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Examining EFL Teachers' Views on the Effects of Tests on English Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools

Auteurs : Régis O.K. JOHNSON, Ph.D Student; Dr. Jean - Marc GNONLONFOUN & Dr. AKPACA Servais M.

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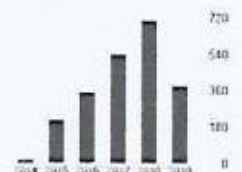
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Examining EFL Teachers' Views on the Effects of Tests on English Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools

Régis O. K. A. JOHNSON, Ph.D. Student ; Dr Jean-Marc GNONLONFOUN & Dr AKPACA Servais M.

GRI-DiGeST/LARPET ; Ecole Normale Supérieure, Lokossa ; UAC-University, Benin

Abstract: Tests should reflect teachers' observations, classroom discussions and analysis of students' work. The aim of this paper is to check whether these components are taken into account in the actual classroom tests organised in EFL classes in Benin. To this end, this paper uses a descriptive and quantitative approach to examine EFL in-service teachers' views on the effects of tests on English teaching and learning. As a matter of fact, 100 in-service EFL teachers, i.e. 20 teachers per school, have been selected at random in five secondary schools in the Mono and Couffo regions, namely CEG1 Lokossa, CEG Comé, CEG1 Grand-Popo, CEG Djakotomey and CEG1 Azovè. On average, 80 percent of the questionnaires distributed have been filled and returned. The analyses carried out subsequently indicate that students poor performance in English tests is due to the lack of training for teachers as well as to the large class sizes and the lack of knowledge in test development and administration procedures. Furthermore, the lack of didactic materials in schools and students' low motivation also contribute to their poor performance. The implications of this situation have been elucidated in a bid to enable various stakeholders to act to solve the problem.

Keywords: EFL, tests, in-service teachers, secondary school students, Mono and Couffo regions

Résumé : Les tests doivent refléter les observations des enseignants, les discussions en classe et l'analyse du travail des élèves. Le but de cet article est de vérifier si ces éléments sont pris en compte dans les tests organisés dans les classes EFL au Bénin. À cette fin, le présent article utilise une approche descriptive et quantitative pour examiner les opinions des enseignants d'EFL sur les effets des tests sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais. En fait, 100 enseignants, soit 20 enseignants par école, ont été choisis au hasard dans cinq écoles secondaires dans les régions du Mono et du Couffo, à savoir CEG 1 Lokossa, CEG Comé, CEG1 Grand-Popo, CEG Djakotomey et CEG 1 Azovè. En moyenne, 80% des questionnaires distribués ont été remplis et retournés. Les analyses effectuées par la suite indiquent que le mauvais rendement des élèves aux examens d'anglais est dû au manque de formation des enseignants ainsi qu'à la taille importante des classes et au manque de connaissances en matière d'élaboration et d'administration des tests. En outre, le manque de matériel didactique dans les écoles et la faible motivation des élèves contribuent également à leur mauvais rendement. Les conséquences de cette situation ont été élucidées dans le but de permettre aux différentes parties prenantes d'agir pour résoudre le problème.

Mots-clés : EFL, tests, enseignants, élèves, régions Mono et Couffo

Introduction

Globalization has generated an increasing interest in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language all over the world. Over the past few years in Benin, there has been an

increase in English language lessons both in public and private schools. This rising interest has led to the publication of methodology books as well as theoretical research and teaching programmes. Many of these programmes emphasize the importance of carrying out authentic, motivating and cognitive language activities. And once these activities are completed, the learners are tested. As a matter of fact, Heaton (1975: 2) states that “the classroom test is concerned with evaluation for the purpose of enabling the teacher to increase his own effectiveness by making adjustments in his teaching to enable certain groups of students or individuals in the class to benefit more.” Tests are therefore, designed in order to measure the effective application of thinking skills. They also help to determine learners’ strength and weaknesses and serve as tools to measure the efficiency of the teaching and learning methods. As a matter of fact, the current study explores the perceptions of teachers on the effects of tests in secondary schools.

