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Research Paper

The Effectiveness of Indigenous Speakers' Role in Improving Learners' Speaking Skills in Benin EFL Context

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This article aims at inquiring the trustworthy role of indigenous speakers play in the improvement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' English oral communication in Beninese settings, especially as the demand for English language teachers outstrips the supply of communicatively competent non-indigenous speaker language teachers. Besides their fundamental contribution to EFL teaching in Beninese classrooms, they will also be very helpful outside the Classrooms so much so that Beninese EFL learners and teachers will seize opportunities to frequently repeat and imitate them in order to learn and acquire progressively the English language. Beninese EFL learners can be able to advocate for themselves and get their academic and emotional needs met, and this diversity of skills gained by skilled speakers, will show that the latter ones get almost all good qualities in life so as to set up excellent relationships and behave logically.

Key words: effectiveness, improving, indigenous speakers, EFL learners, speaking skills.

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INTRODUCTION

English speaking is prominent for English as Foreign Language learners because mastering a language effectively is first and foremost through its oral and successful use. This adequate and efficient use has been difficult for Beninese learners of English so far since Benin is a French speaking country. They hardly utter or hear one English word the whole day and even in an English class, some of them want their teachers to use French or national languages. However, the rationale of my study is that many opportunities deserve to be seized by Beninese EFL students. Among these opportunities, I can name the stay of some indigenous speakers in Benin, which is an important chance EFL learners must not lose. Raine, (2011) discusses the role of indigenous-

speaker teachers in English language education:

- 1) *The demand for English language teachers outstrips the supply of communicatively competent non-indigenous speaker language teachers...*
- 2) *Indigenous speakers have the advantage of 20-plus years of immersive language acquisition before moving abroad to teach their language; not to mention the benefits of having acquired the language during the critical period, the full importance of which is not yet known.*

Through this quotation from Raine, it is obvious that

indigenous speakers have an important role to play for the improvement of the EFL English oral communication in Benin. The demand for English language teachers is still high and the competent teachers of English still dwell insufficient. Consequently, the purpose of my study is to make Beninese EFL learners know that the volunteer indigenous teachers of English sent to Benin are not to be neglected. Many Peace Corps volunteers are frequently sent to Beninese towns and villages to teach English or other subjects. The implication of this opportunity is a good luck to take advantage of. When EFL learners are able to communicate orally and successfully, they can effectively present their own points of view and convince people easily through well-framed arguments. It is worth knowing that skilled speakers are often better readers and writers. They are undoubtedly more confident participants in a variety of contexts, both inside and outside school and they defend themselves validly.

THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A language is learnt for oral communication purpose. Unfortunately, after many years of the learning of English, Beninese learners are not able to express themselves orally in the language and are often reluctant to participate in activities that will enhance their facility in oral expression. Many students feel uncomfortable in their first hesitant attempts to speak the language. Many students are self-conscious and do not like to mistake or to appear stupid in front of their peers. They are afraid of failure, laughter and ridicule. Thus, the desire to speak is real but the psychological and social obstacles to speaking are just as real. From my limited experience I observed that, despite the great role, the speaking skill plays in language learning, it hardly receives the adequate care in the classrooms. This study therefore, tries to examine the important role of the indigenous speakers (Peace Corps Volunteers) living in Benin in enhancing EFL learners' oral fluency.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the significant role played by English indigenous speakers (those involved in **Peace Corps Volunteers' Program**) in increasing the Beninese EFL learners' needs in developing an appropriate fluency level in speech.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What role do English indigenous speakers living in Benin play as a medium to enhance EFL learners'

speaking skills?

2. How Beninese EFL learners are able to advocate for themselves and get their academic and emotional needs met?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part of the work contains the review of the relevant literature related to the study. Thus, any information written here was dealt with through a recognized technique of documentation: quotation, summary or paraphrasing.

No doubt, speaking is an important skill in language learning, however, in a situation of Benin where English is taught as a foreign language, speaking receives less attention and many people around the world have begun to devote much time and efforts in speaking so that they could reach stages at which they might be described as fluent speaker.

Finding Indigenous Speakers of English in Benin

In some Beninese regions and suburbs, snatching a few minutes conversation with indigenous speakers is the hardest thing to do. This difficulty is due to the fact that there are many national languages which are mostly spoken in Benin to the detriment of English. But speaking with indigenous speakers of English is the best use of EFL learners' time. It is the most effective way for EFL learners and teachers to improve their English skills in general, and their oral communication in particular. It is most of the time a great opportunity because these indigenous speakers also are eager to learn Beninese national languages. These indigenous speakers of English try to learn Beninese national languages even if it is difficult for them to utter the words. They make a lot of efforts despite the strong influence the English accent has on "Fongbé" words for example.

