



Edited by
Etienne Dagasso, Koaténin Kouamé & Bolivar Siéwoué

Teaching English to Francophones in Africa:

Issues in language skills development

Preface by Professor Ettien Koffi

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Teaching English to Francophones in Africa

*Issues in Language Skills
Development*

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Dedication

We gladly dedicate this volume to our Academic Masters:

- **Samuel Atechi**, Professor, University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon,
- **Jérôme Kouassi**, Professor, Houphouet Boigny University, Côte d'ivoire,
- **Emmanuel Nforbi**, Professor, University of Dschang, Cameroon.

It proclaims that your seed in us has taken root, and predicts much more.

Very respectfully!

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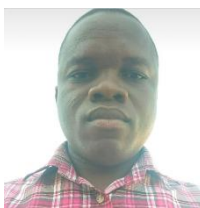
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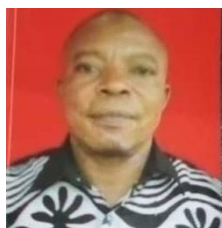
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Preface

This edited volume offers excellent insights into why Education First (2019) ranked English proficiency in Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire as “very low.” Out of the 100 countries from which data is available¹, these two countries ranked 83rd and 96th respectively. Ranking data is not available for other French-speaking countries in West Africa. However, I suspect that they would not have fared any better. The researchers who produced this book have provided data that helps to explain why, in spite of many years of language instruction, English proficiency is still very low.

The investigators diagnose underachievement in English by examining three main skills: *speaking*, *writing*, and *reading*. At a macro level, the authors attribute very low oral proficiency to the lack of opportunities for students to practice English outside of the classroom. Digging deeper, they also find that students lack confidence in their speaking abilities because of layers of phonological interferences from French and their African mother tongues. Mispronunciations of consonants and vowels play havoc on intelligibility and make their spoken English undecipherable.

The investigators also give very low scores to students' writing abilities. They report that even students in their last year of high school cannot write in English. Their essays are littered with basic sentence-level errors having to do with subject-verb agreement, plural agreement, incorrect usage of tense, etc. One researcher also indicates that even teachers-in-training make copious writing errors with prepositions by transferring French syntactic structures directly into their English essays. For example, they tend to write “*They stressed **on** this point*” instead of “*they stressed this point.*” They add the preposition “*on*” because the French equivalent of this phrase, “*insister sur,*” has a preposition.

The authors blame the aforementioned writing difficulties on the fact that students often do not even understand the writing prompts because of their extremely impoverished lexicon. This also has a negative impact on their

¹ Link: <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/>

reading comprehension. Since students do not read much in English, it goes without saying that they lack even basic vocabulary items to express themselves both in writing and in speaking. The usual justification or excuse for the failure to read is the unavailability and/or affordability of reading resources. It is undeniable that students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds can ill-afford to spend their scanty resources on English textbooks. Yet, there is also a cultural dimension to reading failure that cannot be ignored, namely that, for the most part, Black African societies value orality more than literacy as a way of accumulating knowledge. This cultural tendency undercuts the need to seek knowledge through reading. Understanding this cultural bias can help to experiment with different strategies for developing English proficiency.

The authors and editors of this volume spared no effort to hunt down original data to buttress their findings. In so doing, they provide the L2 research community with a treasure trove of invaluable insights that can be used to inform and redesign the curriculum. The solutions that are proposed for improving English proficiency levels in French-speaking Black Africa should also include *listening skills* which were largely ignored in the present volume.

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English language learning in Benin's secondary schools: success or failure?

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Abstract

This chapter inquires about the progress made by Benin's educational system so far in EFL teaching and learning process. It is worth glancing at, for example, some secondary schools in Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi, Natitingou, etc. The global objective of the current study is to examine learners' English language listening and speaking development in Benin so as to determine logical ins and outs. The problem noticed is mainly the inability of many learners of Benin's secondary schools to listen and speak the target language adequately. The hypothesis provided is to explain that learners could use this language well if they are really motivated to this appropriate use from the beginning of their language learning and a consistent and continual follow-up. To carry out such an investigation successfully, a questionnaire has been addressed to EFL teachers and learners, interviews conducted with EFL qualified teachers without forgetting classroom observations, phone calls as well as the data collected through email. These results mostly reveal that though English language teaching was introduced in Benin's educational system for a long time, using the language orally still raises a lot of questions in this country. It is important to suggest that the process of EFL teaching and learning be taken more seriously by the government, parents, EFL teachers, and learners.