For one thing, tests are a very important didactic tool which compels students to regularly learn their lessons in order to understand rules and notions and to get good marks in exams. Furthermore, students’ performance greatly depends on their readiness to go through their lessons every now and then. By so doing, they memorise the lessons which become part and parcel of their knowledge. In the school systems where students do not take tests regularly, they tend not to revise their lessons regularly. This situation can have a disastrous impact on their educational standards. In the schools where tests are not frequently organised, students underperform and forget even some basic notions. Therefore, the issue of tests becomes a central issue in education because it does not only enable teachers to make changes in their teaching but it also renders the educational system and students’ performance more effective. Suffice it to say that there is no effective educational system without a well thought-out test development and administration procedure.

1. Problem Statement and Purpose

It is common knowledge that tests are an integral part of teaching since testing and teaching are so closely inter-related that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other. People use tests in everyday life because they want to have some information on something. The literature (Black William, 1999; Wick, 1973; Heaton, 1998) broadly defines testing as all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to improve teaching and learning. In this definition, testing encompasses teacher’s observations, classroom discussions and analysis of students’ work (Douglas, 2000; Gabriel, 2005; Harlen, 2007). However, are these components always taken into account in EFL classes in Benin in a way that links

teaching and learning, meets learners’ needs and increases their love for the language? The answers to these questions may not be positive. Therefore, it is important to seek the teaching practitioners’ views on the effects of testing on EFL teaching and learning processes in secondary schools in Benin, especially in the Mono and Couffo regions.

2. Methodology of the Study

Gnonlonfoun (2014:99) mentions that there are basically two research designs: the quantitative and the qualitative research methods. To carry out this study, the descriptive and quantitative approach has been used. In this vein, 100 in-service EFL teachers have been selected at random in five secondary schools in the Mono and Couffo regions, namely CEG1 Lokossa, CEG Comé, CEG1 Grand-Popo, CEG Djakotomey and CEG1 Azovè. In an effort to check sample selection errors, school headmasters have kindly been requested to assist in providing an updated list of all EFL teachers teaching in their secondary schools in the 2017-2018 academic years. A two-part questionnaire comprising 18 questions has been administered to these participants. Out of the 100 questionnaire sheets handed out, 80 have been regarded as valid and used in the analysis. The data obtained has been analysed using Microsoft Excel™ 2007 under Windows 7 set up on a Hewlett-Packard (HP) computer. The data was reported using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages and diagrams).

3. Literature Review

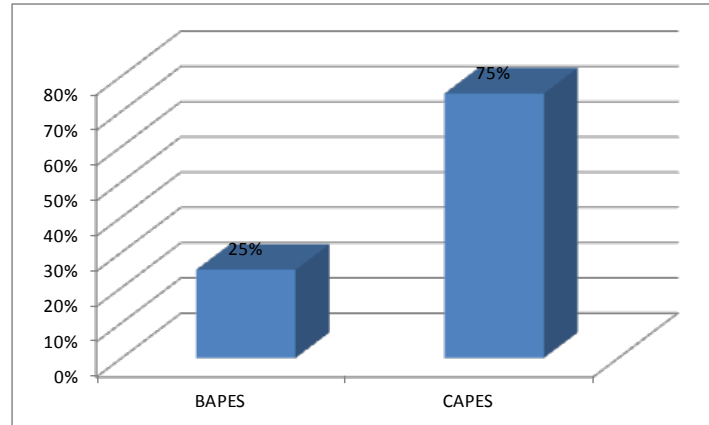
4. FINDINGS

Table 1: Highest Academic Qualification

The highest qualifications	Number of times	Percentage (%)
<i>BAC (i.e. A'level)</i>	0	0
<i>Licence (i.e. B.A.)</i>	55	68.75
<i>Maîtrise (i.e. former Master)</i>	20	25
<i>Master (current)</i>	03	3.75
<i>DEA (former postgraduate degree replaced by Master)</i>	02	2.50
<i>Doctorate</i>	0	0
Total	80	100

The results in the table 2 show that 68.75 percent of English teachers have got their ‘*licence*’. This means that the majority of English teachers are ‘*licence*’ holders whereas 25% of them are “*Maîtrise*” holders. This situation may not facilitate the teaching of English as a foreign language. Language teachers need good background knowledge of the language they teach.

Figure 1: The highest Professional Qualification



According to this figure, only 25 percent of the respondents have a professional qualification. This means that 75% of the English teachers had not trained when they started the job though these two qualifications are required from teachers teaching in junior and senior secondary schools in Benin.

