

# Students' Perceptions of the use of English Language Courses in Enhancing Language Abilities

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## ABSTRACT

The expectation that students integrate information from lectures and textbooks into the essays they produce, and that they demonstrate the mastery of proper reading and writing skills warrants an investigation into the manner in which English language courses are perceived by students towards the attainment of effective writing and reading skills. This paper set out to survey students' perceptions of the Use of English Language courses in enhancing reading and writing abilities. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and data were elicited from a questionnaire administered randomly to a sample of two hundred and eighteen (218) students within the University of Buea who took the Use of English language courses (ENG101/102 for the 2017/2018 academic year). The instrument used for data collection in this study was a close-ended four-point Likert scale questionnaire. The findings indicate that a majority of the respondents (87.2%) hold that their motivation for taking the Use of English courses is based on the fact that it is a University Requirement. 80.79% revealed that they do not clearly understand why the courses are taught, still, 59.7% agree that the courses build language skills and influence academic growth. More specifically with regard to the influence of the course on writing skills improvement, 80.72% agreed to its positive impact. They think that the courses influence writing more than they influence reading and that in teaching reading emphasis should be laid on the observation of punctuation marks and on incorporating materials from their different academic programmes.

**Keywords:** reading skills, writing skills, English proficiency testing, students' perception, teaching approaches.

## INTRODUCTION

At the tertiary level, reading and writing in the same language of instruction as that of the primary and secondary levels is fundamental in academic success. The ability to read and write in one's language of instruction at the university level allows for better accessing of knowledge, understanding and explanation of concepts. Students are always expected to integrate information from lectures and content of textbooks into long essays, research papers and/or theses and dissertations. The ability to read and write in a second language (L2) in this case, is considered an essential skill for academic students and it represents the primary way for independent language learning (Carrell & Grabe, 2002). Thus, proper mastery of reading and writing skills is most likely to result in better academic performance as low levels of proficiency in these skills are tolerated at the tertiary level. Since reading is comprehension and writing is production, students who cannot tolerably reconstruct material for the purposes of their courses, are at risk of not earning the scores needed for academic success because reading and writing share overlapping linguistic, cognitive, or social resources (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

Besides understanding the content of textbooks, articles and essays, students are also expected to be able to analyse, criticise and evaluate ideas from critical reading which is reinforced by writing used in conveying ideas, taking lecture notes, studying, summarising, and most importantly taking examinations.

In fact, competences in both reading and writing are considered to be of fundamental relevance in contemporary undergraduate education (Mok & Yuen, 2016). Thus, if inabilities are observed upon completion of their studies, then there is need to investigate students' perceptions of the course that is supposed to equip them with the reading and writing skills.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research on perceptions on language use and learning over the years has focused on prescribed patterns developed by language teachers and the beliefs, perceptions and practices of experienced teachers (see Ellis 2006; Young & Sachdev, 2011) but little research has been carried out in Cameroon about students' perceptions in language use and learning (Safotso, 2011). At the University of Buea, perceptions on the Use of English language programme have narrowed down to institutional versus students' views. The university authorities strongly believe that the programme is a great tool designed to help students gain access to, and cope with, academic material in their different fields of study. Despite the importance attached to the programme, its value seems to have been reduced to one of a general university requirement which students must pass in order to graduate.

### Objective of the study

To investigate whether or not students share the opinion of the university authorities and if there are any contrary opinions on the manner in which the programme has been branded and what possibly accounts for these opinions.

### Theoretical framework

Two theories underpinned this study, these were the Behaviourism theory by Skinner (1957) and the Cognitivist theory by Chomsky (1965). Skinner's (1957) theory was used to investigate students' perceptions as a form of behaviour conditioned by whether they considered the Use of English courses as important in learning skills or simply as a university requirement.

On its part, Chomsky's (1965) Cognitivism theory was used to determine the impression students had about the courses how these impressions impacted their behaviour. Both theories were then blended to provide answers to the questions submitted to the respondents.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a descriptive survey research design, which consisted of a predetermined set of questions that was administered to a sample with a representative population. Simple random sampling technique was used to select two hundred and eighteen (218) students who constituted the sample for this study. The instrument used for data collection was close-ended questionnaire. It contained close-ended questions. A four Likert type scale (Strongly Agree-SA, Agree-A, Disagree-D and Strongly Disagree-SD) was used. Likert-type or frequency scales use fixed choice response formats and are designed to measure attitudes or opinions (Bowling, 1997; Burns & Grove, 1997).