Key words: English; listening; speaking; success; failure; Benin's educational system.

Résumé

Ce chapitre essaye d'investiguer le progrès fait par le système éducatif du Bénin jusqu'à présent dans le processus de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage de l'anglais, langue étrangère. Cela vaut la peine de jeter des regards par exemple sur quelques établissements secondaires à Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi, Natitingou, etc. L'objectif global de cette étude consiste à examiner le développement de l'écoute et du parler de l'anglais par les apprenants au Bénin en vue d'en déterminer logiquement les tenants et aboutissants. Le problème principal soulevé ici est l'incapacité de plusieurs apprenants des cours secondaires du Bénin d'écouter et de parler de façon adéquate la langue cible. L'hypothèse pourvue est d'expliquer que les apprenants pourraient bien utiliser cette langue s'ils sont vraiment motivés à cet usage approprié dès le début de leur apprentissage de la langue sans oublier un suivi constant et permanent. Pour le succès de cette recherche, un questionnaire a été adressé aux enseignants et apprenants de l'anglais, des interviews conduites avec des professeurs certifiés sans oublier les visites de classes, les appels téléphoniques aussi bien que les données collectées à travers le mail. Les résultats révèlent surtout que l'enseignement de l'anglais fut introduit dans le système éducatif du Bénin il y a longtemps; néanmoins, son utilisation orale efficiente continue de soulever d'énormes interrogations dans le pays. . Il est important de suggérer que le processus de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage de l'anglais soit pris plus au sérieux par le gouvernement, les parents, les enseignants de l'anglais, et les apprenants.

Mots clés: anglais; écoute; parler; succès; échec; système éducatif du Bénin.

Introduction

Benin is a French speaking country where English is used as a foreign language and deserves to be rated. The background to the study makes me

testify that many are those learners of this country who, despite the great number of years spent in secondary schools, many things still need to be done to favour their EFL learning. The current study emerges from the permanent complaints of learners, EFL teachers and parents about the educational system. This study is fundamental because of English language praiseworthy prominence in the whole world nowadays. The English language teaching and learning process in Benin's secondary schools is full of pitfalls and causes a real headache to the different parties involved in the negotiations of the educational progress. The main objective of this study is to examine learners' oral English language progress in this country where French breaks the record, so as to determine adequate consequences. This objective has been split into some specific objectives such as identifying real and personal difficulties that hinder Benin's learners' English learning; finding satisfactory solutions to these problems. The three research questions mentioned in this chapter are: a- To what extent have Benin's secondary school learners grasped the English language speaking so far? b- What are possible hindrances to this language successful learning? c- How to solve such persistent problems faced in these secondary schools? The first section of this study is untitled contextual review which is subdivided into some subsections.

Contextual Review

Obstacles to Effective EFL Utterances

A lot of difficulties underlie the efficient learning of English, a foreign language in Benin. Among these, it is worth naming: social and economic aspects; ethnic and linguistic influences as well as situational barriers which need to be eradicated for the successful learning and acquisition of this noble language humanity can never do without. Hindeme (2012, p. 289) says: "The full potential of students in our secondary schools is not always realised because the quality of teaching those students is inadequate and the consequence is a high percentage of students' failure." He is also right to find

as alternatives that “The Ministry of Education and other concerned bodies should organise successive workshops, seminars and in-service trainings so that teachers can get the chance to share experiences on how to cope with the existing problems in secondary schools.” (Hindeme, 2012, p. 275). I do share his point of view but EFL teachers ought to recognise the obvious drawbacks they will come across waiting for this help from the government which will scarcely come true during their whole career.

Social and Economic Aspects

The majority of Benin’s population scarcely affords learning material owing to their limited living conditions in many areas of the country. Beside, very few parents are really aware of their children’s English language learning due to their poverty. Consequently, encouraging language learning seems not to be their main concern in most Benin’s societies. Another obstacle to this language learning is the frequency of many imposing ceremonies in several places of the country. These ceremonies are organised even against their will because this phenomenon has become a kind of rotary subscription. In addition, as a lot of people are polygamous in this country, they witness such ceremonies many times within a year without succeeding in economising a little money for their children’s adequate schooling. Apart from this type of subscription, there is another subscription organised daily, weekly or monthly where an individual collects a given and important amount of money and in the turn of other people who should collect, this individual is not able to pay back so that these people take their money. This creates a big problem to several parents who have planned to use this money for their children’s schooling or English learning. This unpleasant situation happens many times in Adjarra, a region of Porto-Novo in Benin, and in many areas of the country.

