Enhancing Students' Oral Proficiency in Competency Based-Approach Context: Focusing on Secondary Schools in Ouéme Region

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Abstract

Recent years have seen many exciting developments in language teaching at the level of syllabus and methodology, with the growth of interesting new approaches challenging our traditional views. Thus, in Benin context, the Competency Based Approach (CBA) replaced the Objective Based Approach (OBA) of English teaching and, offers an open field to explore various methods, techniques, strategies, all based rather on the learners' skills development and cognitive process than a simple and pure acquisition of knowledge. The reasons which account for carrying out this research work are related to the necessity to highlight the difficulties faced by different actors with the implementation of CBA and to study factors that enhance oral communication. To reach these goals, questionnaires are designed to investigate teachers' and students' objectives and strategies to reach their goals and overcome the challenges of this 21st century. We also use class observation to check the conditions in which lessons take place. The findings of this study have shown that most of EFL teachers lack training. In addition, this study reveals that curricula, activities and teaching methods are the corner stone of efficient teaching/learning. Some communicative activities with appropriate strategies in CBA context (dialogues, role play) are recommended in order to establish teaching/learning situations where teachers and students are as highly motivated as possible to take the challenge of language usage in their daily life.
Key words: oral proficiency, CBA, secondary schools, communicative activities

Introduction

The necessity of teaching/learning a foreign language is not due to the non-existence of languages in Benin. On the contrary, this country has a wide range of languages. This

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multiplicity raises the problem of the choice of an international language. Because of travels, explorations and colonization, English has become one of the most spoken languages all over the world. It is very important in international relationships. Mastering such a language presents enormous advantages in political, economic and technological fields.

English is an international language. It is widely spoken all over the world. In fact, from the four to five thousand languages, English is by far the most widely used. As a mother tongue, it ranks second after Chinese. If we add those areas where decisions affecting life and welfare are made and announced in English (UN, G8, G20, NATO…), it covers one-third of the world's population. We can also notice that more than half of the international scientific literature is written in English. On the other hand, commercial exchanges are done mainly in English. Hence, teaching and learning English are urgently required in a French-speaking country like Benin. But this cannot be successful without adequate contents and appropriate teaching methods. As Byrne (1976: 24) puts it:

> The classroom is of course a convenient place for imparting information and for developing many educational skills, but our main concern as language teachers is not to inform our students about the language but to develop their ability to use the language for a variety of communicative purposes.

Obviously, the final goal of language learning is to help learners to speak it with some kind of fluency ease and automaticity, the latter being a matter of habit and is acquired through language strategies and techniques. How can teachers enhance students' oral proficiency? In order to answer these questions, we have decided to undertake this research work entitled *"Enhancing Students' Oral Proficiency Through the Competency-Based Approach in Benin: The Case-studies of Some Secondary Schools in Oueme/Plateau Region"*. This work will therefore highlight the role of curricula and the role of teachers in a teaching/learning process in an EFL class implementing the competency-based approach. Thus, the purpose of this research work is to draw teachers' attention to how to use curricula to arise learners' motivation and to contribute to the improvement of learners' poor productions in English through the proposition of CBA as the most appropriate method for the language teaching/learning in our secondary schools by making use of CBA strategies (individual, pair and small group's works) to maximize learners' oral production.

With regard to the entire situation described above, the present paper aims to answer the following questions:

1- To what extent can our secondary school learners achieve their goal in learning of English as a foreign language process?
2- How is English taught in our secondary schools through communicative curricula and methods?
3- How far is the competency-based approach contributing to enhance students' oral proficiency?