These ordinal scales measured levels of agreement to disagreement of particular statements. The study conducted its survey in the University of Buea, the Southwest Region of Cameroon. Two hundred and eighteen (n=218) students of the university were chosen on a random basis. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part collected data pertaining to the respondent's demographic information such as age, sex, faculty, ordinary level English grade). The second part was made up of questions drawn from the specific research question, with response options labelled SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, SD = Strongly Disagree, and D = Disagree. From the responses, the researcher measured the perceptions of students with regard to the research problem.

The Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient was used to check the reliability of the instrument. Items presented in the second part of the questionnaire were modified in the form of statements. After applying Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient for reliability assessment, it was observed that all the items on the questionnaire were valid enough to be administered.

After collecting the data, the two theories adopted for this study, were used to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and to help explain the results obtained. Behaviourism according to Skinner is developed or conditioned through reinforcement, that is, the consequences of a response determines the probability of it being repeated (Thorndike, 1898). According to Skinner, the operant conditioning process (theory of learning) is built up by positive reinforcement where response or behaviour is strengthened by reward, leading to the repetition of desired behaviour. The reward is a reinforcing stimulus. Positive reinforcement strengthens a behaviour by providing a consequence an individual finds rewarding, and negative reinforcement is the termination of an unpleasant state following a response (Bandura, 1977). With this theory, we were able to analyse students’ perceptions towards the Use of English courses, as it is expected to shape students’ effort in obtaining a pass score as a prerequisite for graduation at the University of Buea

On its part, Cognitivism has to do with how the way people think impacts their behaviour. Cognitivism was considered as a relevant complement to Behaviourism. It was considered not as a wholesale refutation of behaviourism, but rather as an expansion that accepts that mental states exist. In this regard, the aforementioned summation took into account a number of aspects related to

the students to test their reading and writing acquisition abilities bearing in mind that they were undergoing mental operations as a result the awareness of the mental processes involved in quest to acquire the required reading and writing skills. Through it, we were able to observe and study the different mechanisms to achieve better academic performance through conscious planning and setting of goals as well as the minimisation failure risks.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

From an analysis the data collected, we obtained some revealing findings that present here below based on the perception questions asked.

### Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

First, we sought to establish the socio-demographic background of the participants in the study. Table 1 below presents this background with respect to gender, age and faculty of affiliation.

**Table I: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Characteristics		n	%
Sex	Male	66	30.3
	Female	152	69.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>100</b>
Age	15-20 years	94	43.1
	21-25 years	110	50.5
	26 years and above	14	06.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<b>Faculty</b>	Arts	10	04.6
	Science	62	28.4
	Education	56	25.7
	SMS	90	41.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Our analysis revealed that out of the 218 participants in the study, 152 (69.7%) were female while 66(30.3%) were male. Concerning age ranges, 110 (50.5%) were between the ages of 21 to 25 years, 94(43.1%) were between the ages of 15 to 20while 14 (06.4%) were from 26 years and above. With regard to faculty affiliation, the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences came first with 90 (41.3%), followed the Faculty of Science with 62 (28.4%), the Faculty of Education with 56 (25.4%) and then the Faculty of Arts with 10 (04.6%). It is important to note that these numbers are reflective of the student strength of each of the faculties concerned.

### Students’ perceptions of the Use of English courses

After an analysis of the socio-demographic data, we proceeded to an examination of students’ perceptions towards the Use of English courses. These are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table II: Students’ Perception of the Use of English Courses**

Students’ perception of the use of English programme	Agreed		Disagreed	
	n	%	n	%
Most students do not understand why the Use of English courses are taught at the University	176	80.7%	42	19.3%
Students are only interested in passing the courses because it is a university requirement.	190	87.2%	28	12.8%
The Use of English programme help me to build Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing skills	130	59.7%	88	39.3%
The Use of English courses have little or no influence on how we read and write in our different University Degree programmes	42	19.3%	176	80.7%
The Use of English courses are very helpful for academic growth	206	94.5%	12	05.5%
Students at the university should be taught how to read observing punctuation marks	210	96.3%	08	03.7%
The use of English courses develops my reading skills	04	0.18%	214	98.2%
The use of English courses develops my writing skills	204	93.6%	14	06.4%
I don’t enjoy being taught together with students from faculties that are different from mine	28	12.8%	190	87.2%
The writing topics taught should be practical based on the concerns of my faculty	64	29.4%	154	70.6%
Words carrying academic contents such as analyse, explain, examine, discuss, etc, could be challenging so they should be explained in the Use of English courses.	198	90.8%	20	09.2%

