

# Stakeholders' Perceptions of 'Use of English' Programme at the University of Buea, Cameroon

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## Abstract

The 'Use of English' (UoE) or 'English Composition' is a freshman course taught in many universities around the world. In Cameroon, an officially bilingual (French/English) country, UoE is taught at the University of Buea, one of two English-Speaking Universities as a compulsory course for all students, irrespective of their major. The present investigation was undertaken to assess stakeholders' perceptions of the relevance of this course, as well as to determine its strengths and weaknesses in view of future improvements.

To accomplish these objectives, structured questionnaires were applied to 500 students who had taken the course. Focused interviews were also conducted with the Coordinators and teachers of the course. Finally to validate the responses, pre- and post-diagnostic tests were conducted with a cohort of 200 students taking the course, marked and their performances compared.

The questionnaire survey indicated considerable stakeholders' positive appreciation of the course while identifying weaknesses such as insufficient availability of course materials, inadequate pre-course preparation and inadequate emphasis placed on grammar during course delivery. Analysis of the results supported the positive impact of the UoE. We concluded that the UoE course is a necessary requirement that needs to be improved upon and applied in similar learning environments.

**Keywords:** English language, teaching, learning, evaluation, Cameroon

## 1. Introduction

First-year composition (FYC) (sometimes known as freshman composition or freshman writing) is an introductory core curriculum writing course in North American colleges. This course focuses on improving students' abilities to write in a university setting and introduces students to writing practices in the disciplines and professions. These courses are traditionally required of incoming students, thus the previous name, "Freshman Composition" (John Duffy, 2012). At the University of Buea, Cameroon, it is called Use of English (UoE) and the objective is almost the same as that of FYC; to help freshmen write better across the disciplines at the university. This is more necessary nowadays because English has become the number one language in the world that is indispensable for science, commerce, diplomacy and technology.

"English has become the second language of everybody," said Mark Warschauer, a Professor of Education and informatics at the University of California, Irvine.

"It's gotten to the point where almost in any part of the world, to be educated means to know English."

*In Africa, countries like Rwanda, Senegal, Morocco and Cote D'Ivoire, which were officially French-speaking, have recently adopted English as their official language. In Cameroon, an officially bilingual (French/English) country, the Use of English (UoE) is taught at the University of Buea, one of the two English Speaking Universities as a compulsory course for all students irrespective of their specialty. English language also continues to be taught as a subject in other predominantly French-speaking universities in the country. Nowadays, university studies require extra lectures in English to enable learners access the rich sources of information available in English.*

*The UoE course at the University of Buea was designed to meet the needs of learners with diverse degrees of exposure at secondary school level who had to study together in English. These learners were predominantly Anglophones who had passed the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE-OL) in English and Francophones who had passed the university's proficiency examination pegged at the same level as the GCE OL examination. The course syllabus for the UoE was designed to enhance the core macro-skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. In addition, remedial work was also done on some micro-skills such as grammar and vocabulary development (Nordquist, 2009).*

The Use of English programme from inception in 1993 has been taught by English Language teachers from secondary schools in the region together with lecturers at the university carefully selected after an interview. The teachers worked under the supervision of course coordinators appointed by the university among senior English language teachers. The course delivery method has usually been traditional i.e. lectures, discussions, reading and writing assignments with limited use of audio-visual aids. The Use of English Programme which has been running for more than twenty years has never been evaluated. Therefore the present

investigation sought to find out whether the programme is relevant as perceived by the different stakeholders.

## 2. Methodology

The sample population for the study comprised five hundred students (500) randomly selected from the nearly 4853 that were registered for the course in 2012. Slovin's formula was used to calculate the appropriate sample size. Although the sample size calculated using the formula was 373, a larger sample of 500 was employed to make room for eventual defections.

To assess the perception of stakeholders, we looked at students, teachers, coordinators and employers who use English as their main language at the job-site. Students were administered questionnaires and two tests (pre and post). The first test was to find out the level of students before the programme while the second test was to see whether any marked difference had occurred at the end of the course. Questionnaires sought to answer questions on students' perception of the course in the various topics learned. Teachers' opinions were sought through questionnaires and in like manner, the responses were analysed and conclusions drawn. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the study participants in the schools and faculties of the university.

