

TEACHING SPEAKING IN EFL CLASSES IN BENIN: METHODS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study has been conducted to identify the difficulties that EFL teachers encounter in teaching speaking to their learners in Benin. The approach used is the mixed methods. A questionnaire was administered to 19 secondary school EFL teachers to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. In terms of teaching strategies, the findings revealed that the participants use the direct and eclectic methods. Besides, they focus on fluency and the combination of fluency and accuracy and frequently correct students' errors. For lack of time, teachers do not assess speaking in their classes. For that reason, students pay little attention to the teaching of that critical skill. It was also discovered that the major challenges confronting the teaching of speaking in an EFL context include inadequate teaching methods and lack of practical speaking activities, limited time devoted to speaking instruction, and irregular feedback provision to the learners, lack of instructional time, large class sizes, lack of teaching materials, and the limited use of ICT tools. In addition, teachers' lack of proficiency and self-confidence, students' shyness, use of other languages in class, distractions, demotivation, problems of mispronunciations, and lack of vocabulary are other challenges identified as part of the study. On the basis of these findings, it has been recommended to build teachers' capacities in spoken English and to encourage learners not to speak their mother tongues during speaking activities in group.

Key words: *Difficulty, speaking, EFL, secondary education*

Introduction

The influence of the English language keeps growing as it is used in almost all spheres of human activity. Therefore, its teaching holds an increasingly prominent place in the curricula of secondary education across the world. Nationals of all the

countries are keen on communicating in English for a more global impact. To achieve global communication, English learners and teachers need to focus on two major skills: speaking and writing. The focus of this article is on speaking because this is the second skill that children develop in the process of acquisition of their first language (Yule, 2020). The knowledge of a language is manifested with the ability to speak it insofar as, out of the four skills, “speaking seems to be the most important as people who know a language are referred to as ‘speakers’ of that language” (Sárosdy, Bencze, Poór, & Vadnay, 2006, p. 57). As it appears, knowing a language is likened with the ability to speak it. Therefore, there is a need to emphasize the teaching of speaking in any EFL curriculum.

Notwithstanding the importance of speaking in language learning, its teaching is confronted with many challenges at secondary school level in Benin. The first challenge is lack of proficiency on the part of many EFL teachers. According to Rezeki and Dalimunte (2024), one of the difficulties confronting EFL teachers themselves is lack of vocabulary, which seriously impairs their ability to speak the language. Therefore, the teaching of speaking is poorly conducted as people cannot teach what they do not know. In addition, students’ poor pronunciation and lack of vocabulary are stumbling blocks to the teaching of speaking because students cannot answer the teachers’ questions adequately. All these factors result in lack of motivation on the part of both teachers and learners (Purwati et al, 2023).

Further, teaching goes beyond the mastery of the content to be taught. The ability to impart knowledge to learners is pivotal in the teaching and learning process. Given that most teachers start the job without any formal training, there is a risk that the lack of content knowledge is compounded with the lack of agreed teaching principles and appropriate instructional procedures. As Bygate (2001) rightly put it, “The teaching of this skill is

problematic for many teachers because of the complexity of spoken interaction and a lack of consensus about what principled approaches should be adopted to teach speaking” (as cited in Burns, 2017, p. 242). This implies that, in addition to lack of content knowledge and limited command of pedagogy, the very science of the teaching of speaking is still subject to controversy. In view of the aforementioned challenges pertaining to the teaching of speaking in EFL classes, deep investigation is required as speaking is at the heart of communicative competence (Martínez-Flor, et al., 2006). The findings of this study are going to contribute to the improvement of the body of literature on speaking instruction as they will provide insights that can reduce the gaps identified by Bygate (2001). The dissemination of the findings will give EFL teachers in Benin and elsewhere the opportunity to reflect on the challenges and equally to put it practice the recommendations made to improve speaking instruction. By reading this study, EFL teacher supervisors can design better training for the teachers under their supervision as they will have a clearer view of the theoretical underpinning of the teaching of speaking and the challenges thereof. The corollary of this is that those supervisors will help the EFL teachers to better plan their lessons and provide adequate feedback following their classroom observations. The main purpose of this research work is to explore the teaching of speaking in selected secondary schools in Benin. Its specific objectives are (a) to find out strategies used by EFL teachers to teach speaking and (b) to determine the challenges confronting secondary school EFL teachers in the process of teaching speaking. The investigation conducted provides the opportunity to address the following research question: (a) How do EFL teachers teach speaking at the secondary school level in Benin? and (b) What are the challenges confronting EFL teachers in the process of teaching speaking at secondary school level in Benin?

