

**UNIVERSITE GASTON BERGER  
DE SAINT-LOUIS**



**Revue internationale de langues,  
littératures et cultures**

**Laboratoire de recherche en art et culture  
(LARAC)**

**n°22  
2023**

**ISSN: 0851-4119**



**SAFARA N° 22/2023 - ISSN 0851- 4119**

**Revue internationale de langues, littératures et cultures**

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## Re-Designing and Re-Assessing Curriculum in the Department of English of Université de Lomé: A Case Study of the American Studies Section

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### **Abstract**

Teaching methods and techniques should be contextualized with regard to the learning environment to make them more rewarding. Togo, a West African French-speaking country, faces the challenge of designing effective curricula, especially in English. Despite the fact that a lot of efforts are being made by professionals of education in secondary schools where English is taught as a second language, not much seems to happen regarding designing updated curricula, at the University level. This is the case of the English Department of Université de Lomé, more specifically its American studies section, where each teacher or groups of teachers are compelled to give the best of themselves to teach the best way they can. This seriously compromises the academic performance of many students and, in one way or another, impedes the country's development. This study takes stock of the education system in the said section in regards to the many challenges facing the department, assesses the existing curricula of the American studies section before suggesting strategies to update, re-assess, re-design and re-contextualize the curricula for the use of teachers and for the best interest of students and the country.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, English Department, American studies section, Academic Performance, Teaching

### **Résumé**

Les méthodes et techniques d'enseignement doivent être adaptées à l'environnement d'apprentissage afin de les rendre plus gratifiantes. Le Togo, pays francophone d'Afrique de l'Ouest, est confronté au défi de la conception de programmes d'enseignements efficaces, en particulier en anglais. En dépit des efforts considérables réalisés par les professionnels de l'éducation dans les écoles secondaires où l'anglais est enseigné comme langue seconde, on constate en

revanche que le contenu des curricula au niveau universitaire ne sont toujours pas adaptés. C'est le cas du département d'anglais de l'Université de Lomé, plus précisément sa branche des études américaines, où chaque enseignant ou groupe d'enseignants est tenu de donner le meilleur de lui-même pour enseigner de la meilleure façon possible. Cela compromet sérieusement les performances académiques de nombreux étudiants et ralentit, d'une manière ou d'une autre, le développement du pays. Cette étude fait le point sur le système éducatif dans ladite section en ce qui concerne les nombreux défis auxquels le département est confronté, évalue les programmes existants de sa branche des études américaines avant de suggérer des stratégies pour les actualiser, réévaluer, reconcevoir et recontextualiser à l'usage des enseignants et dans l'intérêt supérieur des étudiants et du pays.

**Mots-clés :** Curriculum, Département d'Anglais, branche des études américaines, performance académique, enseignement.

## **Introduction**

Curriculum development is a “specialised area of work which expects a teacher to have a deep understanding of the underlying concept of curriculum and also the skill to systematically design learning experiences to achieve the socially desired goals set by the society we live in” (Manglik160). It is a very important part of creating a contextually relevant and responsive teaching and learning environment as it contains the knowledge, skills and competencies that students need to master in order to move to the next level in their studies. However, in most African universities, especially at Université de Lomé and more precisely in the American studies section of the Department of English, the design of meaningful and updated curricula seems a daunting task because many stakeholders lack training, the requisite knowledge and skills, and do not have principles and understanding of curriculum design. B. Matiru, A. Mwangi & R. Schlette (1995) in Maphosa, Mudzielwana & Netshifhefhe seem to concur with this assertion when they write that

only a handful of lecturers have been professionally trained in the art of teaching. The assumption has all along been that the possession of a PhD degree was all that an aspiring lecturer needed in order to be able to teach in a university. The rest one imbibed through osmosis. (355).



Teaching professionally is far beyond just planning and teaching a series of lessons. It must meet a number of criteria and involve the appropriate use of a coherent and well-designed curriculum tailored to meet the society's need which can be acquired through training.

The current study, carried out in 2023 at the Department of English has three sections. First, it considers how a well-designed curriculum can be beneficial not only to learners but also to the society. Second, it explores the issues faced by the education system of the American studies section of the Department of English of Université de Lomé before suggesting solutions to improve upon the existing curricula in a manner that meets the country's aspirations.

### **1. Problematics**

The Department of English of the Université de Lomé, as part of its mission, has always been committed to university training and research. The curriculum of its different specialty courses is, therefore, until now, designed to meet the above-mentioned commitments. However, today, a new paradigm is needed. The teaching program needs to be revisited and adjusted to the country's context to produce learning outcomes for students and to ensure that the education offered meets their expectations and the development goals initiated by the country. F. Hénard & D. Roseveare side with this view as they write that any "institution-wide vision and strategy needs to be well-aligned with bottom-up practices and innovations in teaching and learning" (3).