So, Beninese EFL learners can seize this opportunity to acquire progressively these indigenous speakers' speed and accent, while translating national language words, phrases and sentences to them. It is advisable that learners and teachers give them some calls or beg them to speak to them very frequently. Even if their stay in Benin is short, if they are just tourists, they may be invited to dinner. Whenever they accept that offer, a debate will be set up, even if it is not an easy task for the EFL learners. They will merely get a meal but the learners and teachers will get an English lesson and will successfully acquire good language of English. The Peace Corps volunteers living in Benin and even the indigenous speakers met at many churches throughout Benin can be highly consulted for the effective learning and acquisition of the English language.

Listening to Indigenous Speakers

While listening to indigenous speakers, the EFL learners and teachers are able to record them on their tape-recorders, their computers, or their cell phones. They will have time individually when they are backing home, to study the language prosody and its intonation. This way of learning and acquiring the English language is profitable though it requires availability and much effort. Even if EFL learners and teachers speak perfect English technically, if they speak it like robots, maybe they are not speaking it the way it is meant to be really spoken. They have opportunities to watch these indigenous speakers correctly face-to-face in order to see their mouths' shape while uttering the words and if they permit, they can be recorded with the use of the computers' or cell phones' camera. They will be able to imitate them and watch how emotion is communicated. They will watch where the emphasis goes on certain sentences and how that provides context. Apart from just deciphering their words, these learners and teachers will take notice of the humor, the feeling, and the formality they employ.

Speaking to indigenous speakers

The fear that indigenous speakers communicate speedily may prevent EFL learners and teachers from daring to use English with them, which is very bad for language learning and acquisition. According to <http://englishwithjennifer.wordpress.com> (retrieved on January, 15, 2016 at 17:32)

The relaxed pronunciation: Some learners have the misconception that all indigenous speakers use this fast, relaxed manner all the time. Perhaps they need to remember that careful speech is still natural speech. A film clip could illustrate this point. The scene of young Mia accepting her title in The Princess Diaries might serve as an example. I especially like how her grandmother slows her down, and at the very end Mia uses her most careful articulation to announce her formal acceptance.

It is obvious that the speed of indigenous speakers' speech is extremely quick and it becomes difficult for EFL learners and teachers who have never studied abroad to follow effectively. Hence, whenever they engage a debate with these indigenous speakers, the latter will try to slow them down and speak to them very clearly. If they speak to them slowly and clearly, they will get better chance for their listeners to understand them easily. This attitude will appear odd and boring to these indigenous speakers, but they will quickly understand that those are

people who are eager to understand the English language. It will surely tempt them to get nervous and to have the will to speed up to get it all over with, but EFL learners who are not accustomed to listening to indigenous speakers cannot speed up while speaking, for the time being. But little by little, they will surely acquire this quick speed progressively whenever they keep on listening to indigenous speakers of English and practicing daily and every time.

They will be patient with these learners who will be patient with themselves in their turn because they will discover that it is much less frustrating to speak to someone whom you understand even though they are speaking slowly, than to speak to someone you do not understand at all. Speaking quickly is not impressive if you do not get a loosened tongue. The fundamental idea is to have the adequate ability to speak clearly. Even though somebody does not have a loosened tongue, what is important is the way the message is transmitted. The message can be transmitted slowly or fast, provided the audience understand its content clearly. An obvious example of this phenomenon is that when EFL learners or teachers listen to BBC radio or watch any indigenous speakers' TV or radio station for the first time, they will grasp very few words of English, but when they are accustomed to listening and watching these users of the language, they will acquire it progressively.

Self-Recording

Though speakers hear themselves all the time, they really do not know quite well what they sound like. The proof is that when Beninese people speak they own mother tongues; they cannot know exactly the shape of their lips for example, and the place of their tongues. So, it is important that EFL learners record themselves and identify the weak and strong points that they hear in their speech. And then they can concentrate on what they need to work on. There are some additional vowel and consonant sounds that appear in English, and which do not appear in EFL learners and teachers' mother tongues. These sounds even seem odd and funny to them at their first years of the English language learning. These inexistent sounds in Beninese people's national languages are for example: /θ/, /ð/. It will be interesting to hear and listen to ones' own speech. Consequently, when EFL learners and teachers endeavor themselves to imitate indigenous speakers while speaking and record their own speech, they will hear and listen to themselves many times at home and make their slow speed quicker and quicker, and even challenge indigenous speakers.