Before addressing the research question, the relevant literature has been explored.

1. Literature Review

In this section, two major issues have been addressed: the challenges inherent to the teaching of speaking and some insights into the teaching of this productive skill.

1.1 Major Challenges in the Teaching of Speaking

The challenges reviewed here include those related to instructional procedures and classroom management.

Instructional procedures can vary from one teacher to another as they depend on the teaching methods preferred by the teachers. For teachers who prefer the grammar-translation method, the focus will be more on reading and writing, which creates a situation in which learners are good at these two skills, but they cannot use what they have learnt to communicate orally (Bygate, 2011; Nunan, 2015). Unfortunately, the grammar-translation method remains a predominant practice among EFL teachers even though most teachers would claim nowadays that they are using the communicative language teaching method.

Advocates of the communicative method believe that language needs to be taught in such a way as to get the learners to learn the language by using it for practical purposes. It is learner-centered and that is the reason why Richards (2006) stated that in communicative language teaching, “Students had to become comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model” (p. 5). This shows that learners must play an active role in the teaching and learning process. For that reason, pair work and group work are often used in classrooms. However, monitoring these strategies can be quite challenging for EFL teachers. Oftentimes, students use their mother tongues or French in the

groups or pairs instead of using English for the discussion. As a consequence, the practice of the language expected in organizing the group or pair work is not achieved.

The resort to mother tongue may be due to mere laziness or learners' reluctance to express themselves in English for lack of relevant vocabulary or fear of making mistakes/errors and being ridiculed by peers (Chen & Goh, 2011; Hamer, 2015; Nakhalah, 2016; Quyen, Nga, & Nguyen, 2018; Nakhalah, 2016). Poor lesson planning and classroom management often account for students' reluctance (Harmer, 2015). In fact, selection of tasks or topics that are not adapted to the level of the learners, failure to monitor speaking activities adequately and to use appropriate strategies to encourage learners to open up can make speaking classes very ineffective. Further, as suggested by Lazaraton (2014), large class-size can seriously limit EFL teachers' ability to manage the speaking classes appropriately, thus contributing to some of the factors previously mentioned.

1.2 Some Hints about the Teaching of Speaking

Teachers adopt many approaches to the teaching of speaking Numan (2015) suggested two approaches including the reproductive use of language and creative speaking. In the reproductive language approaches, learners are provided with samples to be reproduced and manipulated, which protects them against anxiety and errors. The only difficulty with this approach is that spoken language corpora may not be easy to access for lack of adequate equipment in most secondary school in the developing world (Brown, 2007). On the other hand, in creative speaking, learners have to create their own language once they are given a topic by the teacher. This approach may be more adapted to advanced levels while the reproductive approach is more suited for lower levels.

Further, the two approaches call for the notions of fluency and accuracy. In the reproductive approach, learners tend to be more

accurate because of the language models made available by the teachers. In fact, according to Numan (2015, p. 54), “Accuracy refers to the extent to which the learners’ speech is grammatically acceptable, with clear, intelligible pronunciation and appropriate choice of vocabulary.” As it appears, accuracy focuses on the whole language, not just on grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, fluency implies the smooth and natural use of language or ease in using language. For Richards and Schmidt (2010), it encompasses “the features which give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions” (p. 222). Citing Fillmore (1979), Bohlke highlighted four abilities related to fluency namely:

- (1) the ability to talk without awkward pauses for relatively long periods of time,
- (2) the ability to talk in coherent and semantically dense sentences that show mastery of syntax and semantics,
- (3) the ability to say appropriate things in a variety of contexts,
- (4) and the ability to use language creatively and imaginatively. (2014, p. 122)

The creative and imaginative use of language like native speakers is the key feature of fluency. That is the reason why it is often stated that the creative approach to the teaching of speaking is fluency oriented.

