



SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AMONG ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS: LESSONS FROM TRENDS IN BENIN REPUBLIC

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Abstract

This study examined Social Interactions on Instructional Practices among EFL Teachers in some secondary schools in Benin Republic. The concurrent research design informed the methodological consideration of the study. A sample size of seventy- seven 77 teachers of English was used. The instruments used for data collection were questionnaire and interview guide. The questionnaire data were put into frequencies and percentages while the interview data were analyzed into themes based on the research questions. The study revealed four types of EFL teachers' interactions. These included collaboration, individualism, contrived collegiality and balkanization. The study also established that social interactions influenced EFL teachers' instructional practices. It is important for instructional leaders to ensure that social interactions among teachers continue to be appropriate to enhance the effective teaching and learning of the language of English.

Keywords: EFL teachers, social interactions, Instructional Practices, balkanization.

Résumé

Cette étude examine les interactions sociales sur les pratiques instructionnelles au sein des enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère, dans certaines écoles secondaires en République du Bénin. De façon simultanée, l'architecture de la recherche prend en compte la considération méthodologique de l'étude. Un échantillon de soixante-dix sept (77) enseignants d'anglais a été utilisé. Les instruments utilisés pour la collecte des données sont le questionnaire et l'interview. Les données obtenues par le questionnaire sont classées par fréquences et pourcentages alors que les données obtenues par l'interview sont analysées selon les thèmes sur les questions de recherche. L'étude a révélé qu'il y a quatre types d'interaction au niveau des enseignants d'anglais. Celles-ci incluent la collaboration, l'individualisme, une collégialité forcée et une balkanisation. L'étude a aussi établi que les interactions sociales ont une influence positive sur les pratiques instructionnelles de l'enseignement de l'anglais. Il est important pour les leaders de l'éducation de s'assurer que les interactions sociales entre les enseignants continuent d'être utilisées pour renforcer l'effectivité de l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise.

Mots clés: enseignants d'anglais, interactions sociales, pratiques instructionnelles, balkanisation.

1. Introduction

In the school system, teachers always interface between curricular documents and classroom practices. Thus, teachers translate curriculum decisions and plans as outlined in the curriculum document into practical activities to bring about desired changes in students (Elmore, 1999). In an attempt to implement curricular policies, teachers mediate formal curriculum principles by adjusting curriculum directives in ways that they believe would benefit students. For instance, in most cases, teachers re-conceptualize the content and organization of curriculum document, the methodologies of implementing curriculum policies and the stipulated assessment techniques to reflect the contemporary needs of students. This means that teachers serve as filters through which mandated curriculum pass to students (Marsh & Willis, 2003). Wang (2002) affirms that teachers are not simply implementers of policies that are handed down to them but they interpret, modify and edit the formal curriculum prior to implementation. Several studies have shown that the interpretations and modifications done by teachers in curriculum documents are shaped by subject professional development meetings in the school system (Little, 1990; Siskin, 1994, & Harris, 2000). These studies have also shown that the subject professional development meetings have a considerable influence on teachers and can either make or mar teachers' conception of the formal curriculum. Further, it has been established that how EFL teachers individually and collectively perceive and enact the curriculum document is conditioned by the practices existing in the subject professional development meetings, a claim McLaughlin (1994) had earlier made. He indicated that the subject professional development meetings have the potential to impact on what is taught how it is taught and assessed. This means that the nature and character of the subject professional development meetings determine teachers' interpretational stance towards a curriculum document.

This study would like to explore the social interaction among teachers of English and its impacts on curriculum enactment in Benin Republic. Its aim is to undertake investigations that might shed light on this state of affairs in the educational sphere.

2. Previous Studies

2.1 The social network theory

The theoretical framework used for the study is the social network. The social network theory is a theoretical concept that is concerned with the relationships between individuals, groups, institutions, or even entire societies. As Scott (2000) notes, the social network theory comprises two or more individuals that are bound together by a common objective. The individuals may be a group

or an organization and the objective may constitute one or more relations such as 'seeking advice from' or 'works together with', 'depends on' and so on (Chung, 2011).