Indigenous Speakers and Speaking Skills

Mechanical Skills

According to FTCE Elementary Education K-6 (060): Practice & Study Guide / Social Science Courses (Teaching Speaking Skills: Strategies & Methods Chapter 9 / Lesson 5 Transcript),

Students need to learn how to project, or speak at the right volume for their audience to hear them. They need to learn how to use intonation to express mood and how to pronounce words properly. They must also learn how to pace their spoken language so that they are neither too fast nor too slow to be understood.

EFL learners should have the ability to easily guess ideas from indigenous speakers, observe the movements of their lips and imitate them in the right way, too. One American volunteer came to the English club I organized in Natitingou Girls' Grammar School in 2009 and put the learners in trouble with only one and simple sentence: "I wish you a happy maer's day" (mothers' day). They should have guessed in the right way that the whole world was celebrating the mothers' day on that very day. Mechanical skills are very important in such a way that EFL learners, while imitating indigenous speakers by speaking at the right volume, using intonation to express mood and pronouncing words properly at an average rhythm, will acquire progressively faster rhythms.

Organizational Skills

In addition, through FTCE Elementary Education K-6 (060): Practice & Study Guide / Social Science Courses (Teaching Speaking Skills: Strategies & Methods Chapter 9 / Lesson 5 Transcript),

Just as students must learn to organize their writing, they must learn how to organize, or structure in a meaningful way, their oral language. This means talking in logical sequence, stating thoughts in an order that makes sense, and making sure the spoken word is relevant to the topic of conversation.

All that should be said needs to be structured or organized meaningfully as it is commonly recommended that before people speak, they should turn their tongues many times. Whenever the speech is relevant to the topic of conversation, the audience's attention should be captured and the will to listen and grasp the content of the message should be nourished.

Expressive Skills

FTCE Elementary Education K-6 (060): Practice & Study Guide / Social Science Courses (Teaching Speaking Skills: Strategies & Methods Chapter 9/Lesson 5 Transcript) also reveals:

One of the most important aspects of speaking is expression, or the ability to effectively communicate ideas and feelings. Students must learn how to say what is on their mind or make oral arguments that get their points across.

Communicating ideas and feelings effectively is very fundamental for speaking because it will foster comprehension, and when the speaker is clearly understood and the message is of great interest, language learning and acquisition will really take place.

Pragmatic Skills

Furthermore, in FTCE Elementary Education K-6 (060): Practice & Study Guide / Social Science Courses (Teaching Speaking Skills: Strategies & Methods Chapter 9/Lesson 5 Transcript), it is stated:

Finally, students who are learning speaking skills must gain experience with pragmatics, or the aspect of language that has to do with social norms and the rules of conversations. Students need practice taking turns in conversation, making eye contact while speaking, and responding appropriately during dialogues.

Language learners should have the ability to interact and behave conveniently in groups and in society, which is a good aspect for establishing actual relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The present research work was a descriptive survey type of research. From the population, a total of eighty (80) respondents were selected representing the population through purposive sampling. The data collection tool was the interview schedule. Interview was adopted in this study as a tool for data collection in order to gain depth and details responses of the respondents. Personal observations on the EFL teaching settings as well as face-to-face conversation have also been used as research tool. The treatment of the raw data was carried out following the application of SSPS. This research started from April to October 2018.

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Results from my Observation and face- to- face Conversation

Conversing with Indigenous Speakers in Benin

According to Peace Corps in Benin-Projects in Benin, Volunteers are involved in the following activities:

-Promoting best agricultural practices and improved production techniques; Encouraging conservation and transformation techniques to increase the value added to harvested crops;

-Training and coaching students in secondary schools and women's groups on entrepreneurship and creating clubs at the school level related to food security;

-Providing training and management advisory services to food security related individuals and groups on business planning, marketing, added value, product, and service quality, basic financial management, etc.;

-Helping individuals and groups of producers conduct feasibility studies, business plans, project design and management, development of action plans, saving schemes, and yearly budgets;

-Promoting community and school gardens for food security and potential income generation.

In my opinion, such activities will surely increase Beninese EFL learners' English learning and they will be really involved when conversation is encouraged. It is very interesting when students are trained and coached in secondary schools and when women's groups on entrepreneurship and clubs are created at the schools level related to food security. This will trigger adequate English learning and acquisition in general, and English speaking will really take place.

Results from U.S. Embassy in Benin: Taking TOEFL® Practice Online

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To my mind, the indigenous speakers living in Benin may help EFL learners in these different activities when needs be. What is certain here is that they cannot complete the tests they are submitted to, at first but by the time, they will be accustomed to such exercises and start playing alone so as to get higher and higher scores and finally succeed.