From a different perspective, the teaching of speaking follows some basic principles, but these principles are not cast in stone as they vary from one linguist to another. For example, in their speaking classes, teachers need to work on both fluency and accuracy, motivate their learners, adopt contextualized error correction strategies, and integrate the teaching of listening and speaking (Lazaraton, 2014; Brown, 2007). The integrated

teaching of speaking and listening is critical because listening provides learners with the opportunity to be exposed to authentic language and at the same time, to learn conversational techniques, especially when the materials used are dialogues or interactions between people or native speakers.

Furthermore, teachers need to bear in mind the context in which the language is taught, combine activities that involve both fluency and accuracy, reduce teacher talking time and encourage interactions between learners, teach learners how to negotiate meaning through planned speaking activities, which must also enable the learners to negotiate goods and services as well as play social roles (Nunan, 2015; Bailey, 2003). Two major elements emerge from these ideas: the need to focus on fluency and accuracy and the negotiation of meaning to make the speaking activities relevant.

Besides, the teaching of speaking in EFL classes is based on a number of principles of which Nunan (2015) identified five including, the need to be aware of the differences between ESL and EFL contexts, focus on both fluency and accuracy, provide students the opportunity to talk by using various strategies, inclusion of tasks that require the negotiation of meaning as well as tasks to involve interactional and transactional speaking. In order to provide students with the opportunity to talk and negotiate meaning, teachers can resort to several activities.

The first activity is pair or group discussions. They are the most effective way of increasing students' talking time, and allow learners to negotiate meaning, engage in genuine conversation, and develop skills in turn taking, speaker selection and change to mention but a few (Nunan, 2015). According to Lazaraton (2014), there are some procedures in organising pair or group work: teaching learners functional language required for stating opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, interrupting, and clarifying; assignment of explicit and specific roles; and understanding the topic, purpose, outcomes, and duration of the discussion.

Teachers are tasked with monitoring how students are doing in their groups to make sure that they all participate in the discussion. Additionally, students can be asked to act out dialogues in their textbooks. Harmer (2015) suggested that, for the successful implementation of this activity, teachers should give time for learners to practice before presenting in front of the whole class. As for prepared talks and presentations, they require time given that students have to prepare and rehearse them on topics of their choice (Harmer, 2015). In addition, students are encouraged to write a few notes that will guide the talk instead of reading out texts fully written down. According to Lazaraton (2014), “Group presentations may be the only choice for participation, given class size and time restrictions.” (p. 113). Therefore, they need to be adequately prepared to stimulate discussion in the classroom.

Apart from presentations and talks, storytelling is another activity used to strengthen the teaching of speaking. Harmer (2015, p. 393) identified two main reasons why storytelling is useful for learners:

Firstly, it mirrors the kind of human activity we have been discussing, and thus is highly motivating for the students. Secondly, it taps into a skill that everyone possesses to some extent and so is not as unnatural as some language learning activities can appear to be.

Its natural feature as well as familiarity are the two features that make storytelling an easy activity to implement by teachers.

Apart from the foregoing activities, role-play and simulation can also be used in the teaching of speaking. The main difference between role-play and simulation is that the learner takes on the role of another person in role-play, but is given a problem-

solving situation, and responds on his/her own behalf in a simulation (Numan, 2015). For Lazaraton (2014), role-plays are very useful for practicing sociocultural variations in speech acts as they make it possible to motivate and encourage hesitant learners to participate.