Ethnic and Linguistic Influences

Some ethnic groups put their children into convents by force, or prevent their children from getting educated and this bad behaviour does not favour these children's English learning in any case. Some ethnic groups organise traditional ceremonies in which many learners are kept home for weeks and months in order to participate even during a school year. One example of these ethnic groups is the Ditammari people in the northern part of Benin. At Perma, an area located not far from Natitingou and Djougou in the North of Benin, a learner saw his teacher naked in 2011, during the ceremony in their village. From that day on, the learner will still have this image whenever he has the opportunity to be in front of that teacher and this will turn his mind from the learning. This phenomenon hardly fosters the English language learning. The national languages of this country often influence learners' oral French, all the more so English. Learners speaking different mother tongues of Benin speak English with different accents and rhythms. Some learners simply remain silent during lessons. This silence is due to their lack of mastery of the English language which prevents them from reacting in class.

Robertson, (2002) cited by Kim (2002), has said:

“Even the students who come to practice spoken English remain silent during class. I really don't understand why they are in my class if they just sit and don't talk at all. They are just wasting money.” Many foreign English teachers remember many cases where students seemed to hesitate to answer the questions posed to them, even when they knew the answer. Sometimes it might have caused misunderstandings. As a result, some teachers must have been upset, presuming that the student was ignoring him, leading to cross cultural communication failure”.

It is really difficult to learn a foreign language in Benin's secondary schools, not only because of the country's location but also the perpetual mockery learners are exposed to. Most people are accustomed to taunting those learners who make mistakes and errors while using the target language. Consequently, learners of this language need to forget about this mockery in their schools or anywhere they feel like speaking it for the successful English learning sake.

Situational Barriers

Benin is a French speaking country where English is seldom used by the population and even at school. The language most used is French and only a few native speakers of English coming from America stay in this country for some days. Those native speakers do not even use their language with Benin's people but want to learn national languages instead. The people from Nigeria speak Broken English and master Benin's national languages a lot. Those who live in Porto-Novo and Adjarra are very interested in Gun language and speak it most of the time with the population of Porto-Novo and Adjarra. The English language is then scarcely used in the different regions of this country.

Al-Sibai, (2004, p.3) has stated:

"The use of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in oral communication is, without a doubt, one of the most common but highly complex activities necessary to be considered when teaching the English language especially because we —live at a time where the ability to speak English fluently has become a must, especially who want to advance in certain fields of human endeavor".

No matter the location of Benin, the use of English remains and dwells a must for EFL learners in the country and elsewhere.

Bankole-Minaflinou (2013, p. 366) declares:

"But the ultimate goal which is to train citizens able to communicate in, to perform well in real life context is not yet reached. This poor performance is due to many factors: the lack of students' motivation, the lack of textbooks due to parents' financial constraints,

the quasi inexistence of school libraries, the lack of trained teachers, school infrastructure, etc”.

This is to say that a teaching which does not produce learners able to use English in their real life situation is useless and is worth improving for the adequate success of this target language in Beninese secondary schools and this is fundamental because they will get a strong level and background before they reach university.

Research Method

For this study to come true, questionnaire sheets have been administered to 40 EFL teachers and 80 learners, interviews conducted with 4 certified teachers of English and 6 English classes observed in some secondary schools of Benin especially Adjarra and Porto-Novo in the region of Ouémé, without forgetting Abomey-Calavi and Natitingou.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire has helped to inquire about: EFL teachers' success in producing effective speakers of English, the frequent problems encountered by these teachers which prevent them from reaching such a goal, Learners' interest in the target language, and Parents' efforts in their children's English learning.

Interviews

Through interviews, it has been discovered: the point of view of some EFL teachers about the development of the English language so far, and adequate solutions to the variety of obstacles to the English language learning.