Table 2: The countries where the teachers studied

Countries	Number of times	Percentage
<i>French speaking countries</i>	78	97.50
<i>English speaking countries</i>	02	2.5
Total	80	100

97.50% of the respondents started and completed their studies in Benin. Only two percent of them trained in an English-speaking country. Since we are in a French-speaking country, English teachers must be aware of the fact that they need a permanent contact with native English speakers to become familiar with the language.

Table 3: Training in EFL teaching

Quality	Number of times	Percentage
<i>Untrained teachers</i>	60	75
<i>Trained teachers</i>	20	25
Total	80	100

Only 25 percent of the teachers have trained for the job, while 75 percent have no training.

Table 4: Teachers’ points of view on teaching

Meaning	Number of times	Percentage
<i>A means to earn a living</i>	5	10
<i>A stepping stone to get a job</i>	10	20
<i>A way out in a job market where there are no more jobs</i>	5	10
<i>A real passion no matter the sacrifices</i>	60	60
Total	80	100

Table 4 shows that 60 percent of the teachers have the vocation, while 10 percent of them think that teaching provides an opportunity in a saturated job market.

Table 5: Qualities of an Effective Teacher

Qualities	Number of times	Percentage
<i>A good communicator</i>	80	100
<i>Somebody who can create good learning opportunities through effective techniques</i>	80	100
<i>Somebody who can create a relaxed atmosphere conducive to effective learning</i>	80	100
<i>A good class manager</i>	80	100
<i>He works for his class to be learner-centred</i>	80	100
<i>He is professionally up-to-date</i>	80	100
<i>He is a researcher</i>	80	100
<i>He is a facilitator</i>	80	100
<i>He is fond of collaborating with other English teachers</i>	80	100
Total	80	100

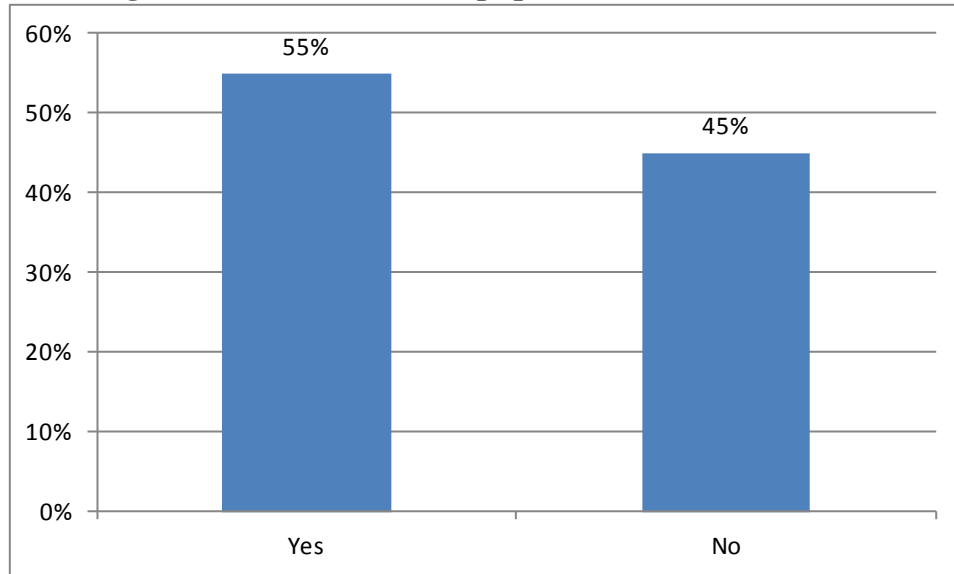
All the respondents have confessed that an effective teacher must have all the best qualities listed in the table. Whoever chooses to become a teacher must work hard to acquire these qualities.

Table 6: Teaching Conditions

Teaching conditions	Number of times	Percentage
<i>Very good</i>	8	10
<i>Acceptable</i>	35	43.75
<i>Demoralizing</i>	37	46.25
Total	80	100

Only 10% of the teachers have stated that they work under very good conditions. 46.25% of them have confessed that their working conditions are demoralizing because of the plethora of students in the classrooms and of problems related to classroom management. Another reason why many teachers are demoralised is that there is a lack of furniture such as tables and benches in the classrooms.