Mandatory participation is another speaking activity. It consists in making all the students participate in a specific task. It includes techniques such as fluency circles, numbered heads, etc. Citing Littlewood (2004), Harmer describes ‘numbered heads’ as follows:

In a group of four, for example, the students are asked to assign a number from 1 to 4 to each member, without telling the teacher who has which number. At the end of an activity, the teacher indicates a group and a number (1-4) and asks that student to report on what happened. Neither the teacher nor the students know who will be called and as a result, all the students have to stay on-task. (2015, p. 387)

This strategy enables to get students to speak voluntarily and in a playful manner. Given that nobody knows who will be called upon, all the students are bound to get prepared to take the floor. Participation in the group discussion is going to increase, and the teacher can be sure that the learners are going to speak English because they are aware that they might be given the floor at any time.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework focuses on the sociocultural theory and first language acquisition theories. The sociocultural theory was developed by Vygotsky, and it posits that social interactions play a critical role in language learning and in cognitive

development and further stipulates that language development also occurs at the individual level (Balbay, 2018; Richards and Schmidt, 2010). In other words, people acquire a language through their interactions with their environment and the people in it. However, there is a lot of transformation that occurs in their mind, especially in the brain that is referred to as the language acquisition device (Freeman and Freeman, 2004). As it appears, two separate processes unfold in the process of language development. That is the reason why errors like overextension and overgeneralisation occur in infants' language (Yule, 2020). Furthermore, human beings are described as having a natural predisposition to acquire and learn languages. Yet, for the acquisition or learning to take place, they must be in a position to send and receive signals in that language (Yule, 2020). However, these conditions are not enough to acquire a language. To acquire or learn a language, human beings need to be in an environment where the language is spoken. That is the reason why language learning or acquisition is viewed as a process of cultural transmission. In fact, cultural transmission is defined as "the process whereby knowledge of a language is passed from one generation to the next" (Yule, 2020, p. 334). In the same vein, John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) stated that, according to the sociocultural theory, "human activities take place in a cultural context and are mediated by language and other symbol systems" (p. 191). It is this cultural context that facilitates the transmission of language among generations. Hence, the complementarity between the theory advocated by Yule and sociocultural theory. It can even be further stated that the idea of cultural transmission derives from the sociocultural theory. The cultural context can be assimilated with the classroom environment where language teaching and learning occur.

2. Methods and Procedures

In view of the complexity of speaking as a language skill, the mixed methods approach has been used as part of this study. In the words of Riazi and Farsani (2024), the mixed methods approach makes it possible to overcome the contradictions between quantitative and qualitative methods and to harness the complementarity of both methods. This approach was preferred for the diversity of stakeholders involved in the study. The population covered by the study includes EFL teachers from six rural secondary schools in the Plateau Region located in the Southeast of Benin. Nineteen teachers were selected from these schools to participate in the investigation. In addition, a thirteen-item questionnaire including open-ended as well close-ended items was administered to the participants. The items covered include instructional activities, error correction, the textbooks used, and learners' interest in speaking activities as well as the overall challenges confronting speaking instruction. The qualitative and quantitative data collected from the participants were analyzed separately and the findings were combined afterwards for a better discussion. The quantitative data are mostly displayed in tables whereas the qualitative data were subject to the color-coding analysis suggested by Dörnyei (2007). The analysis produced the results presented below.

3. Findings of the Study

3.1 Presentation of the Findings

This section includes the presentation of the outcomes of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

3.1.2. Outcomes of the Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data are presented in tables that show

frequencies and percentages.

Table 1: Use of other languages by the learners during group work

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Use of other languages by the learners during group work	Yes	18	94.73
	No	1	5.26
Total		19	100%

Through Table 1, the respondents revealed that a large majority of the learners use other languages during the speaking group work, which is not conducive to the development of that skill. The proportion that reported that learners stick to English is marginal. For this reason, it can be inferred that the use of other languages during speaking activities is a widespread phenomenon in EFL classes.

