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Editorial

La revue Cahiers d'Etudes Linguistiques entend publier des travaux purement descriptifs et ceux à perspective synchronique et, ou diachronique s'appuyant sur l'analyse linguistique ou littéraire d'une ou de plusieurs recherches africaines. La revue entend aussi être le carrefour des recherches linguistiques ou littéraires représentant des courants et des écoles théoriques divers puis d'échanges scientifiques pour tout chercheur en linguistique et littérature africaines.

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SOMMAIRE

1- L'alphabétisation dans le processus du développement en Afrique contemporaine : un paradoxe de Joseph Foster AMEKA	07
2- La catégorie de l'adjectif en buamu (langue gur) de Roland BICABA	33
3- La structure mélodico-rythmique dans les musiques traditionnelles kyaman de Dr DJOKE BODJE THEOPHILE	49
4- Fostering the teaching and learning of reading skills in efl post-beginner classes: case of the Beninese secondary schools of the littoral region de EGOUNLETI Pedro Marius	65
5- Exploring pre-service teachers' perceptions of lesson planning in secondary school efl classrooms in Beninese context de HINDEME Ulrich O. Sèna	93
6- Jalons pour la didactique de la littérature en contexte scolaire dans l'état de lagos de LAGOKE ISSAU	109
7- Traduction et ethnostylistique des panégyriques du fongbe en français : exploitation didactique de Marcellin Mèdétonhan LOUGBEGNON, Maxime Richard ADJANONHOUN et Julien K. GBAGUIDI	141
8- Approche générative de la topicalisation en moore de OUÉDRAOGO Abel et ANABA Paulina Atenei	157
9- "Djan khambir" : une satire du terrain politique a bouna par tidjir hien de Sié HIEN	173
10- Elements d'analyse pour l'enseignement/apprentissage a distance en afrique : cas de l'usage de whatsapp au cameroun de Laurent TAGNE	189

**FOSTERING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF
READING SKILLS IN EFL POST-BEGINNER
CLASSES: CASE OF THE BENINESE SECONDARY
SCHOOLS OF THE LITTORAL REGION**

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FOSTERING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF READING SKILLS IN EFL POST-BEGINNER CLASSES: CASE OF THE BENINESE SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF THE LITTORAL REGION

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Abstract:

Following the EFL students' recurrent difficulties in reading and understanding texts, this study is undertaken. It investigates EFL teachers and learners' perceptions and attitudes towards reading skills, the effects of reading skills development on EFL post-beginners learning process as well as the difficulties related to the teaching and learning of these skills in EFL post-beginner classes in the district of Littoral in Benin Republic. To collect data to answer the research questions, this study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. As a result, 20 teachers receive and answers questionnaire; 16 EFL beginner classes are visited in 8 different secondary schools. The data collected reveal that Beninese post-beginner learners' incapacity to read and comprehend texts stem from a variety of reasons such as the complexity of the texts utterly disconnected to learners' social, cultural and affective needs, environmental influences, anxiety during reading comprehension, EFL students 'lack of interest and motivation as well as their decoding or word recognition speed. In order to redress this situation and help learners develop effective reading skills, the study suggests that a particular attention be paid to their continuous training so that they could be able to implement efficiently the strategies of reading comprehension lesson based on the existing books. In addition, the study proposes that reading comprehension be taught, learnt and evaluated by taking into account EFL learners social and cultural realities.

Key-words: Teaching, Learning, Reading, EFL Post-Beginners

Cette étude est une réponse aux récurrentes difficultés des apprenants d'Anglais langue étrangère en lecture et compréhension de l'écrit. Elle explore la perception et les attitudes de ces apprenants et de leurs enseignants vis-à-vis des techniques de lecture souvent utilisées au cours d'Anglais, les effets du développement des compétences de lecture sur le processus d'apprentissage des post-débutants aussi bien que les

difficultés rencontrées par les apprenants et leurs enseignants pendant l'enseignement de cette compétence dans le département du Littoral en république du Bénin . Afin de répondre aux questions de recherche, les méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives de collecte de données ont été utilisées. Ainsi, 25 enseignants ont répondu à un questionnaire et 16 autres ont été visités en situation de classe dans 8 différents établissements secondaires. L'analyse des données collectées révèle que l'incapacité des apprenants post-débutants à lire et comprendre des textes se justifie par plusieurs réalités telles que la complexité des textes d'apprentissage totalement déconnectés des besoins sociaux, culturels et affectifs des apprenants, le niveau d'anxiété au cours de la lecture, le manque d'intérêt et de motivation des apprenants ainsi que leur facilité à decoder les mots. Dans le souci de remédier efficacement à cette situation et d'aider les apprenants à développer de meilleures techniques de lecture, cette étude propose que l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de la lecture tiennent compte des réalités sociales et culturelles des apprenants.