In the context of this study, the group is EFL teachers teaching in the same secondary school. The objective of professional development meetings is to plan and implement the curriculum at that level of schooling. The objective may constitute one or more relations such as seeking advice from colleagues to prepare lessons, work together to prepare schemes of work, depend on others for the teaching of certain topics, among others. This theoretical approach is necessarily relational. However, a common criticism of social network theory is that individualism is often ignored (Wenlin, Anupreet, Amanda, & Thomas, 2017).

The objective among the individuals during professional development meetings has important behavioural, perceptual, and attitudinal consequences for both the individual units and for the system as a whole (Knoke et al., 1992). Thus, the theory provides mechanisms and processes that interact to yield certain outcomes for the individuals as a unit. Individual benefits could be in the area of professional growth as a teacher, ability to improve planning and teaching as well as an effective teacher identity. Every member of the group has a right to benefit from the social interaction, irrespective of their contribution to its creation or maintenance (Katz, Lazer, Arrow, & Contractor, 2004). For the unit, there could be an appropriate image building, an improvement in the teaching and learning of the English language, and also a healthy social engagement in the meetings. These benefits reflect mutual interest and collective action. Its main premise is that shared interests and the likelihood of benefits from coordinated action often outweigh individual self-interests. (Marwell, & Oliver, 1993).

The intent of the social interaction and collective action of EFL teachers suggest that the outcome of the social interaction would maximize the exchange value between individual teachers. The motivation to forge ties and interact is to further maximize their collective ability to leverage instructional practices and mobilize for collective action. Such collective action is made possible because the teachers, each with their own set of skills, knowledge and expertise, develop communication networks that help them identify and leverage the skills and expertise of others. As the skills, knowledge and expertise of individual teachers play out in the interactions; EFL teachers' curriculum enactment would be influenced.

2.2 Teachers' Interactions

Several authors have different classifications of teachers' interactions. For Taylor (1967), there are two types of teacher interactions: interpersonal interactions and

intrapersonal interactions. Hargreaves (1992) presents four kinds of interactions expanding on Taylor's classification. These include fragmented individualism, collaboration, contrived collegiality and balkanization. Hargreaves' classification has been the basis of contemporary studies on teacher interactions. Some studies present evidence supporting the forms of teachers' interactions. In a study on "Teachers' workplace", Rohenholtz (1993) reports that teachers planned, designed and prepared teaching materials together. Such interaction was also characterized by help-giving, emotional support and collectiveness. Lieberman (1994) also reveals the existence of collaborative interaction among teachers. This interaction among teachers was administratively regulated, rather than development-oriented; and meant to be predictable rather than unpredictable in its outcome. As administrative requirement, novice teachers in the schools were expected to consult the most experienced teachers when taking critical decisions related to lesson planning. These decisions ranged from selection of teaching methods to assessment of students' learning. Teachers in such schools were required to work together to improve practice.

Wang (1995) reports that teachers participated in smaller sub- group interactions within the school community. Thus, teachers were 'balkanized' into different cliques with different ideological demarcations. The first faction represented those who were receptive to changes. They took initiatives to formulate strategies in order to meet students' needs. These teachers were likely to plan their lessons to meet the broad spectrum of learning styles and needs that learners come to class with (Oppong, 2009). The other faction of teachers was apparently isolated-oriented. They were conservative and kept themselves away from the imposed innovations. These teachers may be susceptible to new ways of planning instructional practices. In the end, modern approaches to instructional planning may not be adhered to.

De Lima's (1997) study also reveals that teachers' interactions was more of support-giving; joint planning and enquiry-based teachers' interactions. Supportive planning included group planning of lessons, joint development of materials for use in the classroom and deliberations on teaching practices and instructional strategies that elicit students' critical thinking skills. This collaboration among teachers is likely to improve instructional practices of teachers. One will, therefore, expect that improved instructional practices will also possibly elicit students' analytical and synthetic skills. Similarly, Munthe (2003) shows that teachers in their attempt to implement changes in the curriculum had a round table discussion on what ought to be included in the syllabus and the irrelevant topics in the syllabus; the appropriate pedagogies that appealed to students' needs and how to develop the thinking abilities of students. The findings of the study demonstrate that teachers shared and developed their expertise

through the round table interaction. The findings of the studies reviewed above show that teachers' interactions could be collaborative, isolated-oriented, or administratively regulated. Apart from these, it could be deduced from the literature that teachers engage in sub-group interactions.