Reading should be included in our course content because it helps the teaching of paraphrasing and summarizing become more explicit	202	92.7%	16	07.3%
<b>Multiple responses set (MRS)</b>	<b>2106</b>	<b>69.0%</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>31.0%</b>

The data above reveal that 176 (80.7%) of the respondents said they did not understand why the Use of English courses are taught at the University of Buea, while 42 (19.3%) said that they understood why the courses are taught. Concerning their motivation for passing the course, 190 (87.2%) respondents agreed that students only get interested in passing the courses because they constitute a University Requirement while 28 (12.8%) disagreed. The results here showed that if the Use of English courses were not compulsory, most of them would opt not to take them as they did not see their relevance. As to whether the courses had helped them to build their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, 130 (59.7%) respondents answered in the affirmative while 88 (39.3%) disagreed. We also sought to find out the courses had had any positive influence on their reading and writing abilities. In this regard, 176 (80.7%) respondents disagreed that the courses had had a positive influence on their skills while 42 (19.3%) answered in the affirmative. The fact that students were unable to identify any positive influence of the courses on their reading writing skills, suggests that there is a missing link between the courses and the achievement of their expected goals. As to whether were useful in their academic growth, 206 (94.5%) of the respondents agreed that the Use of English courses had been helpful in their academic growth, while 12 (5.5%) said that had not been useful in their academic growth. From this response, one could deduce that in general terms, the courses contributed to their academic growth but that with specific regard to enhancing their reading and writing skills, the courses were not useful.

We moved further to enquire on how the courses should be taught. From this perspective, 210 (96.3%) respondents said in teaching the courses, special attention should be paid to observing punctuation marks, while 08 (3.7%) disagreed. From this overwhelming response, it is evident that observing punctuation in reading and writing significantly aids the learners in understanding intended messages of the text authors and that in contrast, reading and writing without observing punctuation leads to poor understanding and interpretation of sentences and passages. Contrarily, 04 (1.8%) of the respondents agreed that the Use of English courses helped develop their reading and writing skills while 214 (98.2%) disagreed. In addition, 204 (93.6%) respondents agreed that the Use of English courses helped develop their writing skills, while 14 (6.4%) disagreed. When asked whether they enjoyed being taught the courses alongside students from other faculties, 190 (87.2%) of them said they did not enjoy it while 28 (12.8%) said they enjoyed it. On whether the topics treated in the courses should be practical in line with the concerns of their different areas of study or not, 154 (70.6%) respondents disagreed, while 64 (29.4%) agreed.

Concerning whether words carrying academic content such as ‘analyse’, ‘explain’, ‘examine’ and ‘discuss’ could be challenging and so needed proper explanation in class, 198 (90.8%) respondents agreed that such words could, indeed, be challenging and so they should be properly explained in the Use of English courses, while the 20 (9.2%) disagreed. These responses implies that if students are not taught the direct meaning of the academic language they encounter, it may be difficult for them to fully understand what they read, to understand relationships involved and to follow logical lines of thought or to employ smooth transitions between ideas. This suggests that reading exposes the learner to different writing styles and that it helps them to unconsciously absorb syntax, grammar and vocabulary that are critical to the reading and writing process. When asked whether reading should be included in the course contents, 202 (92.7%) of the respondents agreed that that this was necessary because it would help the learning of paraphrasing and that summarising would become much more explicit while 16 (7.3%) disagreed.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this section, we discuss our findings in relation to relevant literature. Our findings revealed that 176



(80.7%) of the sample did not understand why the Use of English courses were taught at the University of Buea, while 42 (19.3%) understood. These findings contradict those of Ning, Jianhua and Meihua (2016) in which undergraduate students believe strongly that reading and writing courses of general academic the English programme are very influential on their major departmental studies. According to these findings, an understanding of the relevance of language courses motivates the learning of general academic English. This suggests that there may be a problem of lack of proper orientation of students in the context of our study.

