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## EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS IN BENINESE EFL CLASSES: A META-ANALYTIC REVIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

*Teaching English as a Foreign Language to students with emotional and behavioural disorders in Benin is the key issue in this investigation. The study sets out with the aim to explore teachers' practices and students' performance as well as strategies used by Benin EFL teachers to address the issue. The research instruments used are questionnaire, interviews and class observations. The study has revealed that Benin EFL teachers' practices towards students with special needs are far from enabling them to develop their inner potential and learn effectively. Based on the findings, some strategies have been suggested regarding EFL teaching to such specific students.*

**Key Words:** performance, disorders, emotions, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), strategy

### Résumé

*Cet article se propose d'explorer l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère (ALE) aux apprenants béninois ayant une perturbation émotionnelle ou comportementale. Le principal objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les pratiques des enseignants vis-à-vis de ces types d'apprenants ainsi que les performances de ces derniers. Pour y parvenir, divers instruments tels que les interviews, observations directes et questionnaires ont été utilisés. Des résultats recueillis, il ressort que ce phénomène grandissant ne semble pas retenir l'attention*



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*des enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère (ALE) et que de nombreux défis restent à relever. Se basant sur ces résultats, les auteurs de l'article ont fait des suggestions stratégiques pour une prise en charge plus effective de ces types d'apprenants.*

**Mots Clés:** performance, désordres, émotions, anglais langue étrangère (ALE), stratégie

## INTRODUCTION

One can read in the Constitution of December 11, 1990 of Benin Republic, in its article 26, that the individuals with disabilities have to be protected. However, there is no specific law regarding the education of such individuals. Most of the time, students with disabilities are mixed with students without any disabilities. Benin teachers have in their classrooms such students that just do not keep up with teaching materials. Some of them sit in the back and neither raise their hands nor look at the teacher. Others chat all the time and never pay attention.

This issue is a great concern now, especially in this era of globalization, when the learning of the English language is a window to the world. Although French is the official language in certain countries, people in such countries need English to do business with non-French speakers. In West Africa, French speaking countries like Benin and Togo Republics have some neighbouring English speaking countries. They share the same borders and need to interact.

This has given rise to the teaching/learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in many countries for several purposes such as employment, international mobility, development opportunities and the need to access information in a universal language. In this fast-moving and technological world, English is a language which has become a compulsory language for nations worldwide.

This investigation sets out with dual aims. First, exploring strategies used by Benin EFL teachers to teach students with special needs, and second, analyzing and comparing students' performance and teachers' practices.



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## 1. Special education and relative terminologies

There are many views to what it means to be qualified as disabled. All children exhibit differences in terms of physical attributes and learning abilities. Heward (2003) divides “Special Education” into four categories: learning disabilities, speech and language impairment, mental retardation and emotional disturbance. Some critics suggest that the term “exceptional children” could be used to represent all categories of disabled children. They argue that the idea of having a disability does not define the individual. The implication is that the term “exceptional children” offers dignity to the individual.

There are some global terms used when speaking of children with special needs: ‘Children at risk’, ‘Children with impairment’, ‘Children with disability’, ‘children with handicap’ (Heward 2003, p. 10). A child with special needs is a child who deviates from the standard average performance and norm. This child could be below the norm and perform really slower than others, or could be above it and work higher and faster than anyone else within the norm. Either of the two categories of learners need a special way of learning.

### 1.1 Conduct and emotional disorders explored

“Behaviour Disorders” is a term used to describe a broad spectrum of disorders characterized by persistent difficulties with social interactions and disruptive behaviour in school, at home, and elsewhere. The most common disruptive behaviour disorders include oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Walker 2012, p. 17). Other emotional and behavioural disorders include anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, schizophrenia, neurosis, psychosis, bipolar disorder, anorexia, bulimia. They can affect children in every area of their lives (Walker 2012, p. 17).



Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is a childhood behavioural problem characterized by disobedient, hostile, and defiant behaviour, particularly directed towards authority figures, such as parents or teachers. ODD is less severe and more common than Conduct Disorder (CD). Symptoms may include: repeated temper tantrums, excessive arguing with adults, refusal to comply with requests and rules, deliberate attempts to annoy or upset others, bad temper, fault finding, the use of obscene language, low self-esteem (Walker 2012, p. 54).

Conduct Disorder (CD) is a behavioural and emotional disorder characterized by a repetitive and persistent problematic behaviour. A child or adolescent with CD usually violates the basic social rules or rights of others and exhibits disruptive, violent, and antisocial behaviour. Symptoms may include: aggression to people and animals (e.g. bullying, fighting, using weapons, threatening, intimidating others, forcing into sexual activity), destruction of property, deceitfulness, lying or stealing, serious violations of rules (e.g. running away, skipping school, heavy drinking, drug use).