2.3 The Influence of Teachers' Interaction on Curriculum Enactment

The existence of social interaction among teachers may influence teachers' instructional decisions. For instance, several authors (Lieberman, 1994; Pennel, & Firestone, 1996; Vukelich, & Wren, 1999) indicate that true collegial and collaborative interactions are those which have impact on teachers' practices. Talberts' (2001) observes that collegial support and interaction helped teachers to adopt appropriate methodologies for new topics, relevant learning aids and effective strategies before classroom implementation. The study also shows that collegiality influenced the motivation and career commitment of teachers to the extent to which they were willing to modify the methodologies and teaching and learning resources that were selected in the lesson preparation. Cohen and Hill's (1998) indicate that teachers were able to reconstruct their practice to align with the principles of new professional standards for teaching. Cohen and Hill conclude that teachers gained experience from their participation in content-focused interactions with their colleagues. This suggests that collaborative interactions influence teachers' curriculum enactment. This observation emphasizes the belief that, how teachers interpret and further enact the curriculum would be somewhat dictated by effective collegiality. It is, therefore, useful to note that the implementation of the formal curriculum in any classroom situation may allow the discussion of teaching methods, instructional resources and other issues by teachers (Sosu, 2018). Shah (2012) surveys elementary teachers' professional relationships in Kuala Lumpur and found that professional interactions with colleagues enhanced teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to teach specific content areas. The study confirms that constructive feedback from colleagues enabled teachers to get a holistic understanding of a planned curriculum document.

Sato and Kleinsasser's (2004) study, however, show how interactions among teachers could be problematic for teachers' curriculum enactment practices. It was reported in the study that teachers became confused on what method was deemed appropriate, the best teaching and learning aids to use and the best way to meet the diverse needs of students. The study concluded that collaborative interactions hinder teachers' innovations in the classroom practices. Similar observations have been reported by Leonard (1993) and Johnson (2003). These authors detailed in their research reports how collegiate interactions could stifle teachers' initiative and creativity in curriculum enactment. The outcomes of these studies suggest

that interaction among teachers for purposes of curriculum enactment could be negative oriented. The literature, therefore, is not conclusive on the issue. That is, the literature seems to be a mix-bag. The social interaction among EFL teachers during professional development meetings may help confirm or refute the claims in the literature. Perhaps, as noted in the focus of the study the current study may help shed more light on the state of affairs. The current study examined how the social interactions that exist among EFL teachers influence syllabus enactment before classroom implementation in Benin. Given that no such study has been conducted in Benin, the different socio-cultural settings may lead to variation in the findings in previous studies. This provides the reason to focus this research in a Beninese context.

3. Objectives of the Study

The current study seeks to examine social interactions among teachers of English and their impacts on Instructional Practices in some secondary schools in Benin Republic. The following research questions have thus been raised:

- What interactions exist among EFL teachers during weekly professional development meetings?
- How does EFL teachers' social interaction influence their instructional practices?

4. Methodology

The concurrent research design was used for this study. The design was deemed appropriate for this study because it allows the collection of different but complementary data on the same topic on one field visit (Morse, 1991). The sample for the study was made up of seventy-seven (77) purposively selected EFL teachers from public and private secondary schools in Littoral region in Benin . The selection of these teachers was informed by the fact that they had taught the subject for a long period of time in a particular school which put them in the position to know the influence social interactions have on EFL teachers' enactment practices.

Questionnaire and interview guide were used to collect the relevant data. The questionnaire items were designed on two-point Linkert scale format: "Agree" and "Disagree". The questionnaire data were put into frequencies and percentages with the use of SPSS. Interviews were audio-recorded from 18 teachers and transcribed verbatim. To create manageable units for analysis, transcripts were divided into two area units related to the research questions. An inductive approach to develop codes was employed. Broad categories were developed based on the information gathered in response to the questions posed.