Classroom Observations

During these classroom observations, it is important to point out: the atmosphere of the classes, the way learners are motivated or not, the number of learners who are afforded the learning materials, and the teachers' mastery of the language and the way to deliver the message to learners

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Learners' Grasping Spoken English

Table 1: Teachers' Answers to Questionnaire/ 40=100%

Statements	Positive Answers N/%	Negative Answers N/%	Total 40/100/%
EFL teachers' success in effective speakers of English.	02/05%	38/95%	40/100%
The frequent problems encountered by these teachers which prevent them	40/100%	00/00%	40/100%
Learners' interest in the target language.	20/50%	20/50%	40/100%
Parents' efforts in their children's English learning	01/2.5%	39/97.5%	40/100%

Table 1 presents the results of the EFL teachers' questionnaire. Only 02 EFL teachers out of 40 succeed in making their learners speak English effectively. All of them encounter frequent problems which prevent them from reaching such a goal. 20 EFL teachers make their learners interested in the target language. Only one teacher has accepted that parents make efforts in their children's English learning by providing them with relevant materials.

Hindrances to Successful Language Learning

Table 2: Learners' Answers to Questionnaire/ 80=100%

Statements	Positive Answers N/%	Negative Answers N/%	Total N/%
Learners' English mastery	03/03.75%	77/96.25%	80/100%
Learners' problems.	77/96.25%	03/03.75%	80/100%
Learners' motivation in the target language.	06/07.5%	74/92.5%	80/100%
Parents' efforts in their children's English learning	10/12.5%	70/87.5%	80/100%

In the second table, among the 80 learners only 03 (03.75%) have recognised that they master the English language. 77 of them (96.25%) have confessed that they have problems in the English language learning. Only 06 (07.5%) of these learners have said that they are motivated in the target language. Only 10 (12.5%) have said that their parents make efforts in their English learning.

Solving such Persistent Problems

Table 3: EFL Teachers' Interviews' Findings (4 EFL Teachers interviewed=100%)

Statements	Positive Answers N/%	Negative Answers N/%	Total N/%
Good point of view of EFL teachers about the development of the English language so far.	0/100%	4/100%	4/100%
Adequate solutions to the variety of obstacles to the English language learning.	0/00%	4/100%	4/100%

The third table displays the results from the interviews conducted with the certified EFL teachers. None of the 4 teachers interviewed, has got good point of view of EFL teachers about the development of the English language so far. They did not provide adequate solutions to the variety of obstacles to the English language learning.

Table 4: Classroom Observations' Findings (6 Classes Observed=100%)

Statements	Positive Answers N/%	Negative Answers N/%	Total N/%
Pleasant atmosphere of the classes.	1/16.66%	5/83.33%	6/100%
The learners are motivated.	2/33.33%	4/66.66%	6/100%
Learners are afforded the learning materials.	1/16.66%	5/83.33%	6/100%
The teachers' good mastery of the language and good way to deliver the message to learners	3/50%	3/50%	6/100%

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In the fourth table, only 1(16.66%) EFL teacher has succeeded in establishing a pleasant atmosphere in his classes. Only 2 (33.33%) have motivated their learners. Only 1 (16.66%) teacher's learners are afforded adequate learning materials. 3 (50%) of the teachers observed have good mastery of the language and good way to deliver the message to learners.

Discussion of Findings and Suggestions

Through Table 1, very few EFL teachers make their learners use English in their classes. The difficulties encountered do not favour the teaching of this language. Several EFL teachers do not interest their learners in the target language. Most learners are not provided relevant materials for their English learning.

Ur (1996) has considered:

“Speaking as the most important skill among four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language. This indicates that using a language is more important than just knowing about it because —there is no point knowing a lot about language if you can’t use it”.
(Scrivener, 2005, p.146).

It is important that English speaking be rated in Benin’s educational system. In the second table, only a few learners master the English language. This lack of language mastery explains the low oral English of learners in the country’s secondary schools. 77 learners have confessed that they have problems in the English language learning. Only 06 (07.5%) of them are said to be motivated in the target language. Only 10 (12.5%) have been provided with adequate learning materials. The third table shows the results from the interviews conducted with the certified EFL teachers. All of them have criticised the country’s educational system and especially the lack of adequate use of the English language by EFL learners. The fourth table shows that many EFL teachers neither succeed in establishing a pleasant atmosphere in their classes nor motivate their learners effectively. Several EFL teachers observed, Master English and teach the language in suitable way in their classes.