Mots clés: Enseignement, Apprentissage, Lecture, Anglais Langue Etrangère, Post-débutants.

Introduction

In the republic of Benin, English as a foreign language is taught from the first year to the upper sixth at the secondary school level. Considering that Beninese EFL-post beginners learn English for two or three years, they are expected to be able to communicate efficiently with appropriate vocabulary words. Unfortunately, according to Iwikotan (2020), an increasing number of Beninese EFL learners are unable to communicate fluently in English after studying EFL for seven years. A variety of reasons account for this situation among which are EFL students' recurrent difficulties in understanding texts written in English language (Minanflinou, 2018). A study by Gnonlonfoun (2019) showed that 75% of the students who suffer from speaking deficiencies also declared that they experience difficulties in understanding text during classroom activities. Moreover, the same research emphasizes that "*when the EFL post-beginners were given reading activities based on a small paragraph or a text, they cannot find information quickly in the text. They are unable to find the details of a text. They are unable to find synonyms or opposites of some words from the text*" (p.19). With regard to this picture reality, the present study investigates the reasons and the effects of this phenomenon so as to find out the ways and the means to help EFL post-beginners develop effective reading skills likely to help them communicate fluently in the English language.

To this end, the study aims at investigating EFL teachers and learners' perceptions and attitudes towards reading skills, the effects of reading skills on EFL post-beginners learning process and the difficulties related to the teaching and learning of this skill in EFL post-beginner classes in the district of Littoral in Benin.

To reach the goal of this study, I have formulated the following research questions:

1. What are the EFL teachers' perceptions of reading skills teaching?
2. What are the challenges faced by EFL teachers and learners while teaching and learning reading skills in post beginner classes?
3. How can the teaching and learning of reading skills be fostered in EFL beginner classes according to both EFL teachers and learners?

1. Literature Review1.1 EFL Teachers' and EFL Learners' Attitudes Towards Reading Skills

The way teachers manage their reading classes leads us to point out the defective aspects as to the importance of interest and motivation. With emphasis on interest and motivation, teachers may, to some extent, limit student's negative attitudes which sometimes hinder acquisition of reading

skills and fuller comprehension of the text. De Sauze (1929:43) says: "*The most vital problem in any classroom is how to stimulate and retain the interest of the pupils. It is the first of the fundamental principles discussed in the teachers' manual*". Quoting Anatole France, he says that: "*The art of teaching is only the art of interesting, of arousing curiosity, and curiosity is active only in happy minds*". Teaching children to read for the sake of literacy learning is not an adequate goal. The goal should be for teachers to teach their children to value reading so that they will read for various purposes such as for information as well as for pleasure. Educators who are concerned about their children's reading behavior will wonder whether the children are reading enough in a day or they are enjoying what they are reading

In addition, reading motivation is closely related to writing competence, students who do not read in their free time often face problems during their writing assignments, and thus many perform poorly in writing test. This would mean that these students would have difficulty in not only the reading skills but the writing skills as well. In trying to improve students' reading motivation, educators should understand how students acquire the motivation to enable them to be engaged readers. It is vital that educators stimulate students' motivation to read and think of some strategies to improve students reading ability. Spangler (2000) recommended that "*if students are to become mature and effective readers, they must have the skill and the will to read*". Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) note that: *students are thought to be motivated extrinsically which is reading for an external reward or intrinsically that is for the sake or value of doing something and that an engaged reader is someone who reads for the sake of reading and not for a grade or for other external incentives.*

They claimed that

reading motivation does not only explain why some children read more than others did but also how the children utilize the strategic skills which allows him or her to engage in the reading activities.

They emphasized that: "*Without motivation children will less likely be using metacognitive strategies such as using prior knowledge, searching for information, self-monitoring, and are less likely to read*".

In this sense, motivational variables, such as self-efficacy, interest, and autonomy are greatly influential in reading engagement which is an integration of social, cognitive, and motivational aspects.

In the literature of reading strategies, two major categories are mentioned:

cognitive and metacognitive. Cognitive strategies help the reader to construct meaning from the text. Block (1986), Carrell (1989), Davis and Bistodeau (1993) cited that “*studies in both first and second language reading research generally provide a binary division of cognitive strategies as bottom-up and top-down*”. Aebersold and Field (1997) mentioned that “*how the readers' minds repeatedly engage in a variety of processes during reading*”. Readers normally start by using the bottom-up strategies like processing information at the sentence level. This means that they focus on identifying the meaning and grammatical category of a word, sentence syntax, text details, and so forth. Barnett (1988:25)

while the students are processing the information provided by each sentence, they check to see how the information fits, using top-down strategies like background knowledge, prediction, getting the gist of a text, and skimming.