These categories responses were repeatedly refined, augmented, eliminated, and further refined until the final narratives emerged.

5. Results and Discussion

This section is organized under the two research questions, namely (i) the interactions that existed among EFL teachers during professional development meetings and (ii) how the interactions influenced EFL teachers' curriculum enactment.

5.1. Teachers' Interactions

The first objective was to find out the kind of interactions EFL teachers engage in their departments. The quantitative result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 : Teachers' Interactions

Statements	Agree F (%)	Disagree F (%)
Teachers discuss their academic work with their colleagues	(88.9)	(11.1)
Teachers participate in sub- group interactions with their colleagues	(16.7)	(83.3)
Teachers are mandated to work together	(22.2)	(77.8)
I do not discuss my academic work with my colleagues	(33.3)	(66.7)

The results in Table 1 indicate that the majority (16, 88.9%) agreed that they do discuss their academic work with their colleagues while only few teachers (2, 11.1%) disagreed. Again, few (3, 16.7%) respondents agreed that EFL teachers work in cliques while most of them (15, 83.3%) disagreed. Very few (4, 22.2%) of the respondents indicated that teachers during professional development meetings are mandated to work together while the majority (14, 77.8%) indicated otherwise. Lastly, on the statement that teachers did not discuss their academic work with their colleagues, six (33.3%) respondents agreed while twice this number (12, 66.7%) of teachers disagreed. The data point to the fact that, in general, even though some EFL teachers did not collaborate in their department, a considerable portion of teachers engaged their colleagues for academic work. The results, therefore, suggest that some EFL teachers, at least shared ideas.

Findings from the interview revealed that respondents had varying views on the kind of interaction (s) existing during meetings. For example, some of the respondents admitted that they engaged in collegial exchanges which may or may not be regulated. Two quotes illustrate this:

"I will say our interaction is cordial and voluntary; we interact both as teachers and learners. Out of genuine interest, we share stories, plan instructions and even assist beginning teachers specifically, during their first years in the classroom";

"The head of Professional development meeting has established teams of two or three teachers with specific responsibilities... The greatest concern with this arrangement is that we have no say in the formation of the teams... my team is tasked with co-planning of lessons and thematic teaching."

The first comment shows that EFL teachers engage in collegial exchanges and joint planning of activities. The second comment also shows that teachers' collegial exchanges are mandatory. In such a situation, teachers' interactions are regulated by the authority, which Wang (2002) describes as the 'Balkanized System' within the school community. Others noted that they made use of the 'inquiry group' of (2-4 teachers) cohorts. The respondents gave responses like:

"I prefer consulting my colleagues rather than hold (sic) on to my own way of thinking, so do my colleagues",

"... teachers are supportive... we offer instructional support to each other even though everyone belongs to a learning community which meets regularly outside to discuss students' progress".

The existence of sub-group interaction among EFL teachers indicates that teachers experienced collegial engagement differently. It appears that collegial collaboration is common in most secondary schools. This is noteworthy because the teachers displayed a general lack of knowledge about individualism during professional development meetings.

From the responses to the questionnaire, one can reasonably assume that EFL teachers engage in mandated interactions, collegial collaboration, and individualism and sub- group interactions. But the interview data, to some extent, contradict this assumption. While the questionnaire data revealed that some teachers plan their academic work in solitude, during the interview, all the teachers demonstrated a general lack of awareness of individualism. Given the lack of corroboration between the questionnaire and interview data, it maybe that the wording of the questionnaire made it easy for teachers to select any response. But after much probing in the interview, these teachers were unable to adequately account for their engagement in the perceived interactions. In this respect, the

interview data served as an effective mechanism for cross-referencing teachers' knowledge of the information on the questionnaire.

