

TECHNICAL NOTE

ENGLISH IN TERTIARY EDUCATION POST-ARABICIZATION IN SUDAN: AN ANALYTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to look into the aims and objectives of teaching English as a university required subject which is supposed to be taught, according to the policies of Higher Education, to all university students regardless of their specialities or levels and which is supposed, at least formally, to be one of the components in the student's final academic award. Consequently, this article will explore what actually goes on at tertiary institutions regarding the role and status of English.

ملخص

تحاول هذه الورقة النظر في أهداف وأغراض تدريس مادة اللغة الإنجليزية كمطلوب جامعية مفترض حسب سياسات التعليم العالي أن تدرس لكل طلاب الجامعة على امتداد سنوات دراستهم في الجامعة بغض النظر عن تخصصاتهم وأن تكون إحدى مكونات الاجازة الأكاديمية النهائية التي تمنحها الجامعة للطلاب عند تخرجه. كذلك فإن المقال يتعرض لما جرى حقيقة في المؤسسات الجامعية فيما يتعلق بتدريس هذه المادة ووضعيتها في الجامعة.

INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching (ELT) is deeply rooted in the educational system in Sudan. Its history can be traced back to the beginning of British rule which started in 1898. Since then it has gone through various stages and developments due to different factors: political, social, economic and educational. Hence current problems and difficulties facing ELT in Sudan could be better understood and dealt with if seen in the context of these historical developments. So, in order to investigate the issue under discussion, it would perhaps be more appropriate to try first to put it in its right perspective by providing background information about the global status of the English language today as well as about ELT before we discuss the situation in the Sudan in general and in tertiary education in particular.

THE STATUS OF ENGLISH IN THE WORLD TODAY:

English now is the principal international language of communication. Its dominance, particularly in the fields of science and commerce in such a relatively short period, is unprecedented in history. Quirk (1985:1) [1] states that just within four centuries English "has become a language on which the sun does not set, whose users never sleep." Moreover, Mackay and Mountford (1978:7) [2] report

"As long as 1957 UNESCO reported that nearly two thirds of engineering literature appears in English but more than two thirds of the world's professional engineers can not read English."

Furthermore, it is estimated that more than half of the research papers published in the world are published in the English language. (Swales 1987:42) [3].

However, there is no one single explanation as to why English has gained such status. But on the top comes the factor of politics and power. The spread and decline of languages is closely linked with political and economic power. Here the most quoted reasons are the influence of Britain in the 19th century and the influence of the U.S.A. in the 20th century.

But unlike the case of other languages, this influence has gone beyond the sphere of politics. Even after disintegration of the British empire, English has continued to be needed as lingua franca within and without multi-racial and multi-lingual communities. Strevens (1977:10) [4] summarizes these needs as follows.

" English has been employed as a natural link within multi-racial, multi-lingual societies as a vehicle for international communication, global carrier-wave for news, information, entertainment and administration and as the language in which has taken place the genesis of the second industrial and scientific revolution." Hence, there is a world-wide need for learning English at least for its utilitarian and pragmatic benefits as a universal language for international communication particularly in the fields of science, business and education.