Also, we noted that 130 (59.7%) respondents acknowledged that the Use of English courses help them to build listening, speaking, reading and writing skills while a small proportion of them, 88 (39.3%) disagreed. This finding confirms that of Aven and Zaiton (2019) who hold that students observe positive perceptions towards language development in general and that they witness improvements in vocabulary, speaking and reading skills in particular. Another finding that was established is that students agreed that the courses helped build their language skills and that they influenced their academic growth. This finding is in line with that of Ja'ashan (2015) who posits that blended learning is better and helpful because it helps students master course material as well as provide students with more information through watching online videos and using both personal devices such as cell phone, mp3, PDA and social network (twitter, Facebook,...others) for academic purposes. It is worth noting that our respondents were of the opinion that the courses influenced writing more than reading because they had very little influence on reading skills and that reading should incorporate material from their departmental different programmes. The relationship between reading and writing can be described as a very interactive relationship. This is so because the two skills seem to inform each other especially because they are about written words (Jackson & McNamara, 2014). The findings of this work confirm the fact that words expressing academic content should be taught so as to help their application in different disciplines. This is in line with Alderman (2004) who holds that students' poor performance in language learning is the effect of by lack of knowledge on how to use words expressing academic content, as well as the lack of effective learning strategies because a good language learner who has an understanding of appropriate use of words expressing academic content and a successful user of a large number of different learning strategies may evolve into a good performer in language learning.

The data for this study also suggest that reading influences writing. This finding corroborates with that of Loban (1963) whose findings hold that there is a positive relationship between reading and writing in the sense that those who read well, write well and those who read poorly write poorly. Also, research has shown that correlations between reading and writing skills account for 43% of the differences in literacy skills (Salehi, 2015; Shanahan, 1984). The findings of these studies throw more light on the importance of paraphrasing and summarising, which are course contents on the Use of English Programme with a bearing on reading and writing skills. In the light of the above, it would be beneficial to have students practise summarising and paraphrasing using material (academic texts) in their different disciplines. Behaviourism as a theory used in this study is further strengthened given that reading and writing are practical behaviours, which become improved through repetitive practices. Thus, when reading and writing, summarising and paraphrasing are done over and over again, until the rules of good paraphrasing and summarising are internalised through repetitive behaviour.

The implication for this could be captured in testing reading comprehension. Testing reading comprehension (paraphrasing and summarising inclusive) may pose a problem because of the limited amount of time allocated to the Use of English Courses, be it during classroom sessions or during examinations. This is because the amount of time, one hour for class activities and one hour thirty minutes for examinations, is not enough. If the amount of time allocated for classroom instruction and examination sessions are increased, it might also positively influence the running of the programme by reducing examinations malpractice because as it may help students to be more involved in reading.

Further, the circumstances surrounding limitations in time may require the introduction of more time for language courses. Instead of having the classes once a week, increasing this to twice a week like is the case

with every other course is most likely to provide more ample time for better teaching and learning. Teachers would not need to rush over their work as due to time constraints. From the course outline, week three (like the other weeks), for example, when teachers are expected to teach nouns, adjectives and adverbs within the time frame increase from one hour to one hour thirty minutes, can potentially result in successful uptake of knowledge especially when we consider individual learner differences within the classroom. Hedge (2000), argues that students differ in their cognitive abilities and that this consequently affects their language learning abilities. Also, it seems that perceptions of students about the Use of English courses are a reflection of opinions on value the university authorities place on the courses. A great majority of our study participants agreed that language skills develop through the courses. This reflects the position of the university authorities ;yet the time factor needs to be reconsidered upwards is the proper acquisition of these skills must become a reality.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined students' perceptions towards the Use of English courses in enhancing the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Our major findings point to the fact that the courses have their most influence on writing skill. Although students keep passing the courses particularly because it is a university requirement, they express worries about their relevance. Their inability to understand why the courses are taught is the main sponsor of their unfriendly perceptions. Better understanding of the objectives of the courses could result in improvements in skills acquisition. In this regard, students should be given proper orientation on the overall goal of the courses.

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