Notwithstanding the differences in the findings, the collaborative culture finds support in the perspective of Dillenbourg (1999) that in supportive and trusting collaborative environment, it is difficult to recognize any form of isolation. Again, if, in reality, only few teachers engage in sub-group interactions as the findings suggests, it can be assumed that differing ideological demarcations or group compositions do not exist in most professional development meetings. Indeed, in adaptable and successful schools, interactions about teaching tend to be inclusive and homogenous (Cole, 1991). This implies that collegial conversations and exchanges improve teachers' classroom practices. The teachers may perhaps collaborate not only to improve teacher performance, but to also improve student performance. The engagement will put the EFL teachers on the same page in terms of planning and delivery of instruction. That practice will motivate teachers to engage in positive interactions with their colleagues. These benefits of collaboration among teachers confirm Ronfeldt, et al.'s (2015) study, which concludes that teachers' collaboration has positive effects on teachers and their students.

It should also be noted that interaction is not always a concept that is welcomed with open arms as the questionnaire data revealed. The data suggested the existence of individualism though, as noted, the interview data did not confirm. Albeit the lack of confirmation, some teachers who have had success working in isolation may view collaboration as an invasion of their pedagogy and a waste of time. Such teachers are likely to be accustomed to their individualism regardless of the benefits of collegial interaction.

5.2. The Influence of Teachers' Interaction on Curriculum Enactment

The study further sought to find out how social interaction among EFL teachers influenced instructional practices. The responses of teachers are shown in Table 2

Table2. The Influence of EFL Teachers' Interactions on Curriculum Enactment

Statement	Agree F (%)	Disagree F (%)
Social interactions influence my choice of assessment techniques	(77.8)	(22.2)
Social interactions help me choose relevant instructional resources	(83.3)	(16.7)
Social interactions expose me to relevant content knowledge	(88.9)	(11.1)
Social interactions help me know how to formulate realistic lesson objectives	(66.7)	(33.3)
I get to know appropriate methodologies for each topics when I engaged in positive interactions with my colleagues	(94.4)	(5.6)
Social interactions help me plan my lessons to reflect current trends in the teaching industry	13(72.2)	5(27.8)
Interactions with my colleagues enable me plan lessons in more practical manner	14(77.8)	4(22.2)
Social interactions enhance my knowledge in instructional strategies	17(94.4)	1(5.6)
Social interactions widen my knowledge of the purposes , values and philosophical ground of the subject history	11(61.1)	7(38.9)

The majority of the respondents in Table 2 agreed that social interactions influenced how they enact the curriculum. For instance, 17 (94.4%) teachers agreed to the statement that collegial exchanges help them to select relevant methodologies during lesson planning. Another 17 (94.4%) of them indicated that the social engagements in the department exposed them to varied instructional practices in the planning of their lessons. The agreement levels of all the items

suggests, to a greater extent, that interactions influenced EFL teachers' curriculum enactments at that level of curriculum planning. This implies that the social interaction among EFL teachers enhance their lesson preparation.

From the interviews, it was noted, generally, that the social interaction among EFL teachers had an influence on the planning of their lessons. The respondents provided comments that social interaction in the departments afforded them a better orientation on the nature, and the purposes of the subject. One of the responses reflects this position:

"I think the engagements in the department with my colleagues widen my scope of knowledge on the principles and nature of the subject".

This means that respondents acknowledged that interactions enhance their subject matter knowledge. Besides the content issues, the interviewees indicated that social interactions influenced their selection of, for example, appropriate assessment instruments, relevant instructional materials, and student-centered strategies and methodologies. One teacher puts it as:

"The discussions we have in the department help us identify suitable assessment strategies".

Another had this to say

"The ideas we share as colleagues influence my selection of appropriate instructional practices. In fact, these practices have ensured students involvement during lessons".

These engagements have therefore improved teachers' lesson planning. For instance, the comments that:

"Our interaction as teachers have ensured that we formulate realistic and achievable lesson objectives and make lesson more practical" and

"Sharing views in the department makes our lesson plans more comprehensive with different ideas across board"

suggest that the social interaction influence and benefit teachers' curriculum enactment at that level in the school. This observation makes teachers' interactions very critical in curriculum enactment process.