Table 2: Teaching methods used by EFL teachers

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Teaching methods used by EFL teachers	Audiolingual method	2	10.52
	Direct method	8	42.10
	Grammar-translation method	1	5.26
	Competence-based approach	3	15.80

	Eclectic method	5	26.32
Total		19	100

The method most used by the respondents is the direct method (42.10%). The competence-based approach as well as the eclectic method ranks second (26.32%) while the audiolingual method follows with 10.52%. The grammar-translation is the least used method with a total percentage of 10.52.

Table 3: Frequency of speaking classes

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Frequency of speaking lessons	Rarely	0	0
	Sometimes	16	84.21
	Usually	3	15.79
Total		19	100

Only 15.79% of the respondents claimed that they usually teach speaking in class. The others (84.21%) reported that they teach speaking sometimes. These data show that the teaching of speaking is not part and parcel of speaking instruction. EFL teachers choose to teach it when they feel like doing so. Therefore, students do not have the opportunity to practice speaking on a regular basis in EFL classes.

Table 4: Aspects of speaking taught

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
	Accuracy	2	10.53
	Fluency	6	31.58

Aspects of speaking taught	Fluency and accuracy	10	52.63
	Accuracy and appropriacy	1	5.26
Total		19	100

Table 4 reveals that most of the respondents focus on fluency and the combination of accuracy and fluency, 31.58% and 52.63% respectively. Neither accuracy nor its combination with appropriacy activities are common practices among the respondents.

Table 5: Error correction frequency in speaking classes

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Error correction frequency in speaking classes	Never	0	0
	Rarely	0	0
	Often	7	36.84
	Usually	12	63.16
Total		19	100

The data in Table 5 indicate that error correction is part and parcel of the speaking teaching practices of the respondents. In fact, all the respondents frequently correct errors in their speaking classes, that is often or usually.

Table 6: Speaking assessment

Questionnaire item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Speaking assessment	Yes	15	78.95
	No	4	21.05
Total		19	100

Most of the teachers (78.95%) reported that they assess their learners' speaking competence whereas 21.05% do not do so.

Table 7: Presentation of relevant and sufficient speaking activities in the textbooks

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
inclusion and relevance of speaking activities in prescribed textbooks	Yes	7	38.89
	No	11	61.11
Total		18	100

More than half of the respondents (61.11%) think that the textbooks that they use do not include enough and relevant speaking activities even though 38.89% of them have a different opinion.

Table 8: Use of ICT in teaching speaking

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
	Yes	7	36.84

Use of ICT in teaching speaking	No	12	63.15
Total		19	100

Only some respondents (36.84%) use ICT tools to teach speaking activities as opposed to a large proportion of respondents who do not make use of these tools.

Table 9: EFL teachers' opinions about their own proficiency in English

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentages (%)
EFL teachers' opinions about their own proficiency in English	Low	0	0
	Good	6	33.33
	Very good	10	55.56
	Excellent	2	11.11
Total		18	100

Fifty-five-point fifty-six percent (55.56%) of the respondents thought that their level in English is very good whereas thirty-three percent (33.33%) rated their level as good and eleven point eleven percent (11.11%) stated that their level was excellent. On a general note, the respondents had positive opinions about their levels in English.

3.1.2 Analysis of the Qualitative Data

The qualitative data include responses to the probe and open-ended questions.

3.1.2.1 Key Issues about the Teaching of Speaking

The focus of this section is comments made by respondents concerning speaking instruction practices. Most respondents believe that speaking cannot be taught separately as it appears through the following statement: “I teach speaking not as a language skill, but as a language sub-skill because while teaching writing, we also carry out the other skills activities such as speaking, writing, and listening”. This respondent made it clear that speaking is taught in an integrated way and not on its own. This is probably due to lack of time because for this other respondent, “We have many activities to do and the time is insufficient”. Obviously, the teaching of speaking is neglected in favour of other skills because of lack of time. The confusion teachers often make is that as they speak English while teaching vocabulary for instance, then they also teach speaking through the vocabulary lesson, which is not the case.