On the other hand, metacognitive strategies are used to regulate or monitor cognitive strategies. They check or evaluate the effectiveness of the reading done. Devine (1993) and Flavell (1981) described “*Metacognitive strategies in reading as strategies that act to monitor or regulate the cognitive strategies*”. Baker and Brown (1984:43) added that:

Metacognitive strategies include checking the outcome of any attempt to solve a problem, planning one's next move, monitoring the effectiveness of any attempted action, testing, revising, and evaluating one's strategies for learning.

1.2 The Effects of Teaching/Learning Reading Skills on EFL post-beginners'

1.2.1. The Social Context

Reading is not done in vacuum. People read a great variety of things. They read some of these things alone. For example, a newspaper over a morning coffee or tea. They also read things and talk about them with others: For example, they might read the movies listed in the newspaper to a friend to choose a film to see, or they might read a menu item at a restaurant to the waiter to ask if he/she recommends it. People read something while sitting, others while walking, and others while driving. It is done within a social context. One important set of reading activities occurs in the context of instruction. The reader's purpose for reading and operations are shaped by instruction, and short-and long-term consequences are influenced by instruction.

children bring to their classrooms vastly varying capacities and understandings about reading, which are in turn influenced, or in some cases determined by their experiences in their homes and neighborhoods.

Further, classrooms and schools themselves reflect the neighborhood context and the economic disparities of the larger society.

Socio-cultural and socio-historical theories of learning and literacy describe how children acquire literacy through social interactions with more expert peers and adults. According to Vygotsky (1978:67), “*with the guidance and support of an ex-pert, children are able to perform tasks that are slightly beyond their own independent knowledge and capability. As they become more knowledgeable and experienced with the task, the support is withdrawn, and the children internalize the new knowledge and experiences they have acquired, which results in learning*”. From a socio-cultural perspective, both the process (the ways the instruction is delivered and the social interactions that contextualize the learning experience) and the content (the focus of instruction) are of major importance.

1.2.2. Reading for Meeting Students’ Needs

motivating reading materials may generate easy learning and then reading. Reading does not mean reading in vacuum. We read something which we find interest in. Teachers, in their text selection, do not need to bring any text to students regardless of the negative results it may generate. Looking minutely for accurate text means that teachers have grasped and learnt their students’ attitudes: What they need to do and what they do not. Baxter (1992:2) wrote a book designed for young children. This book was written in a simple language and illustrated in a bright modern style. For this, he said:

Encouraging children curiosity in this way (the way the book is illustrated with featured topics) adds to their general knowledge early reading skills and enjoyment of learning. The book introduces children to the excitement of learning about the world around us.

Moreover, students’ attitudes can be those of dropping – out or English class missing, fear that English is an academic requirement for evaluation. More and more, students think that there is no way to avoid the language whether they like it or not. As such, they cannot expect plausible results judging from their weaknesses.

On this point, Lin and Warden (1997:1), claim that:

Most of the students have either fear or unpleasant feeling about their past English learning experience (...); that a better understanding of language learners can have a beneficial effect on the process of attempting to help language learners in learning English as a foreign language.

Lack of reading motivation impedes upper elementary and

secondary school students' willingness to improve critical reading skills and strategies to be successful in school. Struggling readers often show a negative attitude towards reading tasks and manifest low motivation to read. Although the importance of motivation is clear, there is limited research on reading motivation of struggling adolescents with disabilities.

1.3 Effective Strategies for developing Reading Skills Teaching and Learning in EFL Post-Beginner Classes

There are some useful strategies for improving reading comprehension skill. They are reciprocal teaching, instructional conversations, visualization, partner reading, multiple reading strategies, assessment, and running records. According to reciprocal teaching, teachers teach learners to predict, summarize, clarify, and ask questions for parts of a text. These strategies have been regarded as effective strategies for developing learners' reading comprehension skills. Pressley (2006) stated that: *"learners will develop stronger reading comprehension skills on their own if teachers give them mental instruments for understanding texts"*.

There are different kinds of questions that teachers should consider. EFL teachers should form these kinds of questions before, during, and after reading a text. When learners relate a passage to an experience, another book, or other facts about the world, they are "making a connection." Making connections aid learners understand the writer's intentions. Visualization is a mental image created in a readers' mind while reading a text which brings words to life and helps them improve their reading comprehension skills. Asking sensory questions can help learners become better visualizers. Partner reading is a strategy that is created for pairs. Teachers select two suitable books for their learners to read. Learners should first read their own book. Once they have finished this, they are given the chance to write down their own general questions for their partners. Learners read books out loud to one another and ask one another questions about the book they read.

2. Methodology of the Study

2.1 Identification of the Sample Population

2.1.1 Settings

This research study has been set in the District of Littoral. During the school year in Benin, teachers' professional development meetings are organized in each pedagogical area every Wednesday. It is an opportunity of training and retraining for a large number of teachers. All the teachers who take part in this teachers' professional development meeting teach in secondary schools in the District of Littoral. I participated in the two first

teachers' professional development meeting sessions organized in CEG Les Sainte Rita on November 8th and in Cotonou on November 15th 2019. During these sessions, I distributed the questionnaire sheets to the teachers twenty minutes before the start of the session. The distribution was made possible and easy since I was a participant in these sessions. When the respondents finished answering the questions, I collected the questionnaire sheets on the spot. This strategy helped me to get back 100% of the questionnaires addressed to the teachers.