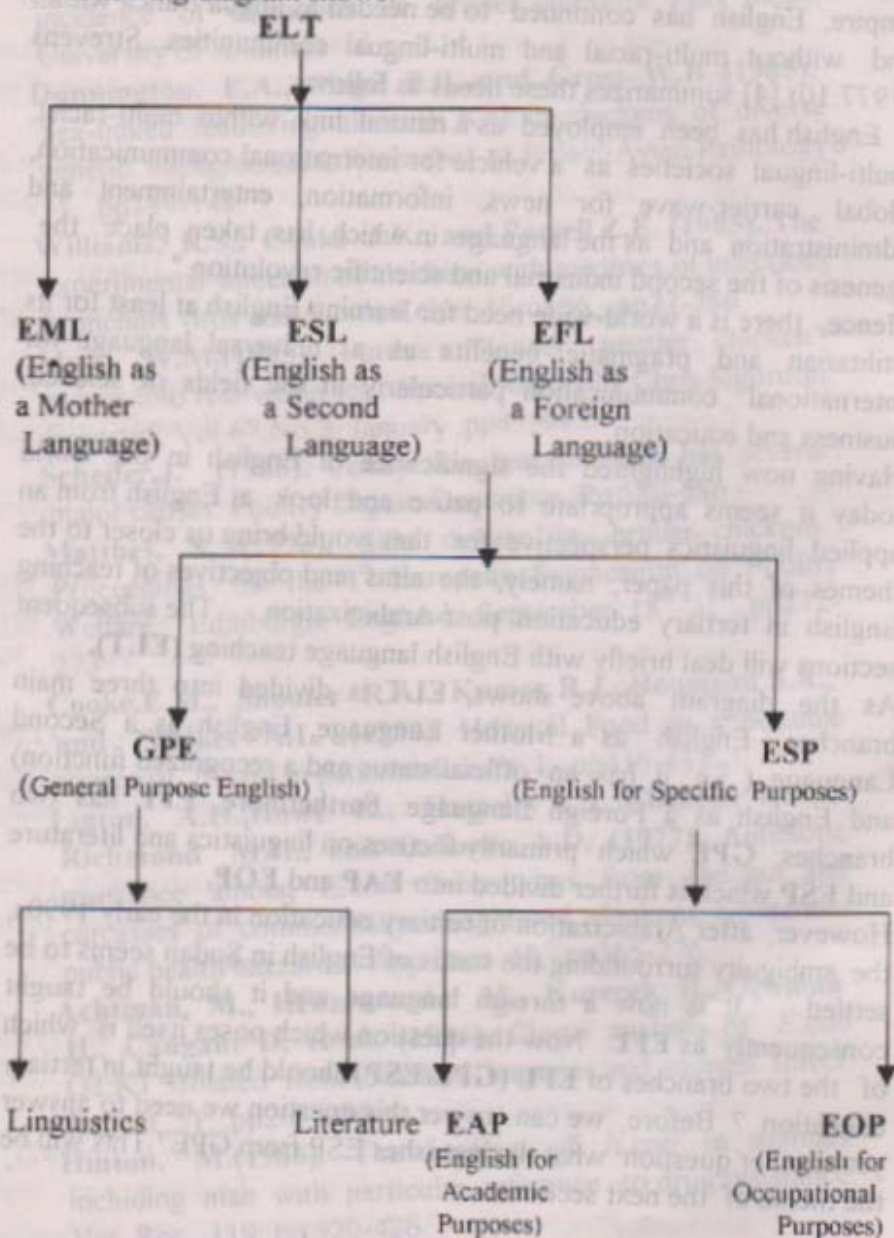
Having now highlighted the significance of English in the world today it seems appropriate to pause and look at English from an applied linguistics perspective for that would bring us closer to the themes of this paper, namely, the aims and objectives of teaching English in tertiary education post-Arabicization. The subsequent sections will deal briefly with English language teaching (ELT).

As the diagram above shows, ELT is divided into three main branches: English as a Mother Language, English as a Second Language (i.e. it has an official status and a recognized function) and English as a Foreign Language. Furthermore, EFL has two branches: GPE which primarily focuses on linguistics and literature and ESP which is further divided into EAP and EOP.

However, after Arabicization of tertiary education in the early 1990s, the ambiguity surrounding the status of English in Sudan seems to be settled. It is now a foreign language and it should be taught consequently as EFL. Now the question which poses itself is, which of the two branches of EFL (GPE/ESP) should be taught in tertiary education ? Before we can answer this question we need to answer yet another question: what distinguishes ESP from GPE? This will be the theme of the next section.