This study raises the query of how the existing curriculum of the American studies section of the Department of English can be re-conceptualized to produce learning outcomes for students and to respond to the needs and priorities of the society in terms of developmental needs knowledge generation and dissemination.

### **1.1. Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on a mixed method approach that is both qualitative and quantitative methods. While the qualitative approach deals with gathering and interpretation of non-numerical data for the purpose of understanding human and social environment. The quantitative one involves the processes of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and writing the results of a study. This study is therefore justified as a hypothetic-deductive case study and the case being explored is the Department of English of Université de Lomé.

### **1.2. Research Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this study is based on both literature review and field survey. The literature review has consisted in collecting data from literary sources, various peer-reviewed journal articles while the field research has consisted in collecting data through a field survey. I equally used personal reflection from the higher education practice.

## **2. Results**

The results of the research are presented below to better explain how useful a well-designed curriculum can be for both the learners and the society.

### **2.1. Importance of Curriculum in Enhancing Teaching and Learning and Promoting Societal Development**

Curriculum development is an ongoing, dynamic process with a focus on the individual student's success and a scope broad enough to accommodate progress and changes in life. An effective curriculum is, therefore, fundamental to impactful teaching and learning, and helping everyone to make progress in life. It must be developed to reflect evolving societal requirements as well as individual learning needs. This section considers three dimensions in regard to the designing of curriculum since its

“development is influenced by a multitude of factors” (Wiles & Sugg195). This study will only consider the pedagogical, economic and cultural dimensions of curriculum development.

### **2.1.1. Pedagogical Dimension**

Curriculum is considered to be the nerve centre of education and as such. It is a powerful lever for changing students’ performance and for preparing them to thrive in and shape the future. As such, it must be able to respond to their needs. In fact, no meaningful learning can take place if the curriculum fails to respond to the needs of individual learners, because in every classroom, there are students with different needs and abilities as far as teaching and learning is concerned (Fomunyam & Teferra1 99). S. Jones (1996) in (Ogude 6) says relevant curriculum develops ‘personal transferable skills’ and the students’ ability to ‘learn to learn’. It addresses “learner variability of instructional design” (Gronseth et al. 1) in order to accommodate the curriculum to meet the needs of different learners because “all learners have strengths, weaknesses, and preferred areas of interest within the context of the learning environment” (Ralabate 4). Curriculum should be re-conceptualized in a manner that places the student at the center of the learning (student-centered) to meet his/her diverse needs. This is alluded to as Equity curricula or pedagogy which is essential to empower all the students, no matter their differences, to leverage their skills, languages, and values and lead them to higher achievement.

### **2.1.2. Economic Dimension**

The economic dimension of the curriculum deals with its ability “to train skilled professionals in the different sectors in the economy. It moves beyond offering a degree in a particular field of study” (Fomunyam & Teferra 197). An effective curriculum must lay emphasis on the promotion of social cohesion, the growth of society and the economy, and the principle of sustainability in all aspects of development. Stabback concurs with this

observation when he thinks that “Curriculum provides the bridge between education and development –and it is the competencies associated with lifelong learning and aligned with development needs, in the broadest, holistic sense of the term, that span that bridge.” (4). Curriculum must take into consideration the economic aspect of any country which aspires to development.

Furthermore, he writes:

Knowledge and education are considered among the major factors contributing to the reduction of poverty, sustainable development and economic growth –and it is the curriculum that is increasingly viewed as foundational to educational reforms aimed at the achievement of high quality learning outcomes. (Stabback 6)

A well-designed curriculum must contribute to economic development by providing learners with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the workforce. Certain subjects that align with the country’s economic goals should be included in the curriculum to make it more rewarding.

For instance, in Togo, the 2020-2025 government roadmap sets out a vision for the development across economic and social dimensions in its axis 2. Curriculum should be designed to align with the government’s vision in this regard. Sissoko, the World Bank representative in Togo, during the commemoration of the creation of ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), also alludes to the economic dimension of curriculum. He called for a genuine industrialization policy to be developed between ECOWAS member States “to better transform their economies and for teaching curricula to be adapted to the realities of each country” (4).

### **2.1.3. Cultural Dimension**

The cultural dimension of a curriculum has to do with the “curriculum’s ability to access and respond to the cultural dissonance in the classroom” (Fomunyam & Teferra 198). The integration of the cultural dimension in curriculum design offers advantages to students. It “enables them to develop

their sensibilities in relation to their immediate environment and their interest in things beyond it” (Bouchard et al. 8). To be sure, culture affects curriculum development process and a curriculum that is influenced by culture is likely to be highly beneficial to learners. In this regard, Offorma equally writes: “Curriculum planning should [...] endeavor to integrate the components of culture, which is the essence of education in curriculum planning to ensure that the products of the educational system would be functional members of their society” (1). No doubt, culture plays a major role in curriculum development and to make curriculum successful in terms of the quality of training provided to learners, it must incorporate cultural elements that strongly affect them.