Identifying children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) is challenging, since most of the children in their growing years exhibit symptoms at some point. To recognize if a person suffers from ADHD, one must look at the severity of symptoms. Age must also be considered for adults. A significant impairment in social and academic functioning should not be confused with any other mental disorder (Cabaroğlu 2012, p. 18).

A child with ADHD has the following characteristics:

- He or she is inattentive
- He or she is easily distracted, doesn't seem to listen
- He or she shows difficulty in organizing, planning and completing tasks
- He or she shows difficulty in adapting to others' behavior in some given situation
- He or she shows difficulty in staying still for even a short period of time: fidgets, squirms, taps and appears restless
- He or she talks, runs, moves excessively, is impulsive



- He or she shows difficulty in taking turn and shows difficulty in controlling his/her action (e.g. hits classmates out of anger or frustration) (Butler 2009).

## 1.2 Strategies used in Special Education

Specific causes of behavioural disorders are hard to define, so diagnosis can be difficult and time consuming. There are several strategies for addressing behaviour problems in classrooms:

### 1.2.1 ABC Strategy

The best place to start is by attempting to understand the behaviour and what the individual is attempting to gain by engaging in the behaviour. A relatively quick approach is observation organized into an ABC strategy according to (Walker 2012):

A – *Antecedent* of the behaviour. This refers to all of the variables taking place before the individual begins demonstrating the inappropriate behaviour. The antecedent can be anything from a rainy day, lack of sleep the night before, having negative interactions with another peer, being asked to do something undesired, or being ignored. Sometimes teachers have to look closely to determine the antecedent.

A- The actual *Behaviour*. What is the child doing: yelling, crying, throwing things, hitting others, disrupting the lesson, etc.?

B- The *Consequence*. What is the individual getting as a result of the behaviour? Is he getting any undesired activities, a treatment, the teacher's undivided attention as a result of his/her inappropriate behaviour? The EFL teachers' job is to be on alert at all times.

### 1.2.2 Strategies Related to Academic Instruction



Specific causes of behavioral disorders are hard to define, so diagnosis can be difficult and time consuming. Treatment often focuses on skill development for the student, parents and teachers.

- Use multi-sensory strategies during teaching
- Make special arrangements in the timetable to accommodate demanding lessons in the morning, when concentration is better
- Have a special reward program and recognize his/her efforts and progress
- Use various modes of evaluation, such as authentic, project work, debates, presentation, drawing
- Use a variety of behavioural intervention techniques (e.g. visual cues such as gestures and cards to communicate privately with the child; proximity control to help and remind the child to stay on task; verbal reinforcement for appropriate behavior and selectively ignoring inappropriate ones)
- Use peer support and foster teamwork spirit so that learning becomes an enjoyable experience
- Clearly establish rules at the beginning of teaching- commitment through collaboration with the student
- “Escape valve” Outlets: give such students a chance to leave class (for example to get a book from the library or to leave a note for another group). (Cabarroglu et al, 2012)

### **1.2.3 Strategies Related to Physical Environment**

- Seat the child in front of the class and/or near a ‘role model’ student
- Create low-distraction areas to study
- Make use of such instructional tools as pointers to take attention, timers to help the student stay focused, soft balls to squeeze when s/he feels stressed (Cabarroglu et al, 2012).

### **1.3 Student performance**

In second and foreign language learning, a learner’s performance in a language may indicate his/her competence. An approach to the study of



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a learner's competence in a language, based on the study of a learner's total linguistic performance (what the learner is able to say and do in the language; which requires a certain conditions:

✓ performance assessment: It is a systematic and direct observation of a student performance or examples of student performances and ranking according to pre-established performance criteria. Students are assessed on the result as well as the process engaged in a complex task or in the creation of a product.

✓ performance criterion: **itis** a description of the characteristics to be assessed for a given task. Performance criteria may be general, specific, analytical, or holistic. They may be expressed as a scoring rubric or scoring guide.

✓ performance task: **itis** an assessment exercise that is goal directed (Lanmantchion 2013).

The theory of education production is employed to begin a quantitative assessment of the relationship between absence types and academic outcomes. To put into place an academic outcome, education economists (e.g. Costes 2003) utilize an education production function, which models the relationship between school inputs and output measures of achievement.

## 1.4 Methods and Procedures

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used in this research work to explore EFL teachers' practices and special students' performance because of their distinctive features and their contrasting domains. Bryman (2008) points out that a single approach to analyzing research issues in any context only yields limited data. Quantitative data for this study are collected through questionnaire and EFL exceptional students' scores. Qualitative data are related to EFL teachers' practices regarding the issues of emotional disorders and behavioural disorders.

Ten (10) secondary schools were chosen at random throughout the Atlantic region of the country. Each school population consisted of boys and girls with behavioural disorders studying English as a Foreign



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Language as part of the national curriculum requirement. These students were identified as students with special needs and selected with the help of their teachers. They were questioned and their performance in class at the end of the academic year was analyzed. EFL instructors teaching these students in the schools selected were also invited to participate through a questionnaire.