English Language Teaching (ELT):

ELT can be perceived as a tree with branches and sub-branches as the following diagram shows:



ESP versus GPE:

The demands imposed on English as an international language, particularly in the fields of science and commerce, have resulted in the emergence and expansion of one particular aspect of ELT, namely **ESP**, where English is taught as an instrument and as an auxiliary means and not as the case in **GPE** where English is taught as an end in itself. **ESP** seeks to provide the language learners with a restricted practical communicative competence to enable them to cope successfully in certain fields such as science and commerce, with clearly defined tasks specified in advance. **GPE**, on the other hand, seeks to provide the language learners with general creative and generative language capability to enable them to cope with undefined and unspecified situations when they arise in future after the end of the course (Widdowson, 1983)[5]. In **ESP** what is taught in the classroom corresponds closely to what the learner encounters outside the classroom whereas in **GPE** what is taught in the classroom is a transitional contrivance or device for the purpose of providing the language learners with creative language capability to enable them to cope with broad unspecified aims in future. So contrary to the **GPE** learner, the **ESP** learner knows in advance where he/she will use the language he has been taught e.g. Medical English and Business English will be used in the fields of medicine and business respectively.

However, the emergence of **ESP** as a discipline in the 1960s can be attributed largely to the coincidental combination of three important factors:

The need of the newly independent countries for English as an instrument for their economic and social development, particularly in the field of science and technology, rather than a vehicle of culture.

The developments in linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s led to the trend towards the study of language in its social context and towards the study of actual use of language for communication. These developments were in line with what **ESP** intends to achieve in meeting the specific communicative needs of specific language learners in specific fields.

The developments in education shifted the focus of attention from the teacher to the learner in terms of his needs interests and attitudes. The relevance of the course to the learners' needs is vital in ESP. Moreover, there was a trend towards what is practical in education. According to Clark (1987)[6] in EFL the focus should be on the practical ability to communicate. This is no doubt is compatible with ESP which aims at successful performance in the target language situation rather than in the linguistic competence for its own sake. To recapitulate, the growth and expansion of ESP can be attributed to the status of English as a universal lingua franca particularly in the fields of science and commerce and the demands made on it from the newly independent countries. The whole process of ESP was accelerated by concurrent developments in the fields of linguistics and education in the 1960s and 1970s.

Now after this general survey of the current status of the English language in the world today and the developments in ELT which resulted in the emergence and growth of ESP, we will proceed to look into the situation in Sudan in an attempt to identify the new role of teaching English in tertiary education post-Arabization.

English in the Sudan: A History of Cultural Conflict

The history of the English language in the Sudan can be traced back to the beginning of British rule (1898-1956). According to Sandell (1982:5)[7] "the administration of British rule had begun and with it the English language found a foothold in an alien land dominated by Arabic and Islam."

Right from the start, the general policy of education was planned to serve the political and economic interests of the Colonial Government. It aimed at "setting nothing on foot that has no vital connection with the economic needs of the country (Sudan Government Annual Report 1900:66) [8]

Moreover, in a famous memorandum on the general policy of education in the Sudan Lord Corner, the British High Commissioner in Cairo, wrote to Lord Kitchener and to Sir James Currie, the first director of Education in the Sudan:

"I wish, however, to explain what I mean by an educated class. I do not refer to high education. What is required is to impart such a knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic to a certain number of young men as will enable them to occupy with advantage the subordinate places in the administration of the country" (cited in Tigani, 1966:7)[9].

Thus, in the light of this educational policy the role of teaching English was instrumental, utilitarian and vocational: to qualify subordinate employees for work in the Government. English was not to be taught for broad educational and cultural advantages but only for restricted utilitarian purposes.

Lord Cromer (1902:52)[10] elaborates clearly this pragmatic policy towards English teaching in Sudan in the following extract:

"I often hear an opinion expressed which I deem a pernicious fallacy. It is that it is worthwhile establishing schools for the teaching of English for the sake of the supposed political advantages which such teaching indirectly confers upon the governing class. As a matter of fact, I hold the exact contrary, and I believe that for one political difficulty you remove by the teaching of English, you create a dozen. I consider at present only those boys should learn English who are subsequently going to make use of it in Government service or in commercial pursuit in which such knowledge is necessary. Schools for this purpose should be good, and it is nearly as important that at present they should be few."

In the light of what has been mentioned earlier in this paper such utilitarian approach towards the teaching of English falls within the domain of ESP, although the acronym 'ESP' was not specifically mentioned.

