative language teaching foundation. Since the course lasted only 14 weeks, the teachers decided to promote the learning of "language chunks" or prefabricated routines that enabled transactionally focused conversations with English speakers. This finding is in harmony with the study by Nalan (2015); Anthony (1997); Berardo (2006) who indicates that *“In ESP any method can be chosen to be used in the classroom according to the context, learners, and needs analysis, teaching standard and learning abilities.”*

6. Recommendations

Based on the data collected through interviews with both ESP course designers and instructors, the following recommendations were made. Firstly, an effective design and implementation of an ESP course must be rooted in a need analysis of prospective learners and a professional environment. Secondly, when looking for prospective learners, there is the possibility of creating some expectations that the course could not fulfil. Therefore, the course syllabus should be elaborated, revised and approved not only by the instructors but also by the prospective learners. This would motivate both groups of participants since the academic project could be considered theirs, and the expectations would be shared.

Thirdly, all four language skills; listening, reading, speaking, and writing, are usually stressed equally in an ESL/EFL classroom, while in ESP it is learners' needs that decide which language skills are focused on, and the course is designed accordingly. Fourthly, ESP students are usually intermediate or advanced adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language to communicate in a particular academic or professional context. Therefore, ESP must combine subject matter and English language teaching. Above all, the evaluation of the course must help to assess how far the identified needs, teaching approaches, materials and methods used in ESP have been satisfied.

7. Conclusion

The main purpose of the present study was to revisit the experience of three UAC graduate students when designing and implementing an ESP course. This study has revealed that English teachers have not completely applied for ESP courses in teaching English for the UAC registrar office workers. A complete ESP course seems appalling to be designed as teachers have to play several roles simultaneously to make the course comes into realization. The teachers are required not only to teach or organize the class to run well, but also to prepare the syllabus, provide materials, collaborate with subject/content experts, conduct research, and evaluate the students and the course. The result of this study also shows that challenges are inevitable as the teachers proceed to design an ESP course. To state which challenge is the most burdensome is seemingly impossible as each stage presents equal difficulties. Nonetheless, breaking down each challenge into feasible tasks gives a sense of success that leads to the probability of completing an ESP course to be applied. Dealing confidently with the challenges helps provide expedient step-to-step experience to prepare for any course in the future. However, since this study is limited to UAC registrar workers, more thorough and wider research that examines the implementation of ESP throughout all the faculties of the university is suggested. Further study should involve students as the users of the course to discover other relevant factors that influence the implementation of the ESP course.

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