To achieve its aim, this paper has been divided into five main sections:

THEORETICAL KEYSTONES

The Importance of Oral Proficiency

Oral proficiency includes the ability to communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language. According to Omaggio (1986), *'a high degree of oral proficiency implies having the ability to apply the linguistic knowledge to new contexts or topics and situations'*. As many students have confessed during this research work, not speaking a language is a sign of not knowing the language. In the same trend, Jake Haymes thinks that *'the success of most teaching and learning is evaluated in terms of our students' ability to speak'*. And Brumfit (1984) stated that *'natural language use, for most people, is primarily discussion and conversation'*. This means that oral proficiency is the final goal of English learning. We learn a language for transaction and interaction. Then learning and teaching a language should embrace how to use this language to get things done and for social intercourse. The question raises here is how to achieve this goal.

The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

This approach began to emerge in the 1970s with growing dissatisfaction with the previous grammar-centred methods. Though it may be considered extreme compared to the current competencies of the learners, this method is the most related to our main goal while teaching and learning English as a foreign language. This approach emphasizes a pedagogical "*shift from the teaching of grammatical structures to the teaching of communicative skills*" (Joyce et al, 1999: 41). A summarizing view of the aims of foreign language learning in a communicative framework is the teaching/learning of "*…languages for the ultimate goal of communication with other speakers of the target language*". This statement means that the language learnt in a classroom setting will later serve as a tool to communicate with native speakers or other learners. Fortunately, this corroborates our investigations. The communicative approach joins the competency-based approach since they have the same goal which is to train students for authentic interactions. But whatever the methods or the contents of the programs are, the success or the failure of the English language teaching/learning lays in the implementation of these methods.

Origins and Implementation of the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) in Benin

The development of a country rests fundamentally on the quality of its educational system. Therefore, from Greco-Roman antiquity to the present day, education has always been a priority for human beings. Today, many scholars compete with imagination and creativity in the design of tools for remedial teaching to maximize students' achievement. They offer new training routes face to the thorny issue of youth employment in a changing world and a labour market increasingly demanding. Taking advantage of the wind of democracy that swept over much of Africa in the early 1990s, Benin has embarked on major reforms, including that of education, with a backdrop, the formation of a new type of citizen, in line with the socio-political and economic realities. To meet the expectations of the population, policymakers and technicians of the

Beninese education system have identified the skills approach (CBA) to help achieve their ambitions. Far from being regarded as the source of final resolution of the problems facing our education system, it is an instrument of work to challenge the conscience of each actor in the system, including teachers who are at the level of implementation of decisions in the classroom.

The implementation of the curriculum according to the CBA was performed gradually in three phases. The phase of experimenting during the 1994-1995 school year involved thirty (30) public schools in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. This was with five (5) schools by region. The extension phase started in the school year 1996-1997; it has to involve, as a first step, one hundred fifty (150) public and private schools and expanding the support bases of the experiment. The phase of generalization from the 1999-2000 school years for primary education and which has reached the end of this cycle (CM2) in September 2004-2005. This stage has its epilogue in secondary schools in the fall of 2011-2012 throughout the country. Training by the competency-based approach is an integrated teaching/learning and assessment based on cognitivism, constructivism and social constructivism. To achieve the goal of this conception, the teacher has a great role in the implementation of the CBA.

Factors Explaining Secondary Schools Students' Difficulties Related to the Language Learning

The goal of teaching the language is to enhance communicative efficiency. But when learners try to express themselves, there is hesitation, cliché expressions which fill in pauses, much repetition and frequent indefiniteness as the speaker seeks the most convenient combination of elements to express their intended meaning. These difficulties are due to a lack of interest in the subject, poor listening practice, deficient vocabulary, lack of self-confidence and the fear of making mistakes.