Table 1. Summary of sample selected for the study

|   | <b>Faculty</b>                      | <b>Sample selected</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Social and Management Studies       | 152                    | 30.4              |
| 2 | Science                             | 121                    | 24.2              |
| 3 | Arts                                | 98                     | 19.6              |
| 4 | Education                           | 78                     | 15.6              |
| 5 | Health Sciences                     | 25                     | 5                 |
| 6 | Engineering and Technology          | 15                     | 3                 |
| 7 | Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine | 07                     | 1.4               |
| 8 | ASTI                                | 04                     | 0.8               |
|   | <b>TOTAL</b>                        | <b>500</b>             | <b>100</b>        |

#

Coordinators were interviewed and gave their impressions and views on the way they had run the programme during their tenure of office and the data analysed to come up with conclusions.

Employees were people who work in English after having graduated from the University of Buea with a pass in Use of English. They responded to questionnaire questions, which were also analysed as above.

### 3. Findings

The primary aim of this investigation was to find out the perceptions of the main stakeholders of the UoE course. Naturally, students who are the main beneficiaries were interviewed, followed by their teachers and program coordinators and finally those graduates who were then gainfully employed. Their responses are analysed below under the respective headings.

#### 3.1 Students

Students constituted the bulk of the study population divided into two groups. The questionnaires were distributed to five hundred (500) respondents and the pre and post tests administered to two hundred (200) students. These students were selected randomly from teaching groups and it later revealed that they came from all the schools and faculties as shown in Table 1 above. The frequency shows the population distribution per faculty as it is on the ground with the Faculty of Social and Management Science (SMS) topping the list with the highest number of students (30.4%) and the schools of technology and engineering coming at the tail in terms of numbers.

The results on Table 2 show that a majority of respondents (85.3%) either strongly agreed or agreed that they made optimal use of knowledge from the UoE course to write minutes. The remaining 14.7% who did not was insignificant.

Table 2. Description of respondents in relation to using English for Minutes-writing

| Response Options  | Frequency  | Percentage (%) | Combined Percentages |
|-------------------|------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Agree             | 211        | 43.8           | 85.3                 |
| Strongly Agree    | 200        | 41.5           |                      |
| Disagree          | 39         | 8.1            | 13.5                 |
| Strongly Disagree | 26         | 5.4            |                      |
| Missing Data      | 6          | 1.2            | 1.2                  |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>482</b> | <b>100.0</b>   | <b>100.0</b>         |

#### 3.2 Coordinators

Out of six coordinators who have handled the course since its inception, only four were available and responded to the structured interviews. All coordinators complained that they never had enough finances to manage the course. Investigations at the office of the Dean showed that initially, the budget allocation for the UoE course was lumped with the rest of the faculty making it difficult to determine how much was effectively spent on the UoE course. However, in 2006/2007 academic year, a budget head was created for UoE Programme and the allocation varied from 8.5-12 million francs CFA (about 17-24.000 USD)

annually. The coordinators judged the amount inadequate and thought the unit needed more money as the number of students increases every year. They all thought that the course was necessary for the students and should be maintained as a prerequisite for graduation.

### 3.3 Teachers

A total of twenty-five (25) questionnaires was distributed to staff members and fifteen were retrieved; three of them from full-time lecturers. The responses showed that though the recommended number of students per group was 60, the number of students effectively enrolled range from 80-100. The number of teaching groups assigned to each teacher range from 1-4 and each group was taught just once a week. Teachers complained that the thirteen weeks allotted for the course were not enough as they had to rush over lessons to complete the course outline. All the necessary skills were never adequately taught. General tests were not regular and teaching methods are not discussed in seminars or workshops. Newly recruited staff were not initiated into the course through seminars or paired with more experienced ones for better transfer of skills.

### 3.4 Workers

This category emerged from the students' questionnaires. It was discovered that some of the respondents happened to be workers who were reading for undergraduate degrees and therefore required to pass the use of English course. Their expectations were to find improvement from the programme but their responses showed that they were rather disappointed as the skills they looked forward to perfecting like speaking and intensive writing were not taught. Along with the students, they responded that English is a necessity at the work and therefore a need (Table 3).

Table 3. Description of former course participants' needs for English at their job-sites

| Response Options  | Frequency  | Percentage (%) | Combined Percentages |
|-------------------|------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 207        | 42.9           | 78.2                 |
| Agree             | 170        | 35.3           |                      |
| Missing Data      | 83         | 17.2           | 17.2                 |
| Strongly Disagree | 12         | 2.5            | 4.6                  |
| Disagree          | 10         | 2.1            |                      |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>482</b> | <b>100.0</b>   | <b>100.0</b>         |

### 3.5 Perception From Students

Following the students' responses, it could be said that they perceived the course as useful and would like that the programme should be ameliorated to suit their needs. They would especially love to be exposed to speaking modules that will enable them speak better English boldly and be able to work with it comfortably.