The two data sources, the questionnaire and interview data, converge on the same point. Both established that social interactions influence teachers' practices of curriculum enactment. Given this level of corroboration, it appears that EFL teachers are inclined to pedagogical influence through social interactions. It implies that teachers' ability to enact the English curriculum is somewhat determined by collegial engagements. This argument confirms the social network theory which views authentic teamwork as very influential to members'

understanding of a task and the performance of it. For instance, Cole (1991) attests that collective generation of ideas and suggestions enhance teachers' development of varied and high quality instructional resources. Again, holding fast to the finding that social interactions widen EFL teachers' content knowledge, teachers believe that inter-collegial exchanges enhance their understanding of the subject matter, skills or the substance of what is taught, a position that reflects the thinking in the social network theory. As noted in the theory, social interaction and collective action of EFL teachers suggested that, the outcome of the social interaction would maximize the exchange value between individual teachers. The motivation to forge ties and interact is to further maximize their collective ability to leverage instructional practices and mobilize for collective action.

It could, therefore, be argued that for EFL teachers to achieve the laudable objectives of the subject, and improve on instructional planning and delivery, their interactions in the area are critical. Perhaps, positive interaction with their colleagues will enable them exploit the usefulness, essence and benefits of each topic in the syllabus. This argument finds support in the words of Miller (1980). The author notes that social interactions influence teachers to an extent that they are able to understand the purposes of their educational practices. Several studies (e.g., Cole, 1991; Hargreaves, 1992; Shah, 2012) provide similar findings. All these studies concluded that social interactions play a vital role in augmenting teachers' instructional practices. Even the essence of discussions of any curriculum document is to give ears to teacher's classroom problems and also proffer solutions to such problems so as to improve instructional delivery. As Little (1978) argued earlier, collegial discussions increase teachers' capacity to reflect on instructional challenges for remediation. Social interaction among EFL teachers is, therefore, beneficial for curricular discourse.

Others have also argued on the limitation of social interaction in schools. For example, Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) observe that interactions among teachers could be problematic for teachers' curriculum enactment practices. Leonard (1993) earlier suggested that collegiate interactions could stifle teachers' initiative and creativity in curriculum enactment practices. These arguments seek to advance the course of individualism over the social network theory. One common criticism of social network theory is that individualism is often ignored although this may not be the case in practice (Wenlin et al., 2017). The lack of initiative and creativity may be perhaps associated with introvert teachers, because any discussions among teachers should enable individuals share their innovations and not otherwise. However, the elements of initiative and creativity could possibly be stifled when the interaction among teachers is not receptive. One mechanism that can hinder initiative and creativity of individuals is reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971).

Conventional knowledge suggests that a group should have important effects on the development of cooperation by mutual altruism.

Regardless of the flip side of social interaction in any association, it is evident in this study that interaction among EFL teachers influence curriculum enactment practices for the benefits of the teachers. The current study therefore re-echoes the quintessential nature of social interaction in curriculum enactment. The findings provide a firm confirmation of the literature that suggests that social interaction is important for curriculum enactment discourse. Perhaps the socio-cultural settings of the current study and those previous studies bear semblance.

6. Conclusion

This study set to examine social interactions among teachers of English and their impacts on Instructional Practices in some secondary schools in Benin Republic. It has been established that various interactions exist among EFL teachers in the various secondary schools where the study was conducted. These include mandated interactions, collegial collaboration, and individualism and sub-group interactions. The existence of these forms of interactions indicates that curriculum enactment may not take place in a vacuum. However, it is important that these interactions are regulated professionally to avoid any negative effect on teachers' professional work. Again, the concept of individualism should be managed properly to avoid isolationism while ensuring that teachers' initiative and creativity are not curbed. The study further recognized that the social interaction among EFL teachers influenced curriculum enactment practices at that level of schooling. This implies that EFL teachers' classroom practices are usually informed by the social engagements that take place during professional development meetings. It is, therefore, important for instructional leaders to ensure that those engagements among teachers continue to be appropriate to enhance the effective teaching and learning of the English language.

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