Results Related to Interview

To gather trustful and reliable information related to the research questions, I distributed the interview schedule having 4 question items to 80 respondents (Table 1) involved in the study. Some of them filled up the interview questions form.

Among the eighty (80) respondents, 68.75% have agreed that people can meet indigenous speakers in Benin and 31.25% have disagreed. 62.5% have agreed that people can imitate Indigenous speakers' speech, whereas 37.50% have disagreed. 56.25% recognized that Beninese EFL Learners can make indigenous speakers speak slowly and 43.75 have not. 53.75% have accepted that indigenous speakers can understand Beninese EFL Learners' speech and 46.25% have not. 50% have said that Beninese EFL Learners can understand indigenous speakers' speech and 50% have denied.

Interpretation of the Findings

I can deduce from these different results mentioned above that a lot of Beninese people recognize that they can meet indigenous speakers in Benin, which is an opportunity to be seized. Most of them have agreed that people can imitate indigenous speakers' speech. As repetition is pedagogical as well as imitation, and though they are mechanical, they can both foster language learning and acquisition. Many Beninese people have recognized that Beninese EFL Learners can make indigenous speakers speak slowly. Then, they will be able to hear and listen to them well and distinctly. Many Beninese people have accepted that indigenous

Table 1: Respondents' Perception about the Importance of Indigenous Speakers in Benin.

Key statements	Numbers	Positive results	Negative results	Respondents' Percentage per statement (Students' population: 80)	
People can meet indigenous speakers in Benin.	80	55		68.75%	
			25		31.25%
People can imitate indigenous speakers' speech.	80	50		62.5%	
			30		37.50%
Beninese EFL Learners can make indigenous speakers speak slowly.	80	45		56.25%	
			35		43.75%
Indigenous speakers can understand Beninese EFL Learners' speech.	80	43		53.75%	
			37		46.25%
Beninese EFL Learners can understand indigenous speakers' speech.	80	40		50%	
			40		50%

speakers can understand Beninese EFL Learners' speech; most of them have also said that Beninese EFL Learners can understand indigenous speakers' speech. Consequently, Beninese EFL learners have a lot of opportunities to foster oral English learning and acquisition.

My research questions also deserve to be discussed. Beninese EFL learners are able to advocate for themselves and get their academic and emotional needs met. They are free to make their own decision either to cooperate with indigenous speakers, or to stay withdrawn all the time and avoid any collaboration. This refusal of collaboration seems to be stupid since traveling to English speaking countries before cooperating with indigenous speakers is costly and time consuming, and they will leave their families for many days, weeks and even years. This collaboration inside the country is profitable so much so that the EFL learners' academic needs could be met. As they are used to repeating and imitating indigenous speakers, they will become talented speakers and listeners of English, and of course, will succeed in their academic life as well as their daily life. When their emotional needs are regularly met, they will be able to express their own emotions and react accordingly in order to behave in the right way at a given time.

This diversity of skills gained by skilled speakers, show that the latter ones will get almost all good qualities in life. Whenever Beninese EFL learners exchange with indigenous speakers frequently and constantly, they will gain a diversity of skills and become then skilled

speakers of the English language. They will get almost all good qualities in life. Somebody who gets almost all good qualities in life will be famous and desired or appreciated by many people in their country and in the whole world. They will easily establish relationships with these indigenous speakers inside the country and when they reach their respective countries, they will still be communicating. These EFL learners may travel from time to time to the indigenous speakers' countries and this will foster more their English language learning and acquisition.

CONCLUSION

Learning to speak English in a non-English speaking country like Benin Republic is not an easy task as it requires many additional efforts from the learners and teachers, and Beninese EFL learners are not really aware that the presence of indigenous speakers is to be taken seriously for many reasons. To reach my goal, I have exploited ideas from some authors who have dealt with the topic before me. From their different opinions I can deduce the trustworthy prominence of English indigenous speakers in Benin for EFL learners. The methodology I have used for my investigation is descriptive and personal observation, face-to-face conversation, phone calls with EFL teachers working with Peace Corps volunteers and in American embassy without forgetting interviews with these indigenous speakers themselves, as well as the books, articles,

dissertations and websites are the data collection tool used in this study. In addition, the results have revealed that indigenous speakers play a fundamental role in EFL learning and acquisition in Beninese settings. I have made some suggestions to draw Beninese EFL learners' attention on English and American indigenous speakers in Benin and get them to know that many opportunities still deserve to be created to foster the English oral communication.

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