Table 4. Description of respondents on measures to take to improve the programme

| S/N | What to do to improve on the Programme   | Frequency  | Percentage (%) |
|-----|--|------------|----------------|
| 1   | Workshop activities should be incorporated in the teaching-learning process.   | 251        | 52.1           |
| 2   | The teaching of phonetics should be intensified.   | 79         | 16.4           |
| 3   | Smaller tutorial groups should be formed to ease teaching and learning.  | 62         | 12.9           |
| 4   | Teaching aids should be used regularly.  | 24         | 5.0            |
| 5   | Film/video shows should be used for teaching programmes to enhance better understanding.   | 16         | 3.3            |
| 6   | Administrative writing should be incorporated in the programme.  | 12         | 2.5            |
| 7   | Hand writing should be taught as part of the programme.  | 12         | 2.5            |
| 8   | Handouts and other study materials should be made during and after the course.   | 9          | 1.9            |
| 9   | Seminars should be used as part of teaching the course.  | 5          | 1.0            |
| 10  | Field trips to places like the British Council, American Language Centre should be organized to acquaint participants with language. | 5          | 1.0            |
| 11  | Spoken English should be included in the programme.  | 4          | 0.8            |
| 12  | Assignments should always be given to students.  | 3          | 0.6            |
|     | <b>Total</b>   | <b>482</b> | <b>100.0</b>   |

As summarized in Table 4, Students also perceived the course as a global need as many of them are faced with the problem of writing admission letters abroad and to seek jobs in international organisations.

Many of the students (52.1%) thought that they could have done better if they had practical activities incorporated into the course. This would have made them work in the language and thus done more things with it. Based on participants' responses, this study demonstrates that many factors, which often remain unnoticed or unacknowledged, impact student learning and transfer, including participants' robust identities, perceptions of writing, and resistance to conscious shifts in learning. In order to increase students' abilities to transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts, we will need to provide students with ample opportunities to investigate and articulate their learning in the classroom. This will call for more practical sessions as suggested in Table 4 above.

### *3.6 Perception From Coordinators And Teachers (Structured Interviews)*

The end product of every scholarship is to use the new knowledge to succeed in society. The Use of English programme as perceived by the coordinators and teachers is a subject that is used across all other disciplines. The teacher's perception is expected to focus on how the

student can make this knowledge transfer through the classroom lessons planned year after year. This did not seem to have been the case as teachers did not work in synergy. For example there were no seminars and workshops to ensure that each teacher focuses on the same competences as his/her colleague. The lack of synergy of action among the coordinators and teachers lead to disparities in the course delivery and disparate outcomes among the learners' methods.

### *3.7 Perception From Workers' Responses*

The few workers encountered in this research indicated that the impact that the course has on the wider society and thus, their contributions are considered here for future considerations in establishing new course outlines. The area of knowledge transfer becomes an issue to students and workers alike as they find it difficult to identify what should be used from the 101/102 courses. Students tend to believe that what is learned in the course should stay within the course, whereas the course cuts across all the disciplines studied at the university and should be applicable to a wide variety of situations. Students and workers alike could attain higher rates of transfer if they perceived the knowledge and skills from one setting (101/102) as valuable to another.

### *3.8 Validation Of Students' Perception Using Pre/Post Tests And Long Essays)*

A pre and post-tests were administered to students during this research in order to validate stakeholders' perceptions obtained through the surveys and interviews. The pre test was designed to find out the level of students at entry. Marking consisted of **content, expression and accuracy** which are basic for academic writing. The results obtained showed lapses in the areas of grammar, expressions and tenses. The post test on its part was to find out whether there had been any progress after taking two semesters of the UoE courses. Although students had not performed as well as expected, there was considerable improvement. Tables 5 & 6 below show the frequency distribution of the pre and post test results.

The frequency chart in table 5 presents results obtained from students' scripts after Test 1 (pre-test). A total of 200 students enrolled to write but at the end, there were only 197. About 44% passed the test assuming a cut-off of C grade or 50% as a pass rate.