Figure 2: Teaching Materials and School Equipment in Schools



45% of the teachers have said that their schools have books and dictionaries, while 55% of them have said that their schools do not have relevant teaching materials.

Table 7: Class size

Size	Number of times	Percentage %
<i>Less than fifty students</i>	5	10
<i>More than fifty students</i>	10	20
<i>Seventy students</i>	50	40
<i>More than seventy students</i>	15	30
Total	80	100

Table 7 shows a plethora of students in classrooms. Only 10% of the teachers said that their classrooms have less than fifty students. All the respondents have large classes. Small class sizes are found only in some private schools. As a result, the government is expected to make an effort to build more classrooms.

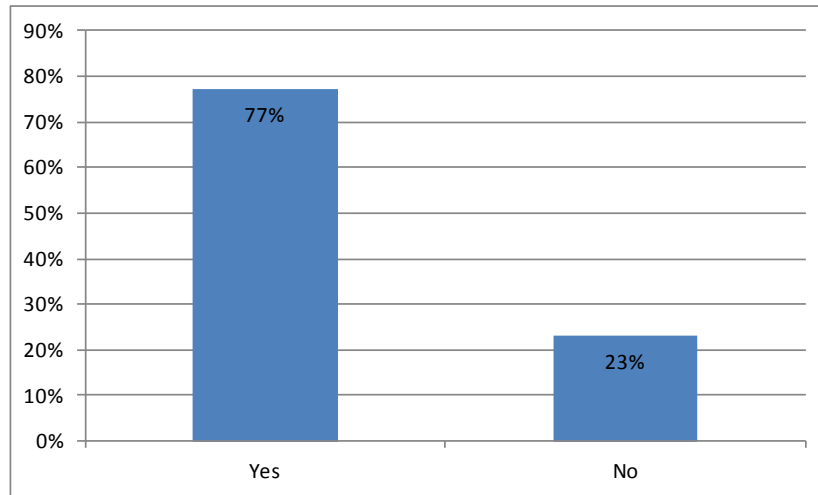
Almost all the teachers said that a large class size has a negative impact on testing. Further, they noted that when there is a large class size, it takes too much time and energy to mark students' copies. As a result, teachers are reluctant to test the students. This makes it difficult for them to assess whether their learning objectives have been reached or not. With a small class size, teachers can easily and regularly test their students and make sure that they do not copy from their fellow students.

Table 8: Possession of the Recommended Books by Learners

Possession by learners of recommended books	Number of times	Percentage %
<i>Few students</i>	80	100
<i>Most students</i>	00	0
Total	80	100

The majority of respondents said that the majority of students do not have the recommended books. According to the teachers involved in this survey, this situation prevents students from learning effectively because they can neither follow lessons in class nor do their homework if they do not have the books.

Figure 3: Students’ interest in learning English



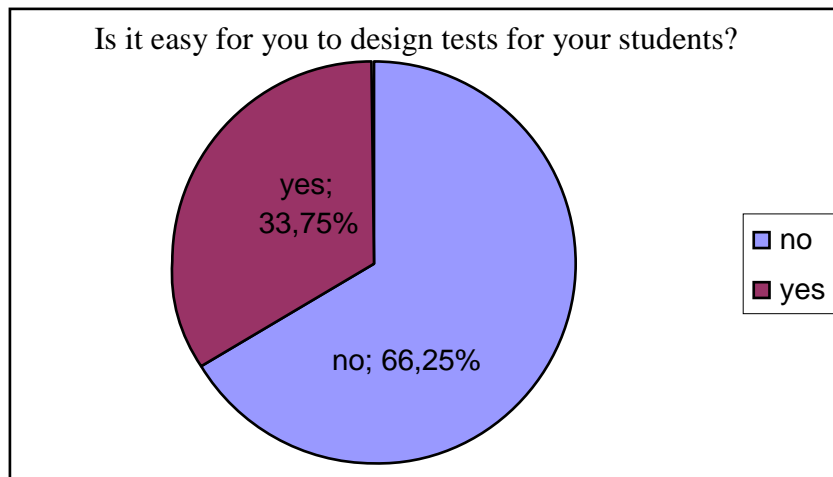
This figure shows that most of the respondents (77%) said that their students are really fond of learning English. This is true because they don’t miss English classes.