Many writers are interested in the problems hindering the acquisition of the English language. One of them is G. Brown (1977:221) who stated: "*students' failure comes from the sort of extremely slow form of pronunciation pupils are accustomed to*". Another problem hindering the success of English language teaching for oral proficiency is the characteristics of our secondary school situation. In fact, English is rarely taught in secondary schools in the most efficient way possible. There are many reasons for this, most of them historical and administrative. One of them is stated here by Christopher Brumfit (1984), '*Language teaching and particularly English is subject to many external political considerations which may justify taking many decisions but which will not justify spending enough money to make learning successful*'. Unfortunately, this statement of C. Brumfit is true. In fact, during our research work, we noticed that political issues are directly related to our educational system. The decisions, if they are not simply thrown into garbage cans, are not always followed by appropriate or concrete acts. One of the examples is the "bad" implementation of what we called "new syllabus", mainly because of the shortcoming appropriate measures. Another example is the political decision to free schooling in primary schools for boys and girls alike, and recently the decision-making of secondary schools free of charge for girls. None of those decisions was

followed up by appropriate measures to go with. Consequently, they raise more problems than they solve.

METHODOLOGY

After considering the research question we decided that both quantitative and qualitative research would be appropriate to handle it. To have clear and accurate information about the issue, a field investigation is carried out. During this investigation, some relevant data have been collected in the educational environment, the population of which is made up of teachers and students sixteen secondary schools randomly selected from rural and urban areas in Ouéme/Plateau regions. Among the research instruments, we have identified questionnaires as the most reliable tools that could help us collect data for this research work. In this respect, we have set up two different samples depending on the information we wanted to get from each of the target population. We distributed questionnaire number one to thirty-two teachers and questionnaire number two to eighty students. Class observations were also used to collect data.

Table 1: Different samples

Schools	The number of teachers selected		The number of students selected	
	Having received the questionnaire	Having answered	Having received the questionnaire	Having answered
School 1	02	02	05	05
School 2	02	02	05	05
School 3	02	02	05	05
School 4	02	02	05	05
School 5	02	02	05	05
School 6	02	02	05	05
School 7	02	02	05	05
School 8	02	02	05	05
School 9	02	02	05	05
School 10	02	02	05	05
TOTAL	20	20	50	50

Source: Our compilation (Field research 2021)

Instruments

This research work has been implemented with regard to a descriptive and evaluative methodology. To have an understanding of this investigation, we think it is interesting describing each of the investigation instruments.

The Students' Questionnaires

This questionnaire is addressed to learners of English as a foreign language in Benin secondary schools. It aims to investigate the effective use of appropriate practices in classes during English lessons to facilitate this language learning for communicative purposes. It is made up of nine questions which are designed to collect information about the duration since which students have been learning English and their difficulties, their needs, the importance of this language, and their suggestions.

The Teachers' Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed for the teachers in charge of teaching English as a foreign language in Benin secondary schools. The objective of this questionnaire with its eleven questions is to collect information about teachers, their strategies in CBA context, and to seek factors which may hinder the oral proficiency teaching/learning process in English classes.

Class Observations

This instrument has been used in six secondary schools. The purpose of these observations is to make sure of the relevance of the activities and materials used by the teachers for the development of speaking skills by the students and to check if the English language teaching-learning is learner-centred and whether appropriate methods and strategies are used as recommended by CBA. The following grid has been purposefully designed to achieve that goal:

Table 2: Observation Grid

Items	1	2	3	4	5
Designing adequate material					
Efficient use of material					
Classroom atmosphere conducive					
Students' motivation					
Student participation					
Learner centered class					
Strategies					
Reaching lesson objectives					
Lesson planning					
TTT vs STT					

1-Poor; 2- Fair; 3- Good; 4- Very good; 5- Excellent.

RESULTS

This section presents and analyses the data collected during the investigation.

Teachers' Answers

Table 3: Teachers' Teaching Service

Length of Service (years)	Frequency	Percentage
0-5	04	6.84
5-10	37	71.23
10-15	09	17.80
Above 15	02	4.10
Total	52	99.97

These data show that the majority (71.23%) of EFL teachers have at most ten years of teaching experience. 6.84% have less than five years of experience, and 17.80% have more than ten years of experience, but only 4.10% are more than fifteen years experienced. So most of our EFL teachers are very young in the teaching field.