Table 5. Test One: (Pre-Test) Before Start Of Eng. 101 Course

| A | B+ | B  | C+ | C  | D+ | D  | F  | Total |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| 2 | 6  | 14 | 25 | 39 | 36 | 45 | 30 | 197   |

The second test was written at the end of the course (i.e. after the second semester) and sought to find out whether there had been an improvement from the first test. The following results were recorded (Table 6).



Table 6. Test Two (Post Test) End Of Eng. 102 Course

| A | B+ | B  | C+ | C  | D+ | D  | F  |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 5 | 10 | 15 | 30 | 45 | 20 | 24 | 25 |

Table 6 shows the results of the second test with a better performance. The percentage pass rose from 44 in ENG. 101 to 60 in ENG. 102. Marking at this level still concentrated on **content, expression and accuracy.** The number of students who wrote the second test were 174 reason being that all who wrote test one could not be traced. The reason for the improvement could be that the students had learned how to write better which suggested that the course was meeting its objectives though not entirely satisfactorily.

Students usually write a long essay in their respective disciplines as part of the requirements for the Bachelor's degree. A selection of these long essays was evaluated in order to determine whether the writing skills of the students had improved in their respective disciplines. The long essays corrected and analysed showed similar lapses in content, grammar and expressions. Since students are exposed to the same language courses and present the same results, it supposes that focus should be on the writing skills with emphases on content, grammar, tenses and expressions. Besides ENG 101/102, there should be English for Special Purposes for post graduate students to enable them write their dissertations and theses.

### *3.9 Impact Of The Programme*

Every research endeavour done in a community should have an impact or relevance to the immediate community. This study sought to determine how relevant this programme is to the University of Buea and since the institution does not exist in a vacuum' by extension to the community. English is the language used for formal matters in offices, churches, courts and administration in Cameroon West of the Mungo i.e. English-speaking part of Cameroon. Wills, Formal letters, Official Meetings, Media: (Radio, Newspaper and Television are done in English). All these show that English is needed in the community. It will be difficult to understand many of the things that happen nationally and internationally if one did not grasp the basic skills of English. It is common nowadays to see grandmothers speak to their grand children in some form of English. When asked why this is the case, the response is often that the children speak English in school and not Pidgin English. It is believed that if the children are exposed to the language of the school, they will perform better. Illiterates find someone at all times to read or write for them or explain what they cannot understand in church, on radio or on television. Many graduates from the University of Buea get recruited severally into both the Public and Private sectors as a result of their knowledge of the English language. Though this is the case, it could be better if the teaching/learning machinery of the University of Buea could be overhauled for better performance.



#### 4. Conclusions

Based on the analyses of the results of the questionnaire and structured interviews it has been shown that the UoE program is effective, useful and well appreciated by the stakeholders. This view is corroborated by the direct testing of the students before and after taking the course which showed marked improvement of the learners' performance in the English Language diagnostic tests. It is highly probable that over the years the course achieved its goals of facilitating teaching and learning at the University of Buea. Given the robust design of the syllabus and its successful implantation, it is possible that similar courses would add value to university training, particularly in the African countries where English is gaining grounds as an official language.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Teachers' questionnaire

The following questions ask you to express your opinion about the Use of English Programme in which you are a key actor as a classroom teacher. Your honest answers will enable us improve on the teaching/learning process. Your responses will be anonymous and treated with total confidentiality. Thanks!

#### A) Personal information

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Qualification: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Number of years on the course: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Academic and Professional experience: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Use of English Programme

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1. What is the number of students you teach per group?
  - (a) 100
  - (b) 80
  - (c) 60
  - (d) 40
2. How many groups do you teach?
  - (a) One
  - (b) Two
  - (c) Three
  - (d) More than three
3. How often do you teach one group of students per week?
  - (a) Once
  - (b) Twice
  - (c) Three times
  - (d) Four times
4. How do you assess the students?
  - (a) Classroom exercises
  - (b) Weekly tests
  - (c) Oral tests
  - (d) End of month
5. What study aids do your students use?
  - (a) Prescribed textbooks
  - (b) Handouts
  - (c) Teacher notes
  - (d) Polycopies

6. How often are general tests organized?
  - (a) Once in a semester
  - (b) Sometimes
  - (c) Rarely
  - (d) Never
7. How often do you discuss methodology and other pedagogic teaching imperatives?
  - (a) Once in a semester
  - (b) Sometimes
  - (c) Rarely
  - (d) Never
8. How are end of course examinations set?
  - (a) Sample questions from teachers
  - (b) By the coordinator
  - (c) By older staff
  - (d) No idea
9. As part-time staff, you are remunerated according to work done
  - (a) Regularly
  - (b) End of semester
  - (c) Very late
  - (d) End of the school year
10. What is your relationship with the organization of the course?
  - (a) excellent
  - (b) very good
  - (c) Good
  - (d) Poor
11. What would you give as suggestions for the improvement of the course?