## **1. RESULTS**

### **2.1 Teachers' practices**

The majority of teachers questioned recognized that they did not always create a supportive environment for students. Most of the time, EFL teachers send any student who misbehaves out of the class as punishment including students with special needs; sometimes, the latter are neglected and their conduct grade diminishes. Then the learner with special needs does not feel motivated and this in turn might lead to his/her never developing a liking for school and for studies, but rather, seeing school as a burden.

The learner who feels that school is uninteresting might drop out of school altogether. EFL Teachers have not always differentiated exceptional students from normal students in their teaching. Policies are outdated and do not clearly articulate teachers' responsibilities. This creates a lack of accountability and requires a duplication of effort from the teachers. Additionally, the country supervision services are weak, providing no systematic quality education. In a word, the students with special needs have challenges and opportunities unmatched by teachers in EFL classes today.

### **2.2 Students' performance**

Performance assessments have been found to stimulate changes in the ways teachers teach. At the same time, such performance assessments provide occasion for colleagues to collaboratively reflect on and to improve on their own work. When teachers get into the habit of



collecting and reflecting on evidence about their students, they become much more able to recognize and appreciate the different ways students learn. This understanding enhances teachers' abilities to provide effective instruction. By performance we mean students' scores. These are analyzed in order to get a global view on students with special needs achievement. Table 1 reveals many remarks about students with exceptionalities

**Table1: Students with special needs achievement**

Schools	Number of students per school	Number of students with disabilities	Percentage of success of students with special need success	Percentage of success in the whole school
A	3024	123	16%	73%
B	3720	201	31%	61%
C	1321	177	31%	57%
D	1069	172	42%	82%
E	2358	198	9%	77%
F	1983	265	23%	81%
G	3025	105	19%	59%
H	2212	56	12%	86%
I	2321	89	9%	78%
J	2435	172	32%	69%

These results are relevant indications that something is going wrong in the educational system. The performance of students with special needs was poor compared to the percentage of success in the whole school. The majority of students face special challenges in terms of academic performance. The toughest challenge is the lack of training for teachers on the issue of emotional and behavioural disorders. Teachers are just



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recruited and sent to classes without any preliminary training on the issue.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

A number of tangible accomplishments are necessary to address the issue. These include improved academic performance, the development of positive, safe learning environments, and increased parent involvement in many ways throughout the school including a significant and notable presence of parents in the schools. Beninese educational stakeholders need to bolster the skills and knowledge of teachers of English to ensure that every teacher is able to teach effectively different types of learners. To accomplish this, schools need to make sure that professional learning is planned and organized. This requires high-quality, sustained professional learning throughout the school year. EFL teachers should meet on a regular schedule in learning teams organized by content – area assignments and share responsibility for their students' success.

Learning teams should follow a cycle of continuous improvement that begins with examining student data to determine the areas of greatest student need, pinpointing areas where additional educator learning is necessary. Besides, identifying and creating learning experiences to address these adult needs, developing powerful lessons and assessments, applying new strategies in the classroom to satisfy students with exceptionalities, refining new learning into more powerful lessons and assessments, reflecting on the impact of student learning, and repeating the cycle with new goals are indispensable (Ağazade 2014 p. 24). The system at the school level should be supported by the Government and the country policies that encourage regular teacher collaboration and professional learning closely tied with school improvement priorities and provides needed resources to give teachers time and opportunity to achieve this goal.

As with any aspect of learning for any learning disabled student, no single solution is good for everybody. Stories abound of disabled



students who have learned a foreign language one way or another. The question worth asking however is what "learned" means. Students may become highly conversational with excellent accents and still be quite weak in grammar and in written language. Others may be very skilled readers of a foreign language and yet be virtually unable to converse in more than the most rudimentary phrases poorly pronounced. Still others may be fairly competent in all areas but never come close to attaining an accent that is close to "native" in the foreign language. Consequently, when a learning disabled student faces foreign language learning, a realistic assessment of the student's situation, problems and needs should be done. In other words, what the student may be able to do in a language and what the learning situation offers may not match at all. A student able to do oral language may be in a situation where passing grammar and translation tests is really what is required. Similarly, someone who reads and translates proficiently may be up against a teacher for whom pronunciation and conversation are of great importance

## CONCLUSION

This investigation sets out with the aim to explore teachers' practices and special students' performance in EFL classes. The study has revealed that EFL teachers' practices towards students with emotional disorders are far from enabling them to develop their inner potential and learn effectively the English language. The teacher is the decisive element in the classroom. It is his or her personal approach that creates the atmosphere. It is his or her daily mood that makes the weather. As Bolster (2004) puts it, as a teacher I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized (p. 45).

The country is losing sight of its children with special needs. A child is a child and every child has a right to live a life of dignity, so as teachers,



we must give children intensive support and care. Schools should improve development chances for children because all children can learn. As Walker (2012), citing Kenneth, wrote, "If students do not learn the way we teach them, then let us teach the way they learn." (p. 12)

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