### **3. Rethinking American Literature Courses**

The Department of English of Université de Lomé, established as one of the pioneer departments of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, then, is nowadays faced with the issue of the huge number of students enrolled every year. More than 9,176 students (4659 males and 4517 females) were enrolled for the 2022-2023 academic year, with all the attendant challenges such as the lack of infrastructure, teaching materials and logistics, the non-existence of language laboratories, the glaring shortage of teachers and the unavailability of an effective teaching program in the various fields, especially in the field of American literature. This poses a significant problem in terms of the skills passed on to learners, and jeopardizes the teaching-learning equation. This reality corroborates the analysis of C. N. Nwadiokwu & F. E. Nwadiokwu . For them, “universities operate with overcrowded and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete library resources, insufficient equipment and instructional materials, outdated curricula...” (7) and this contributes a great deal to the decline in quality of education.

In fact, since its inception, the Department of English of Université de Lomé has always taught courses that were patterned after similar departments in the U.S. After a common core course in years one (semesters 1-2) and two (semesters 3-4), students then choose their specialty courses in year three

(semesters 5-6) either in Anglophone African Literature, English Literature or American Literature. Unfortunately, the dominant theme of the Department of English has never been the need to make its courses reflect the requirements of the country. The syllabus does not really take into consideration various areas where English is required beyond teaching and research. In the field of American literature, the content of the training programs is not always in line with the realities of the country. The research axes are not even clearly defined, and American literature is taught in such a way as to reflect on existential socio-political problems in the United States and to find solutions to the Issues undermining American society rather than ours. The curriculum is not designed, contextualized to enable learners to make intertextual connections between American and Togolese literature, so as to enable our country to develop on the basis of these reflections.

The teaching materials available are not as often adjusted to the realities of the students themselves. They are not student-centered. Some of the materials used are far too irrelevant for the students in terms of language level, and this is due to the fact that libraries are not sufficiently equipped to allow teachers to choose the material they think is most appropriate for their students.

Most of the curricula are outdated, static and not revisited and unevaluated for decades and consequently, new learning activities are not integrated.

#### **4. A Re-Designed and Re-Assessed Curriculum for a Profitable Income**

A well-designed curriculum necessarily offers courses that meet not only a country's educational challenge but also its economic, social, and political challenges. Besides its pedagogical dimension, which provides a wide and innovative range of contents and scholarly approaches, curriculum must equally provide learners with the requisite literary skills to meet some of the demands of the job market. Against this backdrop, it is important to make the course contents of American literature meet the needs of the students and the country. Put differently, curriculum must be adapted to bridge the local

realities and the realities in the U.S. To be sure, scholars must embark on a journey to decolonize the curriculum in most African Universities, especially in the American studies section of the Department of English of Université de Lomé because without the decolonization of the predominantly Americentric or US-centric curriculum, the development of our countries will be relegated to the background. Corroborating this idea, Ngara thinks that

If the school curriculum is not informed by research insights on multilayered knowledge systems including indigenous ways of knowing, this implies pedagogy of confusion and stagnation in Africa. In a way, this probably explains some of the obstacles blocking the emergence [...] and economic development in Africa. (10).

Obviously, without the decolonization of curriculum, the achievement of progress and development remain elusive. Instructors who are tasked with the development of the curricula in the American studies section of the Department of English must revisit or if needs be, re-design it completely for the best interest of not only the learners but also for the country's development.

Interestingly enough, the teaching-learning of American literature must be made more rewarding in the sense that, instead of teaching American literature based on the model of the U.S., stakeholders should contextualize it by elevating African-American literature courses in the curriculum and by promoting comparative studies between American Literature and Togolese or other African literatures.

Also, there is a need to proactively bring teachers of the Departments of English in American studies together and have workshops on the basics and essentials of teaching curricula. They must be trained on key elements to consider in the assessment of curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has addressed the issue of curriculum design of the American studies section of the Department of English at Université de Lomé. It has

taken stock of the current curricula and come out with the conclusion that the curricula must be revisited. Furthermore, beyond the scope of the training content, the study has equally analyzed issues related to the staggering number of students and to inadequate facilities which also impede students' academic performance. In order to make the curricula more rewarding both for students and the country, it is suggested that the existing curriculum needs to be upgraded, updated, re-contextualized and re-designed by taking into consideration some realities of our country. In a real sense, an innovation must be made to the teaching-learning of American studies of the Department of English. Teaching American studies in Togo must be re-thought in such a way that analyzing fact from the U.S. society, one might, at the same time, deal with existential issues undermining our own country, promoting therefore, its development. To achieve this, lecturers involved in curriculum-design and education specialists of the Department must be trained and provided with a clear understanding of the concept of curriculum as well as curriculum orientations in order to be effectively engaged in course design for the benefit of all stakeholders and the nation.

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