These educational policies provided the aims and objectives of the study in the Gordon Memorial College which was established in 1902. English was the medium of instruction in the senior forms of the college. Translation was taught as separate subject. The aim was to graduate clerks, translators and other subordinate employees for the Government machinery.

In 1929 the Department of Education set up a commission to review the educational system with special reference to Gordon Memorial College. Interestingly the Commission recommended, among other things, teaching what we might call "ESP" in the final two years of the college. The report specifically recommended teaching "the kind of English according to the kind of career which the pupil proposes" (Sudan Government 1929:28) [11].

Commenting on such recommendation which calls for teaching ESP, Sandell (1982:21)[7] states, "It is fascinating to a modern scholar that fifty years ago there were pleas for the serious consideration of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach to English language teaching."

However, this ESP trend seemed to dominate the scene until 1937. In that year, the Government invited what was called De la Warr Commission to report on the educational system in the Sudan. Its recommendations turned out to be an important landmark in the history of education in the Sudan, for they called for a more liberal education to replace the restricted vocationism which characterized the system.

As far as English was concerned, a new syllabus for the Secondary Stage was designed to meet the requirements of the Cambridge Overseas Examination. It was a flexible syllabus with a marked bias towards literature and formal grammar. It was typically a GPE approach. Hence, English came to be taught for broad educational and cultural aims and as an end in itself.

English by then had established itself as the official medium of instruction in both Secondary Stage and post-secondary stage. This situation continued up to 1965 when Arabic started to replace gradually English as medium of instruction in the Secondary Stage. However, English continued to function as medium of instruction in tertiary education. But this duality of using two languages as media of instruction in education created problems and difficulties as we shall see later.

The period which followed Arabicization of the Secondary Stage witnessed more deterioration in the standards of English which were already showing signs of decline as the following table indicates:

Sudan School Certificate Examinations: Percentage of Success in English

Academic year	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972
% of success	70.3 %	68.4 %	66.2 %	57.9 %	48 %	43.1 %	42.4 %	40.5 %	40 %	39 %

Source: Ministry of Education, Examinations Office, Khartoum

In tertiary education where English continued to be the medium of instruction, this decline in the standards of English began to pose an academic problem for the universities. Many students failed to cope with their English-medium studies. According to Macmillan (1970:20)[12], a professor of English at University of Khartoum, "the rapid decline of English is an immediate threat to the academic standards and to the future of English as an effective second language."

Hence, as a necessary adjustment and as a response to this decline of standards in English, the need was felt for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in the English-medium institutions in higher education to enable students to cope with their English-medium studies.

Consequently in 1973 the English Language Service Unit (ELSU) at University of Khartoum was set up and was soon followed by similar servicing units in other tertiary institutions such as University of Gezira, University of Juba and Khartoum Polytechnic, the ancestor of the present Sudan University of Science and Technology (SUST). So ESP appeared again but this time as a discipline in its own right under the acronym 'ESP' unlike the case in 1927 when it was recommended as a general approach in teaching English.

The introduction of ESP in tertiary education contributed, to some extent, to improvement of the students standards in English and that consequently led to better performance in their specialties. But unfortunately the unclear and ambiguous status of ESP as auxiliary service subject encouraged the students as well as many of the staff members to view it as a second-rate subject as it was reflected often

in lack of seriousness as indicated in low attendance and examination results.

The 1990s witnessed the last developments in the status of English in the Sudan. Arabic has replaced English as medium of instruction in tertiary education and consequently has now rightfully regained its ground as the dominant language in the country and as the medium of instruction in the entire system of education.

The change from English-medium to Arabic-medium seemed to have settled the ambiguous status of English in the Sudan. The role of English now is that of a foreign language (EFL) and it should be treated within this context and not as it used to be before 1990 when it was considered as second language, at least nominally, as the official medium of instruction while Arabic, in one way or another was the defacto medium of instruction in many tertiary institutions.

Now the important question which poses itself is: What are the aims and objectives of teaching English at tertiary institutions post-Arabicization?