Data are also collected through class observation in eight different secondary schools, each with different settings and characteristics. Six state-owned secondary schools and two private schools were involved in this study at this level.

2.1.2 Questionnaires

Following the objective of this work, ten (10) questions were included in the questionnaire addressed to EFL teachers teaching in EFL post-beginners' classes. The first section of the questionnaire addressed to EFL teachers included six (06) questions related to the teacher-participants' teaching familiarity with reading skills as well as their perceptions and attitudes toward teaching and learning reading skills in EFL classes. The effects of reading skills on EFL post-beginners have been explored through the second section including two (02) questions. Finally, the difficulties that EFL teachers encountered in implementing reading skills were explored through the last question.

2.1.3 Class Observations

To have a better understanding of the data collected with the questionnaire, I chose to observe students and the teachers in action. Sixteen (16) EFL beginners' classes were visited in eight different secondary schools during this phase. The teachers were selected based on their responses in the questionnaire and those whose students experience difficulties in reading tasks during EFL classes and who are willing to be observed are contacted for an appointment. Observations were conducted with an average of an hour per teacher. A checklist based on the features of teaching reading skills was used to identify specific reading behaviors. The use of a checklist served to focus the observations on reading characteristics. The reading skills observable behaviors and activities in the classroom are grouped in table 10.

3. Presentation and Discussion of the Results

This section presents the findings and their interpretation.

3.1 Presentation of the Results Collected from Teachers' Questionnaire

As outlined previously, twenty (20) EFL teachers took part to the questionnaire phase in this research study. Below are the results of their responses to the different questions.

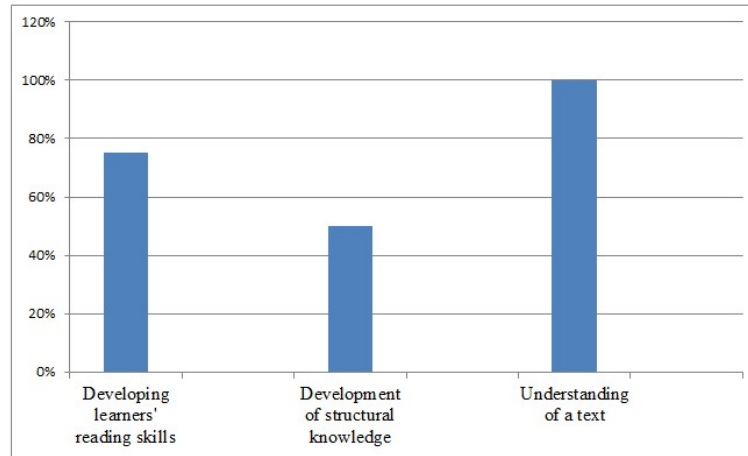


Figure 1: Importance of Reading Strategies to the EFL Post-beginners

This figure shows that 15 teachers (75%) agreed that reading strategies help in developing learners' reading skills; some of them (10 teachers; 50%) agreed that reading strategies help to develop structural knowledge while 20 teachers (100%) agreed that reading strategies facilitate understanding of a text.

Table 1: Strategies used by EFL Teachers in Reading Activities with Post-beginner Learners.

Strategies	Frequency (%)	Percentage
Reciprocal teaching	11	55%
Instructional conversation	8	40%
Visualization	6	30%
Partner reading strategy	7	35%
Making connection	12	60%
Writing records and summary	12	60%
Asking questions, finding synonyms/antonyms, gap-filling, true or false questions....	18	90%

According to the table above, 90% of the respondents teach or assess reading skills through activities such as “asking questions, finding synonyms/antonyms, gap-filling, true or false questions”. One justification of this situation maybe the fact that most EFL teachers investigated are not trained to conduct efficiently a lesson in reading. As a result, they confine themselves to these traditional reading activities which seem simple to design. Only 55% resort to “reciprocal teaching”. Instructional conversation, visualization and partner reading strategies are respectively used by 40%, 30%, 35% of the Beninese EFL teachers involved in the present study. Furthermore, “making connections to other texts” and “writing records and summary of texts” are appreciated by 60% of the EFL teachers as a strategy to teach and foster reading skills. Why not all of them? Either because they are not trained enough to use such a strategy or because they lack the time necessary to teach using this approach.

Table 2: EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Learners' Preference as regard to the Reading Materials.