Table 4: Teachers' Qualifications

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
BAC	00	00
DUEL	04	07.69
LICENCE	19	36.53
MAITRISE	04	07.69
BAPES	21	40.38
CAPES	04	07.69
Total	52	99.6

This table shows that EFL teachers in our secondary school are less qualified than what should be expected. Only 7.69 owned CAPES, and 40.38 of them have BAPES. But the large majority are teaching with an academic qualification (7.69% for Duel, 36.53% for licence and 7.69% for maîtrise) instead of a professional one.
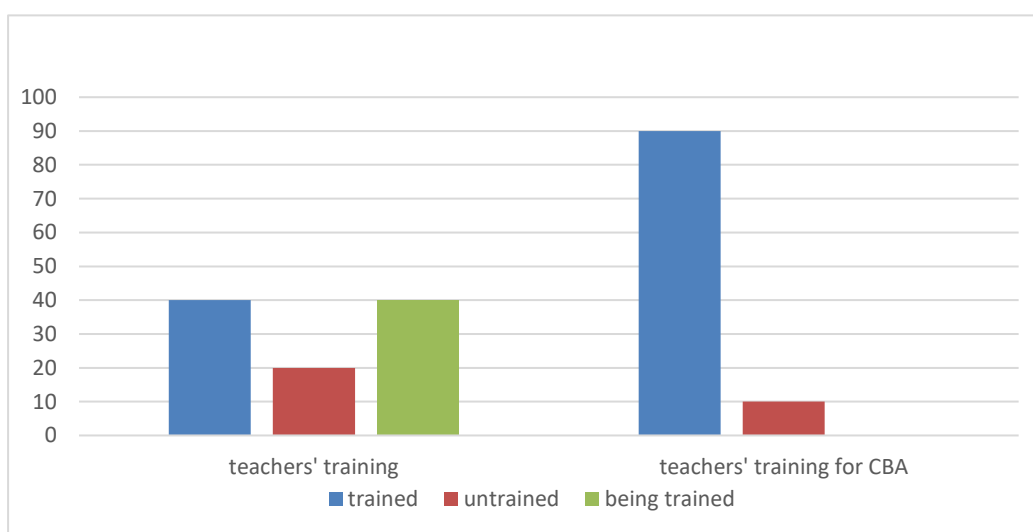
Figure 1: Teachers' Training

These data corroborate what has been said previously that many teachers are untrained. But 90% have been trained for CBA. Only 10% of teachers have never attended a CBA training. Nevertheless, many obstacles are still hindering the right implementation of CBA.
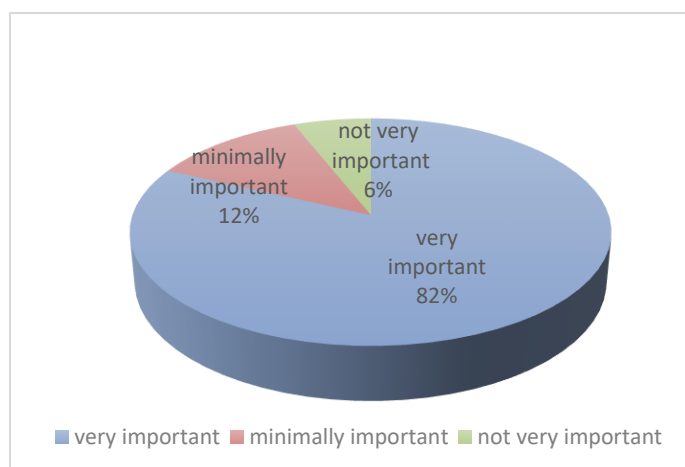
Figure 2: Importance of Students' Oral Proficiency