Table 9: Purposes of Testing

Purposes	Number of times	Percentage %
<i>To reveal students’ weaknesses and remedy them</i>	80	100
<i>To evaluate the effectiveness of my own teaching</i>	80	100
<i>To boost my students’ motivation</i>	80	100
<i>To measure my students’ aptitude to perform well in English</i>	80	100
Total	80	100

All the teachers confirmed that the purposes mentioned in the table are the purposes for which they test their students.

Figure 4: Facility to design tests



As far as test design is concerned, 66.25% of the teachers confessed that it is not easy for them to design tests. Some of the reasons that they gave were the lack of training and counselling. Only 33.75% of them said that it was easy for them to design tests.

Table 10: Test Items

Items tested	Number of times	Percentage
<i>Grammar</i>	47	58%
<i>Vocabulary</i>	29	36%
<i>Pronunciation</i>	00	00%
<i>The four skills (listening- speaking - reading- writing)</i>	04	05%
Total	80	100

According to this table, 58% of the respondents test students’ knowledge of grammar; no teacher tests students’ pronunciation. Very few of them (5%) test the four skills mentioned in the table. This situation is unacceptable because English is learnt through skills development and acquisition of elements of the language.

Table 11: Teachers’ Reactions to Tests’ Results

How do you react to test results	Number of times	Percentage %
<i>I praise brilliant students and encourage them to work harder</i>	60	75
<i>I plan remedial work</i>	8	10
<i>I encourage and support the weak students</i>	8	10
<i>I conduct individual corrections with students</i>	4	05
Total	80	100

Seventy five percent (75%) of teachers praise brilliant students; only ten percent (10%) of them plan remedial works; ten percent (10%) also give encouragement and support to weak students and only five percent (5%) organise individual corrections with students.

Table 12: Sorts of Tests Preferred in Class

Types of tests	Number of times	Percentage %
<i>My own planned tests</i>	24	30
<i>Tests conducted without informing learners in advance</i>	44	55
<i>Tests planned by the school</i>	12	15
<i>Tests planned at regional level</i>	00	00
TOTAL	80	100

According to this table, most of the respondents (44), i.e. 55%, do not inform the students in advance before conducting the tests; thirty percent (30%) of them use their own planned tests; fifteen percent of them (15%) prefer the tests planned by their school; none of them uses tests planned regionally.

4. DISCUSSION

The survey results have revealed problems such as students’ poor performance in English, the lack of training for teachers, the large class sizes, difficulty in test design and administration procedures as well as the lack of didactic materials in schools and students’ low motivation.

4.1. Testing and effective teaching

If a teacher is not trained, how can he/she teach effectively and give the best type of education to students? Teachers have complained during the survey about the lack of facility and means to build their capacity. In fact, they think that the government should make an effort to ensure an effective teaching system.

Teachers have a great role to play when it comes to testing. As an assessment strategy, testing demands a special skill from teachers who must know what they are doing in order to help learners’ develop the right strategies. Teachers need to develop a clear understanding of testing. They need instructions as to how to carry out tests in their English language classes. The fact that there are less qualified teachers in our educational system does not confirm what Arends (1991, p.123) said: ‘*Teaching offers a bright and rewarding career for those who can meet the intellectual and social challenge of the job*’. If teachers do not have the required methodology, they cannot teach efficiently and test effectively either. The government should

think about this situation and find solutions by organising pre- and in-service training for EFL teachers in order to make them grow professionally.

Regarding effective testing, learners should learn their lessons regularly. Although learners spend less time in the school, the duty assigned to teachers is to make learners enjoy this foreign language. Teachers can do this by providing them with advice and show them how far learning lessons regularly is part and parcel of the process of learning a language.

The result obtained so far confirms what is said above about the purpose of testing which is to determine readiness for specified instructional strengths and weaknesses and to evaluate the effectiveness of instructions. One tends to believe that before thinking about test in a language class, it is the teacher's duty to set the purposes of testing. Testing should not be used as a tool to punish students.