Learners' preference as regard to the reading materials	Frequency	Percentage
a. Articles	15	75%
b. Newspapers	17	85%
c.Required book (student's book)	11	55%
d.Magazines	13	65%
Other books	18	90%

These data show that the EFL teachers who take part in this survey support their EFL learners prefer to read articles (75%) and newspapers (85%) than reading the students' book prescribed by the government (55%).It can be inferred from these data that the prescribed books in these secondary schools are not enough adapted to the students' cultural or social needs. Magazines are also read by EFL students (65%) maybe because of the variety of information contained in them. More interestingly, EFL students are fonder of other books (90%) than their prescribed books which receive only (55%).

Table 3: EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Post-beginners' Purpose during Reading Tasks

EFL Post-beginners 'purpose for reading	Frequency	Percentage
Comprehension of the text	20	100%
Acquisition of new vocabulary words	11	55%
Correct pronunciation	9	45%

All the EFL teachers agreed that their learners' purpose while reading a text is to comprehend it. 55% of them think that their learners read in order to acquire new words whereas 45% of them accepted that their students read to learn pronunciation. It seems that EFL Beninese students are motivated to read in classroom situation where they are involved in reading activities or tests/quizzes given by their instructors.

Table 4: Special Training for Teaching Reading Skills in Post-beginners Classes

special training for teaching reading skills in post-beginners 'classes	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	09	45
No	11	55
Total	20	100

These results show that the majority of the teacher participants (11 teachers;55%) have not been trained for teaching reading skills. This finding may partly justify their EFL learners' incapacity to perform reading task well.

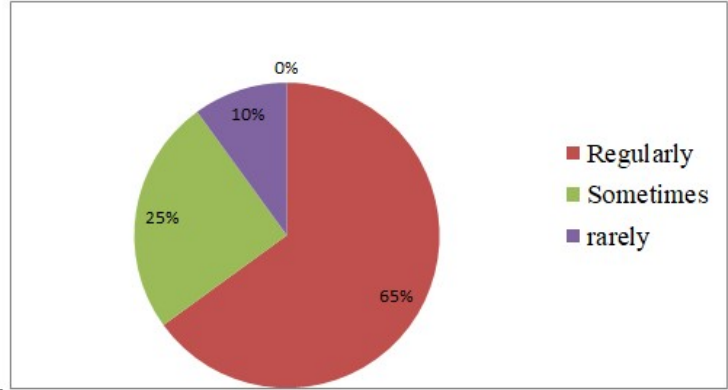


Figure 2: Frequency of Teaching Reading Skills in EFL Post-beginners Classes

The figure above reveals that most of the EFL teachers investigated (13 teachers; 65 %) teach regularly reading skills in post-beginners' classes. (05 teachers;25 %) sometimes teach reading skills in their classes whereas two of them (10%) rarely teach reading skills.

Table 5: EFL Teachers Awareness of the Importance of Reading Strategies.

EFL teachers' awareness of the importance of reading strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	20	100
No	00	00
Total	20	100

This table shows that all the teachers (100%) involved in this research work are aware of the importance of reading skills in post-beginners' classes. However, 65 % of them regularly teach reading skills in their post-beginner's classes and 25 % sometimes teach reading skills in their classes. This situation may be due to the insufficiency of the time weekly allotted to EFL teaching or to the EFL teachers' lack of training.

Table 6: Importance of Teaching Reading Skills in EFL Post-beginners Classes.

Importance of teaching reading skills in EFL post-beginners' classes.	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Acquisition of new vocabulary	09	45
Acquisition of good pronunciation	16	80
Communication in classes and in real life	20	100
Getting quickly the gist of the text	20	100

These results show that 45% of the EFL teachers agreed that reading skills help EFL post-beginners to acquire new vocabulary; 80% recognized that reading skills help EFL post-beginners to acquire good pronunciation. All of them (100%) agreed that reading skills help EFL post-beginners not only to communicate in EFL classes and in real life but also to get quickly the gist of a text.

Table 7: Effects of Reading Skills on EFL Post-beginners

Effects of reading skills on EFL post-beginners	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Extensive reading outside the class	05	25%
Acquisition of good pronunciation	17	85%
Getting information in limited period	20	100%
Abilities to communicate orally in English	20	100%
Developing learners writing skills	20	100%

These data reveal the effects of reading skills on EFL post-beginners. 25% of the investigated teachers agree that the use of effective reading skills help EFL post-beginners to read extensively outside the classroom. 85% of them agreed that reading skills help the EFL post-beginners to express their opinion about texts. Interestingly enough, all (100%) the EFL teachers recognized that reading skills help EFL post-beginners to get not only information from texts in a limited period of time and to communicate orally in English but it also helps learners to develop writing skills.

Table 8: EFL Post-Beginners' Reading Performance During Evaluation

Performance	Frequency	Percentage
Very good	05	25%
Good	11	55%
Fair	15	75%
Poor	06	30%

The responses presented in the table above show that the majority of the EFL teachers (75%) who took part in this study think that their learners are fair at reading. The data also reveal that only 25% of their learners are very good at reading and 55% of them are good at reading. In the same vein, these EFL teachers declared that 30% of their learners are poor at reading.