The first specific concern was to know to what extent Benin’s secondary school learners have grasped the English language speaking so far. It is necessary for such learners to really communicate orally in this language after so many years of language learning. Nevertheless, this true usage is not easy for learners who speak other languages from their childhood. That is what is explained by Nunan (2003) when he has said that “Speaking is the productive oral skill. It requires a lot of hardship if L2 learners intend to develop their speaking skill as it cannot be achieved overnight. Speaking needs systematic verbal utterances as it conveys meaning”.

The second specific concern was to know possible hindrances to the English language successful learning. These hindrances are numerous and are those come across by EFL teachers as well as learners, hindrances which compel EFL teachers to make much additional effort in their teaching process. The third specific concern was to know how to solve such persistent problems faced in these secondary schools. EFL teachers have difficulties making their

learners interact in Benin's secondary schools. Brown (2001) emphasizes on interaction when he asserts, "*Interaction in fact, the heart of communication, it is what communication is all about*".

Several suggestions deserve to be made, mainly: The implication of different actors of the educational system in the learning of students in the country's regions. The implication of parents to some extent in their children's education, schooling, and EFL learning process. Regular and adequate monitoring of learners for their English language learning. The real documentation of the libraries: school libraries and the ones of the whole department and commune. Successful oral communication has remained a permanent worry in Benin's secondary schools so far, despite much effort and struggles from EFL teachers and educational authorities.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study has been to examine learners' oral English language progress in this country where French breaks the record. No EFL teacher can deny the very low progress or even the absence of real progress of this language in Benin. The current study implies that EFL teachers have tremendous responsibilities for their teaching to be efficient in Benin's secondary schools. According to Brosh (1996), cited by Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2015), effective EFL teachers are those who focus on comprehension, are in command of the language, prepare interesting lessons, help students to be independent, and deal with students fairly. This point of view from Brosh is worth rating because EFL learners are frequently taunted and blamed by teachers who think they are not responsible for the poor level of these learners. According to another author, the effectiveness of teachers is not limited to teacher characteristics or merely abiding by a particular set of criteria, it is also about employing teaching practices that are valued by, and contribute to, the wider community in which the teaching takes place. The fundamental objective of this study has been to determine and examine this failure of language teaching and provide relevant strategies and techniques for eradicating these endless complaints towards Benin's educational system. Many obstacles to language learning need to be taken away such as social,

economic, ethnic, and situational difficulties. The findings from the investigation have helped a lot in reaching this goal. English provides learners with appropriate speaking and listening materials for its true teaching and learning.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire to EFL teachers

Do your learners always communicate in English orally?

How do you succeed in making your learners speak English effectively?

Name some frequent problems you encounter which prevent you from reaching such a goal.

Are your learners interested in the target language?

Are they regularly provided with appropriate learning materials?

How do you appreciate their parents' efforts in their children's English learning?

Appendix 2: Questionnaire to learners

Do you speak English correctly during the lessons?

What language does your teacher of English use while teaching you?

Do you understand your teachers' explanations?

Are you interested in the English language?

- Is English difficult or easy for you?
- Do your parents buy learning materials for you every year?
- Do you listen to people speaking English on radio?
- Do you watch people speaking on television?
- Do you understand what they say?
- What efforts do you make in order to understand them?

Appendix 3: Interviews Guide for EFL teachers

What is your point of view about the development of the English language so far?

Do you think the spoken English teaching process is a success nowadays?

What are the obstacles to the oral English teaching?

Suggest some adequate solutions to the variety of obstacles to the English language learning.

Appendix 4: Classroom Observations grid

The atmosphere of the classes.

The way the learners are motivated or not.

The number of learners who are afforded the learning materials.

The teachers' mastery of the language and the way to deliver the message to learners

Teaching English to Francophones in Africa:

Issues in language skills development

The largely low proficiency in English with most French-speaking learners in Africa is the main concern in this collective book. The investigators from Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon and Ghana discuss issues in oral skills development ranging from pronunciation to real life speech (in Part One) and reading and writing as written skills (Part Two) in the school system. The last part of the volume handles issues like translation from French to English and corporate language policies. Ethnography, discourse analysis and the experimental approach, variably used in the nineteen chapters of the volume, support the findings and perspectives for the Francophone English proficiency seekers in Africa.



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