Furthermore, the respondents complained about the fact that learners do not often have prescribed textbooks, which prevents them from following lessons adequately. However, if properly planned, speaking activities are not supposed to require the use of textbooks. For picture description activities, for example, teachers can provide their own copies of the pictures to be described instead of expecting students to make copies. Lack of vocabulary on the part of the learners is another issue raised by the respondents. For one of them, “The students’ lexical background is very low, which makes communication very difficult for them. So, they prefer keeping quiet, even if they have some good ideas to develop.” The implication of the poor vocabulary is that students do not participate in classroom activities or even if they do, they use their mother tongues. The lack of participation leads to noisemaking in the classroom as reported in the following statement by one of the respondents, “The problem is that some students of the class use the

opportunity to talk among themselves, and some among those who seem to follow relativize some words' pronunciation in other languages to make others laugh." This statement seems to express a form of demotivation and lack of interest on the part of most learners. Not only do some make noise but others who pretend to participate also take advantage of their participation to increase the level of noise in the classroom.

From a different perspective, the language functions most frequently taught include giving and accepting advice, making requests, making suggestions, expressing prohibition, expressing warning, asking for assistance, and asking for and giving directions. All these functions are directive speech acts. Expressive speech acts (expressing one's feelings and acknowledging gratitude) are also taught. Some respondents equally provided the following responses to the same question on language functions: pragmatics, function, vocabulary, grammar, different ways of communicating with people through practical dialogues, vocabularies through pronunciation, active interactions, communication methods, role-play, acting, poems, songs and repeating. These responses show that the respondents are not familiar with the notion of language functions. However, lack of knowledge of language functions is not the only problem related to the teaching of speaking. Other problems include large class sizes, students' reluctance to speak in class, shyness, lack of teaching materials, lack of practice opportunities for students. However, these do not discourage teachers from teaching speaking through activities such as dialogues, debates and discussions, role-plays, simulations, listening and repeat, picture description, and storytelling. Some respondents mentioned songs and poems. Even though these two activities contribute to the improvement of pronunciation, they are not speaking activities.

Another issue with the teaching of speaking is lack of assessment. Except what is done as part of the national

examinations, speaking is generally not assessed like other skills such as reading and writing as stated by one of the respondents for whom “speaking is not evaluated in summative exams.” For this reason, students do not realize the need to take an active part in speaking activities as they know such activities will not have any bearing on their grades. However, it is important to assess speaking in EFL classes. Those classes are not language acquisition environments, but language learning ones, as indicated by one of the respondents. If teachers fail to assess speaking, there is no way for them to know whether their lesson objectives are reached.

3.2 Discussion of the Findings

3.2.1 The Teaching of Speaking in EFL Classes

EFL Teaching is based on several strategies of which the most important are highlighted here. Most of the respondents (52.63%) reported that they focus on both accuracy and fluency in their speaking classes while only 31.58% focus on fluency. These percentages raise the issue of the appropriacy of the focus because English is taught in Benin as a foreign language. For that reason, teachers need to focus on fluency to avoid impeding communication as suggested by Harmer (2015). In the same vein, most of the respondents (84.21%) reported that they correct errors only sometimes when they are teaching speaking. This practice seems to be in line with best practices in speaking instruction. In fact, when English is taught as a foreign language, it is often recommended that teachers should focus on fluency as stated earlier. Besides, frequent error corrections should be avoided so as not to impede fluency (Harmer, 2015; Lazaraton, 2014). Further, a large proportion of the respondents reported that they integrate the teaching of speaking with other skills such as reading, writing, and listening, which is in contradiction with the fact that a large proportion (84.1%) of respondents reported

that they teach speaking sometimes. Given that other skills such as reading and writing and macroskills such as grammar and vocabulary are often taught, it is obvious that the respondents think that because they interact with the learners in English while teaching, they integrate the teaching of speaking. Integrated teaching of skills is purposeful and consists in embedding specific activities related to the skill to be integrated into the teaching of another skill. In the opinion of Gebauer et al (2020), integrated teaching establishes an interconnection between various items to be taught and learnt in the classroom. If this interconnection is often made, most of the respondents would not report that they teach speaking sometimes in their classes.