Table 9: Difficulties Encountered in Implementing Reading Activities in EFL Post- beginners Classes

Difficulties	Frequency (%)	Percentage
lack of reading materials adapted to learners' social and cultural realities	13	65%
time limit	07	35%
large class size	18	90%
Students' poor vocabulary	16	80%
Students' lack of interest and motivation	12	60%
Safe environment for teaching and learning reading skills	02	10%
Students' lack of cultural knowledge of the target language	09	45%

The table above illustrates that 65% of the EFL teachers investigated faced difficulties related to lack reading materials adapted to learners social and cultural realities. 35% of them faced difficulties associated with the lack of time devoted to the teaching of reading skills in EFL post-beginner classes. Amazingly enough,90% of the teachers blame large class size of preventing them from teaching reading skills effectively whereas 80% of them consider students' poor vocabulary to be the major cause of their incapacity to read and understand texts during reading activities. More interestingly, students' lack of interest and motivation has also been mentioned by 60% of their teachers as a key factor to take into

consideration while teaching reading to post-beginner learners. furthermore, this study reveals that EFL classes take place in a “safe environment for teaching and learning reading” as declared by 80% of the teachers. For 45% of the teachers investigated, Beninese students’ limited cultural knowledge of the target language represents an obstacle which negatively impacts their reading comprehension skills development.

3.2 Presentation of the Results of Class Observations

The reading skills checklist used during the class observations helped collect data about some characteristics related to the teaching and learning of reading skills as it is shown in the following table.

Table 10: Reading Skills Characteristics Observed During Class Observations

Reading skills characteristics observed during class observations phase	Frequency (%)	
	Yes	No
Student-centered environment	100	00
Small group discussion	100	00
Students’ expression of opinions about the text	68.75	31.25
Students’ participation is evident during class	100	00
Students give each other feedback	100	00
Teacher acts as organizer	100	00
Correction is minimal from teacher	43.75	56.25
The use of authentic materials	31.25	68.75
Textbooks used in the classroom are required	100	00
Target language is used during all class time	43.75	56.25
Minimal use of native or French language during the class	56.25	43.75
Instructions for reading activities are given in the target language	43.75	56.25
The four skills are spontaneously integrated in activities	00	100
Effective practice of the three phases in teaching reading lesson.	31.25	68.75
Written presentation	81.25	18.75

These results from the class observations in the different secondary schools reveal that the teaching and learning of reading skills take place in a student-centered environment; the students participate actively.

3.3 Discussion of the Results

The discussion of the results attempts to answer the research questions of the present study

3.3.1 EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Skills Teaching in EFL Post-Beginner Classes

The first research question is to investigate "What are EFL teachers' perceptions of reading skills teaching in post-beginner classes". According to the data collected through questionnaire and class observation, all the teachers investigated in the present study are aware of the importance of teaching reading skills in EFL post-beginner classes (table 5). As it is shown in table 6, teaching reading skills helps EFL learners develop effective reading skills (100%), acquire new vocabulary (55%) and master correct pronunciation of words (45%). More importantly, although 55% of the respondent teachers are not trained to teach reading skills effectively in post-beginner classes, 65% of them declare that they regularly teach it (figure 1) and 100% of them agree that they use reading activities to foster communicative abilities in both classes and real life situations as it helps learners to get quickly the gist of a text (table 6). In the same perspective, 50% of the participant-teachers confessed that reading skills help learners to acquire structural knowledge (figure 1). All these data show that an important number of EFL teachers and learners are motivated to perform reading activities in Beninese secondary schools for their perceptions about the teaching and learning of such a skill are quite positive. This finding seems to be in accordance with Baker & Wigfield, (1999) who think that "*Levels of motivation and engagement have been found to predict achievement and as such are key factors in determining children's academic success*".

The present research also reveals the effects of reading skills on EFL Post-beginner's other language skills development. At this level, all the respondents (100%) recognized that effective reading skills help EFL learners to develop both oral communication and writing abilities (table 6). In this regard, Houtveen (2007) reports that "*reading strategy used positively affects reading comprehension*". He finds out "*that teachers who applied superior metacognitive strategy instruction produced students who made greater progress in metacognitive knowledge*". Furthermore, Houtveen, (2007) clarifies that "*students who were trained in the use of reading strategies had substantially better speaking and writing*

performances than those who were not trained”.