Bearing in mind the universal status of English in the world today as the lingua franca of science and technology and as the principal language of commerce and communication as well as the developments in ELT inside and outside the Sudan as elaborated earlier in this paper, it appears logical and educationally appropriate to see the aims and objectives of teaching English to students in tertiary education as an instrument for primarily gaining access to specialized information and skills in their specialties and for keeping up with developments in their fields particularly in science and technology. Strevens (1970:272)[13] appears to support these conclusions. He states that "EFL... should be taught for science and through science in the first instance." This is because university students encounter most of their difficulties in the field of science when they use English as a foreign language. Such role of English, however, falls within the domain of ESP/EAP (English for Specific Purposes/English for Academic Purposes) where English is not taught for its own sake but for practical, utilitarian purposes as an instrument and a means for enabling them to gain access to information in their fields through the use of English.

The branch of ESP which is normally taught at tertiary institutions is called EAP (English for Academic Purposes). By its very nature as a discipline taught within the curricula of these educational institutions EAP combines the characteristics of both GPE (General Purpose English) with its broad educational aims and those of ESP with its practical immediate and instrumental/utilitarian purposes.

CONCLUSION:

To sum up, the history of the English language teaching in the Sudan dates back to the beginning of British rule (1898-1956). It was first taught in a restricted way for practical and instrumental purposes as a means for qualifying subordinate employees for the service of the government machinery. It was largely an ESP approach. This restricted vocationism in education continued up to 1937 when it was replaced by a more liberal education where English came to be taught for broad educational aims with a marked bias towards literature and grammar. In 1965 English was replaced by Arabic as medium of instruction in the Secondary Stage though it continued to be medium of instruction in tertiary education. However, the decline of the standards of English, particularly in the late 1960s began to pose an academic problem for many university students failed to cope with their English-medium studies. Hence the need was felt for teaching ESP courses as a language problem solution. Moreover, Arabicization of tertiary education in the early 1990s seemed to have settled the ambiguous status of the English language in the Sudan.

English is now a foreign language and it should be treated as such. Furthermore, the role of teaching English at tertiary institutions is seen largely as an ESP/EAP role to enable students to gain access to specialized information in their respective specialties through the use of English.

Now the study of English in tertiary institutions is a state policy as well as a university requirement. Accordingly it has presumably become a compulsory and an examinable subject for all university students regardless of their levels or specialties. But much of the

trouble facing **ESP** and **ESP teachers** seems to spring largely from the ambiguous and uncertain status of **ESP** in the universities. It is a result of what Graves (1975) [14] calls 'the formal and informal order' which refers to how an institution is supposed to work according to official policies and how it actually works as perceived and operated by its members. Thus although English is now a compulsory and an examinable subject across the whole university according to official policies, what actually goes on in many university departments is often inconsistent with these policies and at times even resistant to them. There are often marked variations at tertiary institutions regarding its academic weight as well as the scope and number of hours allocated to it. Such negative practices often reflect negatively upon the ESP teachers and affect their position particularly those who are recruited as "instructors".

However, Yassin (1999:214)[15] identifies the top five problems which appear to be facing ESP/EAP at the universities in the Sudan in rank order as follows.

1. ambiguity and uncertainty of ESP/EAP status as well as that of its teachers.
2. lack of suitable teaching materials and printing facilities.
3. ESP/EAP teacher training
4. Timetabling
5. Class size

Hence, any attempt to upgrade the standards of English in tertiary education in the Sudan should address these problems as top priorities.

Last but not least it might be appropriate to round off this article by referring again to the rivalry between Arabic and English in the Sudan as reflected by the continuous swinging of the pendulum between them throughout the 20th century. It was a rivalry that could be viewed in its wider context as a cultural conflict between an invading foreign culture and a resisting local culture. Early in this paper I have quoted Sandell (1982:3)[7] saying that "administration of British rule had begun and with it the English language found a foothold in an alien land dominated by Arabic and Islam." Now the paradox here is that just exactly a century after British conquest the

"alien land" is again dominated by Arabic and Islam and again the threats of a foreign invasion from the same political quarters are looming over the country. It is really one of the ironies of history in this country. History really repeats itself!

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