The mission of effective teaching is to help students succeed in tests. However, according to the field results, students were asked whether they liked English or not, and 66.87 percent of them gave a positive answer. The fact that 75 percent of learners (Table 18) do not succeed in tests is not understandable. As a result, teachers have to do something to make tests less difficult for students. Apart from the fact that some students are lazy, it is the teacher's performance which is gauged and the effectiveness of his teaching which is at stake.

4.2. Testing Language Elements and Skills

The results collected from teachers show that most of them usually test grammar and vocabulary (58%). This is unacceptable because the learning process of English as a foreign language should be done both in language elements and language skills. When the focus is solely on grammar and vocabulary, students do not develop their capability and ability to write, read, listen and speak the language. That's why it is advisable to set right from the beginning of the test what aspects of language are to be tested, and teachers should try to maintain the balance between the two aspects of language.

Giving priority to only one field can create a sort of imbalance in students' performance in the language. Moreover, Alan (1985) points out clearly that both language elements and skills should be tested. It is up to the teacher to know what he/she is supposed to test with learners at a given time and he/she should bear in mind that there should be in the tests a balance between both language elements and language skills.

4.3. Tests construction

According to the field results, 66.5 percent of the teachers confessed that they had difficulty in designing a fair test based on what they have taught in the classrooms. Test design should not be done at random. It must be well thought out and designed in relation

with the time of the lesson because of its impact on teaching/learning English as a foreign language. It is not when students do not react to the flashback questions that teacher should feel the need to test them. What does he want to test at that time? What kind of results can he get from students? Under these conditions, EFL teachers should plan their tests since testing is an important field in teaching/learning. Testing should not be an area of English language teaching that many teachers shy away from. This contradicts what William (1988:143) said by pointing out that testing is not a topic where only experts are competent to indulge in and where the average language teacher is inadequate for.

It is advisable for teachers to collaborate in providing relevant tests in their classes in order to boost the love of English as a foreign language. They may from time to time submit the test contents to their counsellors and hear their comments, corrections or suggestions. Teachers, especially the inexperienced ones, need more training and counselling.

Another aspect of test construction is its contents. We should test what we have taught. Therefore, teachers have to lay emphasis on learners' input. Our tests should be as reliable and valid as possible.

According to the results, only 8 percent of the teachers plan remedial work with their learners. This is detrimental to educational achievement because it can cause weak learners to dislike the language and to feel that they are discriminated against. Teachers should praise brilliant students and urge dull students to work harder. However, a danger occurs when they forget to plan remedial teaching or to conduct individual corrections with students or to give encouragement and support to weak students. An EFL teacher has to ask himself/herself whether he/she has been effective in his/her teaching or not. There is no doubt that this will help diagnose his/her own weaknesses and he/she can remove weak items before the results of the test are recorded. This calls for regular self-evaluation.

Besides, the sort of test used in class is also important. Field results show that many teachers (55 percent, i.e. 44 out of 80) use tests without informing their learners in advance. When a teacher informs his/her students before organising a test, it is very beneficial for them and for the teacher as well. The aim of this approach is not to encourage laziness, but teachers need to make it clear at the beginning of the course that tests are organised to check students' progress. In this perspective, it is good to inform them in advance.

4.4. Problems Encountered during the Teaching Process

- *Lack of Didactic Materials*

Teaching/Learning English as a foreign language needs very important teaching material. However, it is difficult for learners to acquire the necessary material because of

economic problems. Most students come from low income families and generally lack financial resources to sustain their learning efforts. The provision of adequate instructional materials to school is very necessary since many students (80 percent) do not have textbooks. Didactic materials are tools without which the teaching and learning process cannot take place. They are indispensable in the implementation of any syllabus because most of the learning activities are based on them. Therefore, materials should be available and teachers must be sure that all students have access to them. Moreover, the educational authorities should solve this problem by providing students with free books or by subsidising the prices of textbooks. This will allow a large number of students to get them. To ensure that English is taught effectively in schools, the government should make an effort to make teaching materials available.

Many EFL teachers report that at times, there are only two books at the disposal of a group of six students but teachers are not allowed to send away students who do not have books. Therefore, teachers are obliged to cope with the situation and encourage students to buy the books no matter the sacrifices.