3.3.2 Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers while Teaching Reading Skills in EFL Post-beginner Classes

Considering the second research question designed to know about the difficulties EFL teachers face in teaching reading skills, the data collected through questionnaire addressed to teachers and class-observations are very revealing. In fact, through the results presented in table 11, 65% of the participant teachers declared that they faced difficulties related to lack of reading materials adapted to the learners' social and cultural realities. As a result, their students tend to read other books such as articles, 75%; newspapers 85%, magazines 65% with just 55% for the books prescribed by the government. These data are in opposition to Collie and Slater (1987:6) who study the relationship between students' reading ability development and the types of texts given to them. They conclude that *“Reading a text in a foreign language supposes that different factors are involved to achieve a satisfactory job. These factors may include: stimulation, personal involvement, arousing student's interest, provoking strong and thoughtful reactions.* So, selecting a text is really a phase where the best reactions and attitudes can be seen. Failure to achieve this goal for student's sake results in wrong judgments. In this same line of thought, Collie and Slater (1987:6) declare: *“If the text is meaningful and enjoyable, reading is more likely to have a lasting and beneficial effect upon the learner's linguistic and cultural knowledge.”* In actual fact, to comprehend written language, we rely on our ability to recognize words, phrases and sentences as well as our background knowledge related to the contents of what we are reading. These two processes interact as we read resulting in some degree of comprehension. Unfortunately, cultural knowledge of English language represents a major challenge for an important number of EFL students in Beninese secondary as it is shown in table 9. Quite often, comprehension is difficult for EFL readers because of cultural factors. For example, in a study, Pary (1987) shows that failure of Nigerian students to achieve high scores in the English language section of the west African school certificate (WASC) exam is due in large part to two cultural factors. Firstly, the West African physical and social environment of the children is very different from that reflected on European influenced passages in the English reading section of the exam. Secondly, the act of reading itself is cultural, as the Nigerian students live in an oral culture where complex thoughts and ideas are remembered and expressed orally.

Another study by Joag-Dev and Anderson (1979:13) also shows that the lack of cultural knowledge can affect comprehension. Joag-Dev and Anderson discovered that:

When readers have the background, knowledge assumed by the writer, comprehension is high; correct inferences are made – If they do not have the background knowledge, they distort meaning as they attempt to adjust the writer's intent to their own knowledge of the word.

Besides, 35% of the respondents confess that the time allotted for teaching reading skills is limited whereas 90% of them consider large class size as a great challenge. In addition, 80% of them consider students' poor vocabulary to be the major cause of their incapacity to read and understand texts during reading activities. More interestingly, students' lack of interest and motivation has also been pointed out by 60% of their teachers as an essential factor element likely to impede their learners reading skills development in post-beginner classes. These findings are in accordance with Dennis (2008) concepts of "interest and motivation". According to him:

Learners' interest and motivation are very important in developing reading comprehension skill. If readers find the reading material monotonous, they will have a lot of problems in concentrating on their comprehension. This can lead to a lowering of reading comprehension among readers. If the reading material is interesting for learners, they can easily understand it and can remember it clearly. EFL teachers should motivate their learners through providing interesting reading materials during their class time.

Furthermore, this study reveals that EFL classes take place in a "safe environment for teaching and learning reading" as it is declared by 80% of the teachers. This finding is similar to what Dennis (2008) termed as "the environmental conditions" that impact the learners who try to read a passage. According to the author, readers may have a lot of problems to understand a text in an unorganized environment than those who read in a calm and controlled place. Dennis (2008) states that:

If learners are in an unsafe place, they find it difficult to focus on their reading. When they are in safe environments, their reading comprehension ability will be better. Readers will lose their concentration in understanding a text when there are noises like televisions or radios.

Moreover, 80% of the teachers indicate that learners' poor performance in reading comprehension is partly due to their lack of vocabulary necessary to understand the information contained in a text.

This result is in correlation with the conclusion reached by Westwood (2008) who thinks that “ *In EFL classes, difficulties at text level refer to comprehension difficulties resulting from limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of fluency, lack of familiarity with the subject matter, difficulty of the text (readability), inadequate use of effective reading strategies, weak verbal reasoning, problems with processing information, and problems in recalling information after reading*”. Likewise, Wahiba. M. (2015:17) stated that:

Insufficient vocabulary leads to many obstacles in reading comprehension since lexis has a very important role for a successful reading. When the learner has a large vocabulary, he will not face problems comprehension in understanding the whole text, and this comes from habitual reading, i.e. whenever the learner reads a lot he will acquire new vocabulary, and then improve his vocabulary knowledge which makes the reading task much easier for him.

From these data, EFL teachers should motivate students to read extensively as Richard Day, (1998) recommends:

Through extensive reading, the reader enriches his background knowledge, and expands his vocabulary; he also recognizes the spelling forms. Therefore, the learner chooses his/her own books and reads at his/her pace. Then, the teacher has to guide learners to select books depending on their levels of comprehension that lead to comprehensible input.

The data collected from teachers' questionnaire and class observation point out that 55% of the EFL teachers who took part in this study have not been trained for reading skills teaching and evaluation in EFL post-beginner's classes. Therefore, they do not use all the three phases in teaching reading comprehension lesson. This poor situation influences the learners' performance during reading comprehension.