In addition to the foregoing, the respondents reported that they often teach language functions such as giving and accepting advice, making requests, making suggestions, expressing prohibition, expressing warning, asking for assistance, and asking for and giving directions, all of which are directive speech acts. However, some respondents equally indicated that they teach the following language functions: vocabulary, grammar, different ways of communicating with people through practical dialogues, vocabularies through pronunciation, active interactions, communication methods, role-play, acting, poems, songs and repeating. This last set of responses displays the respondents' lack of knowledge of the notion of language functions. In fact, according to Richards, and Schmidt (2010), "language functions are often described as categories of behaviour; e.g. requests, apologies, complaints, offers, compliments" (pp. 233-234). This definition indicates that the respondents confuse language functions with other language items in the teaching process.

3.2.2 Challenges Related to the Teaching of Speaking in EFL Classes

The findings of this study reveal that the teaching of speaking in Beninese secondary schools EFL classes is confronted with some challenges pinpointed by the respondents. In fact, the respondents mentioned lack of instructional time, and large class sizes as major obstacles to their classroom performance. These results are in line with the results of a study conducted by Chen and Goh (2011) on the teaching of speaking in the Chinese higher education. Similarly, Lazaraton (2014, p. 116) stated that “Large classes are often norms in both ESL and EFL settings, limiting students’ opportunities to talk, and teachers’ opportunities to provide individual feedback.” In this study, a large proportion (94.73%) of the respondents complained that some students use their mother tongue and even make noise in the classroom. The issue of large class size here goes beyond the limitation of student talking time. It creates an environment in which the classroom management spirals out of the control of the teachers. Situations like this are testimonials of the way in which poor working conditions can jeopardise differentiated pedagogy. When it comes to speaking, the situation might be even more complex because the teacher cannot have an eye on all the students and speaking cannot be taught in lockstep for a long time. Muluk et al (2021) suggested that strategies to be used in a speaking class include sitting arrangements, use of the classroom code of conduct, and differentiated instruction. However, respondents reported large class size as one of the challenges to speaking instruction. Therefore, differentiated pedagogy and the monitoring of compliance with the classroom code of conduct will be difficult.

Other challenges related to speaking instruction include the level of proficiency of the respondents in English, the relevance of speaking activities, the lack of use of ICT, the low rate of

textbook ownership by the learners, learners' poor vocabulary, and lack of assessment of speaking. Language proficiency is one of the 10 features of exemplary EFL teachers defined by Richards (2010) and Nugroho (2018) underscored the importance of EFL teachers' proficiency in English for effective teaching of the language. The findings reveal that 33.33 percent of the respondents rated their own level as good while 55.56 percent rated their level as very good. Only 11.11 percent reported that their level is excellent. Considering that for social desirability reasons, respondents are likely to overrate their levels of proficiency, it can be inferred that the latter are a bit problematic for adequate teaching.

Other obstacles to the teaching of speaking include inadequate teaching methods and practical speaking activities, unbalanced focus during speaking classes, irregular feedback provision and teachers' self-doubt and self-confidence levels. The method used by teachers is mainly the direct method followed by the grammar translation methods and audiolingual methods. In fact, these methods hardly help with the successful teaching of speaking. According to Bygate (2011, p. 14), with these methods, "The oral communication is not as discourse skill on its own right, but rather as a special medium for providing language input." This has been confirmed by some respondents who reported teaching speaking as a sub-skill, rather than an independent skill like writing and reading. Pinpointing the consequences of the grammar-translation method, Numan (2015, p. 48) remarked, "In fact, the grammar-translation method...turned out learners who could read and write, but who were incapable of understanding the spoken language or to speak it themselves." This means that there is evidence showing that the grammar-translation method is not suitable for speaking instruction. Consequently, the lack of performance noticed at the

level of the learners can be accounted for by poor instructional procedures on the part of some teachers.