- *Lack of Students' Motivation*

Motivation is what makes us act. It is the desire to work towards a goal or to achieve an objective. If motivation is present, learning can be easy; but without motivation, there is no effective learning. It can be said that achievement is possible when there is motivation. But how do teachers motivate students? Experienced teachers know that it is one of the important factors that guide students' actions. The desire to perform is evident when students try hard to learn a particular subject or when they strive to achieve particular teaching objectives. The question is to know how testing can influence students' motivation. As a matter of fact, teachers should not forget that English is not their students' mother tongue. Therefore, testing should be attractive and designed in a way that enables the learners to have encouraging marks. Besides, if teachers regularly congratulate students who excel in tests, they will feel happy and motivated to keep on working hard to get good marks.

Besides, human dimension should be taken into account while testing students. In fact, teachers need to understand that students have their lives outside schools and many of them face difficulties and struggle to survive. This factor can prevent some students from achieving high scores in tests. Thus, it is advisable that teachers, instead of mocking at students who get bad marks, give them care and attention in a bid to understand their problems and see how they can help them out.

- *Problems related to large class size*

Large class size forces teachers to apply a pedagogy that doesn't enable students to perform in tests. This leads to a boring climate in some classrooms and students lose interest in the subject and just strive to acquire "book knowledge" that enables them have the marks they need to pass. There is a need to reduce the number of students per class to ensure that class size becomes manageable. This will give teachers an opportunity to have direct and personal contacts with the students. The reduction of the students' number is necessary in the sense that it will lead to a reduction of the workload. Large class size also creates other problems because during exams, some students copy from other students.

Another problem caused by this situation is the long time teachers take to mark papers. When a teacher has to teach many students, he/she takes time to mark students' copies. Moreover, teachers are sometimes reluctant to have periodical tests because they fear the workload. Teachers are encouraged not to shy away from their responsibility to test their students. The large class size should not be an excuse for teachers to fail to comply with this requirement.

According to the results, teaching conditions in secondary schools in Benin do not make teachers and learners feel comfortable. Teachers complain not only about the plethora of students but also about the lack of benches and tables. As a result, students are not comfortable enough to follow the lessons.

- *Students' Low Achievements*

Teachers have a great responsibility in the success or failure of their students. They have to manage complicated and demanding situations by channelling the personal, emotional and social pressures of learners in order to help them become proficient. It is the teachers' duty to receive a feedback from their learners on the lessons before carrying out tests. Teachers should also plan remedial teaching, organise individual corrections with students, encourage and support weak students and praise the brilliant ones. Students' poor achievement is also due to some problems they encountered in the classrooms. As shown by the results, all students have almost the same problems such as mispronunciation, reading and understanding a test, difficulty in writing and vocabulary, misunderstanding of instructions (see table 15).

More efforts have to be made to solve or minimize these common problems facing students most of the time. These problems prevent them from being fond of the English language. What can we do to help learners take tests with less fear and anxiety? Right from the beginning of a class, teachers should draw students' attention to the fact that they have to

be tested during every learning situation and at the end of it. This will prompt learners to learn their lessons regularly and to be prepared to take tests.

Since this country is not an English-speaking country, it is the responsibility of the teachers to do whatever they can to make students love the language. Sometimes, it is good to discuss with students the importance of English in real life. The field results show that 60 percent of the students argued that they like English because it is an international language. Teachers should motivate students who show a lack of interest in the language and should stimulate them.

Another problem, which is responsible for students' poor achievement, is the teachers' character. Most of the time, some students miss or abandon English class because of the teachers bad character. The teachers' character has a great impact on students. This character includes: being a good or bad communicator, being somebody who can provide good learning opportunities through effective techniques, being a good class manager as well as a facilitator in the learning process.

Conclusion

The data from this study is meant to draw teachers' attention to the numerous advantages of a relevant test and to point out drawbacks of a poor test. Teachers are urged to focus on testing to foster learning abilities and to follow the acceptable teaching procedures.

More specifically, teachers are expected to:

- make testing a cooperative activity, not a competition where there will be many winners and losers;
- know about students' progress and difficulties in the learning process so that they can adapt their own work to meet students' needs;
- explain their testing methods to students because this will make them feel comfortable when testing time comes;
- devote sufficient time to testing to make students do what they have to do in an accurate way;
- mark tests fairly to stimulate students and demystify testing.

Last but not least, parents should periodically keep in touch with the school administration to be informed about their children's performance and conduct.

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