3.3.3 Effective Strategies for Fostering Reading Skills Teaching and Learning in EFL Post-Beginner Classes

If readers want to read various kinds of texts, they should use different reading strategies. Pressley (2006) states that “*Good readers interact with texts to expand an understanding of the information before them. Some good reader strategies are predicting, forecasting, deducing, summarizing, examining, and evaluating.*” On the contrary, it seems that the greater part of the teachers investigated are more familiar with other strategies such as reciprocal teaching (11%), making connections (12%), making records and summary (12%) than instructional conversation in connection with a text(8%),visualization (6%) and partner reading strategy

(7%). Besides, 90% of the EFL teachers use other strategies “*asking questions, finding synonyms/antonyms, gap-filling, true or false questions*” which are commonly employed to evaluate reading comprehension skills during formal evaluations in Beninese secondary schools. Based on these data, it can be concluded that EFL teachers’ objectives in reading classes are more likely to boost their students’ performance during formal evaluations than to develop their learners’ actual reading skills. These results reflect the conclusions made by Sato (2009) in his study about the importance of reading skills in curriculum development when he remarks that “*a common defence of existing practices has been that it is more important to prepare learners for passing English exams than to develop their communicative abilities*». However, the findings of (Cain & Oakhill, 2009) contrast with the present study in the sense that they consider “*the application of effective comprehension strategies is very important when learners want to improve their reading comprehension skills. These strategies provide particular instructions for expanding comprehension skills*”. According to them “*this strategy can provide a model of fluent reading and helps learners learn decoding skills by presenting positive feedback and direct chances for teachers to circulate in the class, watch their learners, and present individual corrections*”. For this reason, Tompkins (2011) suggests the adoption of a more a holistic approach when he expresses that:

There are informal and formal assessments to check an individual’s comprehension skill and utilization of comprehension strategies. Informal assessments are done by observation and the use of instruments such as story boards, word sorts, and interactive writing. Formal assessments are district or state assessments that assess all learners on significant skills.

4- Pedagogical Implications

The findings and conclusions of this study have certain implications for language teachers; these may not only contribute to the improvement of students’ classroom performance and motivation but to the teacher’s professionalism as well. Although the majority of Benin EFL teachers are accustomed to reading skills teaching and learning, they face some difficulties such lack of materials. So, they should be supplied with good and sufficient materials. As the teachers’ attitudes to teaching reading skills were rather positive in this study, they should be more trained for the implementation of this skill in their classrooms.

In this regard, decision makers in charge of the educational system should also change their attitudes and do their best to promote these skills.

Therefore, teachers should be careful while selecting reading materials for a course. The use of inappropriate materials can have a negative influence on students' performance and motivation.

When the content in a course book is presented in a boring way, it becomes very difficult to stimulate the interest of learners. Allwright and Bailey (1991:162) suggest that *"even if everything else seems favourable, learners can 'switch off' because they do not like the way content of their course is presented in the teaching materials"*. In case they fail to have an interesting book, teachers should provide learners with interesting photocopies from outside sources, providing extracurricular activities.

It works well since it raises the motivation of students. Therefore, serious consideration should be given to reading and language teachers should provide their students with opportunities to read out the classroom progressively. Furthermore, language teachers are recommended to provide an enjoyable learning and evaluating environment for their students. Classroom atmosphere is very important for learning and evaluating...

In this way, they can identify and work on their weaknesses in class as well as improving their performance in evaluation. As Wallace (1991:26) stated *"teachers should be encouraged to become reflective practitioners by reflecting on their professional experience"*. Furthermore, Wallace (1991) added that *"there is not a best method that is always valid. Teachers should always be trained to renew themselves"*.

Conclusion

This work was designed to investigate EFL teachers and learners' perceptions about reading skills teaching and learning, the challenges faced by EFL teachers and learners related to reading skills teaching and learning as well as the ways reading skills can be taught and learnt efficiently. To reach the objective of this research work, a methodology used helps to collect of both qualitative and quantitative data from 20 EFL teachers exercising in state-owned and private secondary schools in Benin republic. As the teachers' perceptions of reading skills teaching and learning were positive in this study, particular attention should be paid to their continuous training so that they should be able to implement efficiently the strategies of reading comprehension lesson based on the existing books. Reading comprehension should be taught and learnt in a calm environment. Teachers should try their best to be in good mood while teaching, evaluating their learners. To sustain students' reading performance and help them learn to enjoy reading, EFL learners' curiosity must be developed by teachers in such a way that they become more responsible for their readings the post-beginner learners books in use in our secondary schools need revision and more illustration with featured topics.

English language teaching inspectors must provide secondary school teachers and teaching advisors with a constant and sufficient guidance likely to help them promote a sustainable reading habits among their learners. In this vein, the government must recruit and ensure an efficient training of EFL teaching inspectors, advisors and teachers so that they could be able to teach reading skills appropriately.

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