When the teachers were asked the practical activities that they carry out during their speaking activities, the answers provided include “Yes or No questions” and “writing”. These responses are more or less odd. “Yes or No questions” are closed-ended items which cannot give the learners the opportunity to express themselves orally. On the other hand, writing is typically not suitable as activity for a real and practical speaking class. Moreover, some teachers focus on fluency and accuracy, which is not bad per se. All the same, these teachers neglect appropriacy which is in fact crucial because, without appropriacy, it is difficult to understand what people try to convey in their messages.

The problems involving the learners include reluctance, shyness, the use of other languages in class, distractions, demotivation, problems of mispronunciations, fears of mispronunciations, and lack of vocabulary. These problems have been revealed in the research work by Nuraini in 2016. In fact, these problems are interrelated. The fear of mispronunciations, demotivation, and lack of vocabulary may lead the students to shyness or the use of other languages in class. The problems of mispronunciation can be associated with interference between the learners’ mother tongues and French, and English.

The findings of this study show that some problems relate to the education system itself. The respondents mentioned lack of instructional time, and large class sizes. Chen and Goh (2011) found the same results in Chinese higher education. According to Lazaraton (2014, p. 116), “Large classes are often norms in both ESL and EFL settings, limiting students’ opportunities to talk, and teachers’ opportunities to provide individual feedback.” This shows that unsatisfactory working conditions are key to the learning and teaching of speaking. Limiting students’ opportunities to talk can easily encourage students’

shyness. Other problems found include lack of teaching materials – limited use of ICT tools and lack of students’ textbooks, non-assessment of speaking during the summative evaluations, the teaching of speaking as an integrated skill, and lack of relevant speaking activities in the textbooks. Currently, ICT contributes a great deal to the teaching of speaking. “The Internet and digital technologies have forever changed the landscape for teaching speaking.” (Ibid., 2014, p. 117). At the same time, most of the respondents involved in this research work said that they do not use ICT tools to teach speaking in their classes. This implies that teachers only rely on the limited and irrelevant speaking activities contained in the textbooks without using technology. The fact that some students do not have the textbooks to follow the activities with other points accounts for their vocabulary problems. If students do not have textbooks, they will not have the opportunity to read in order to improve their vocabulary.

Mindful of the various difficulties found above, the study suggests that teachers be trained in communicative techniques for teaching speaking. They should be provided with adequate instructional materials. Teachers should continuously encourage their learners to participate in speaking activities and avoid the use of their mother tongues during group work. It is equally important to build teachers’ capacities in spoken English for them to be more confident in speaking the language with their learners.

Following the above recommendations which derive from the data collected from the field, the study is now to be concluded.

Conclusion

This study has been conducted in view of the importance of speaking in language knowledge and its potential to enlighten EFL teachers in their instructional practices. Its overall objective

is to explore the teaching of speaking in secondary school EFL classes in Benin and the specific objectives are (a) to find out strategies used by EFL teachers to teach speaking and (b) to determine the challenges confronting secondary school EFL teachers in the process of teaching speaking. It used the mixed methods design. A questionnaire was designed and administered to the 19 participants to determine the approaches they use to teach speaking and the difficulties that affect their instructional procedures.

First of all, with regard to the strategies used to teach speaking, the findings revealed that the teaching methods frequently used by the teachers are the direct method and the eclectic method. Besides, teachers often focus on fluency and the combination of fluency and accuracy. They also correct their learners' errors frequently, which is not conducive to the development of fluency. For lack of time, teachers fail to assess speaking in their classes.

Secondly, the challenges identified following the analysis of the data include inadequate teaching methods and lack of practical speaking activities, limited time devoted to speaking instruction, and irregular feedback provision to the learners, lack of instructional time, large class sizes, lack of teaching materials, and the limited use of ICT tools. In addition, teachers' lack of proficiency and self-confidence, students' shyness, use of other languages in class, distractions, demotivation, problems of mispronunciations, and lack of vocabulary are other challenges identified as part of the study.

In view of the challenges, it has been suggested to train teachers in the teaching of speaking so that they can and in spoken English. As for teachers, they are invited to encourage their students to avoid the use of other languages during the speaking activities.

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