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**Thank you for finding time to respond to these questions**

## Appendix 2

### Student questionnaire

I am a lecturer at UB in the Department of English. The questions below ask you to express opinion about the Use of English Course: ENG101/102 that you did a few years ago. Your answers will help us improve on the teaching/learning of the course. We would appreciate your honest opinions. Your responses will be anonymous and treated with complete confidentiality. Thanks!

#### A) Personal Information

1. Name: (optional) -----
2. Sex: -----
3. Faculty: -----
4. UB Matric. No. -----
5. Year of study in Use of English -----
6. Age: -----
7. Tel. No. -----

#### B) Language Profile:

1. Grade scored in English at the GCE O'L: [A] [B] [C] BACC: [ ] [ ]
2. Languages spoken (tick if spoken)  
English [ ] French [ ] Pidgin [ ] Mother tongue [ ] Any other  
language [ ]
3. High school attended (state type) [Gov't] [Mission] [Private]
4. Did you have a rule in your school forbidding the use of Pidgin English? [Yes]  
[No]

#### C) Use of English Programme

1. Did the course 101/102 have any impact on your studies at UB?  
(a) Very much  
(b) Much  
(c) A little  
(d) Not at all
2. Do you think it would have been possible to study in UB without 101/102 course?  
(a) Very well  
(b) Not much  
(c) Not quite  
(d) Not at all
3. In your opinion, did the programme meet your expectation?  
(a) Very well  
(b) A little  
(c) Not quite  
(d) Not at all

4. What aspect of the course did you find most useful?
  - (a) Listening
  - (b) Speaking
  - (c) Writing
  - (d) Reading
5. How would you rate the relationship between you and your 101/102 instructor?
  - (a) Excellent
  - (b) Very good
  - (c) Good
  - (d) Poor
6. What did you find most difficult in 101/102 programme? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What did you find most interesting in the course? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Would you advise someone to do ENG 101/102 for university studies?

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  - (a) Very strongly
  - (b) Strongly
  - (c) Not at all

**D) Personal Opinion**

1. If you were asked to improve on the course as a former student, what would you like to change or add?
  - (a) -----
  - (b) -----
  - (c) -----
  - (d) -----

**Thank you for taking time to answer these questions!**

### Appendix 3

#### Questionnaire: interview with coordinators

1. How long have you coordinated the Use of English programme?
2. What are the aims and objectives of the Programme?
3. How long has it been in use?
4. Has it ever been updated or revised?
5. Do/Did you teach some of the groups? If yes, how many?
6. What resources do/did you have for the management of this Unit?
7. Was/Is the money ever enough to do the work of the Unit?
8. How do you measure teachers' output?
9. How did/do you organize the Unit in terms of tests/examinations?
10. Does/Did each teacher administer his/her tests?
11. How do/did you verify harmony in the evaluation to ensure that each teacher taught/teaches what is intended?
12. What is/was your relationship with the teachers?
13. Did/Do you have any difficulties as a coordinator?
14. Name some of them.
15. If you had to do it all over again, what changes will you bring into the programme?
16. As coordinator, did/do you find the teaching/learning process effective?
17. Do/Did you think that it was/is necessary to make it compulsory for all students?
18. Do you think that the programme is necessary for the university?
19. What do you think about the results at the end of each semester?
20. Do they reflect the students' work?
21. Are you comfortable with an evaluation of the programme as current coordinator?
22. What future for the programme?
23. Any suggestions to administration for improvement? Thanks for your response

#### **Appendix 4**

##### **Samples from students' long essays from three faculties.**

The errors found on students' long essays are similar across the faculties especially in the area of acknowledgements where the students use their own language. Most of the students' write-ups are uplifted from the Internet or textbooks. Students' language can be easily recognized as the style drops from beautiful prose to weak expressions, poor agreements, and wrong spellings. Some examples of students' writings can be found in the sentences below.

"I will like to acknowledge this work to those who helped me directly or indirectly in the realization of this work"

"First and famous"

"As far as alkaloids in medicine is concern..."

"Most but not all possesses..." etc.

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