Most of the respondents think that students' oral proficiency is very important (82%). Only 6% have answered that it is not very important.
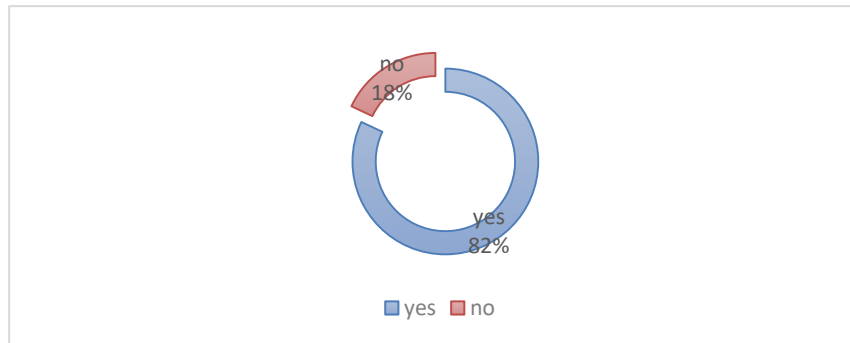

Figure 3: Teaching Oral Proficiency

When the teachers were asked whether oral proficiency should be taught, 82% have answered 'yes' and 18% said 'no'.

Table 5: Oral Proficiency Teaching Techniques

Techniques	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Discussion/ debates	52	100
Games	52	100
Songs	52	100
Riddles and proverbs	00	00
Role-play	52	100
Audio-materials	02	3.84
Trips	00	00
TV programs	00	00

The results in the table show that all the respondents, this to say 100% of the teachers have suggested discussions/debates, games, songs, and role-play as oral proficiency teaching techniques. Very few of them use audio materials (3.84%). None of the respondents uses trips or TV programmes.
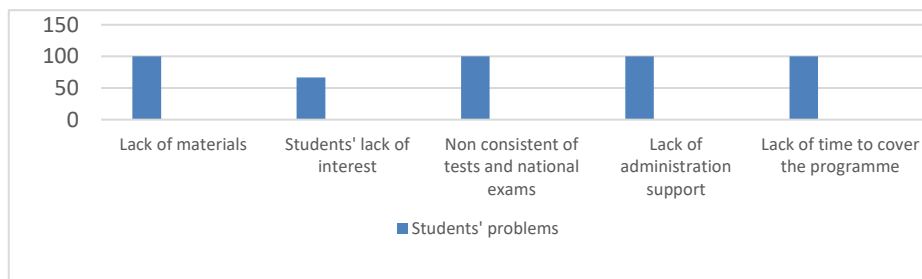

Figure 4: Problems Encountered by Teachers in Trying to Enhance Oral Proficiency

The results show that all the teachers (100%) have almost the same problems in trying to enhance students' oral proficiency. These include lack of materials, students' lack of interest, non-consistent of tests and national exams, lack of administrative support and lack of time to cover the programme.
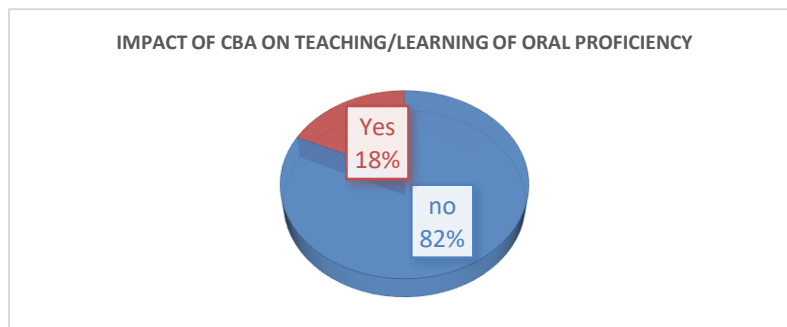
Figure 5: CBA's Impact on the Teaching/Learning Oral Proficiency

This figure reveals that CBA does not really impact the teaching/learning of oral proficiency (82% of "no'' against 18% of 'yes' as an evidence).
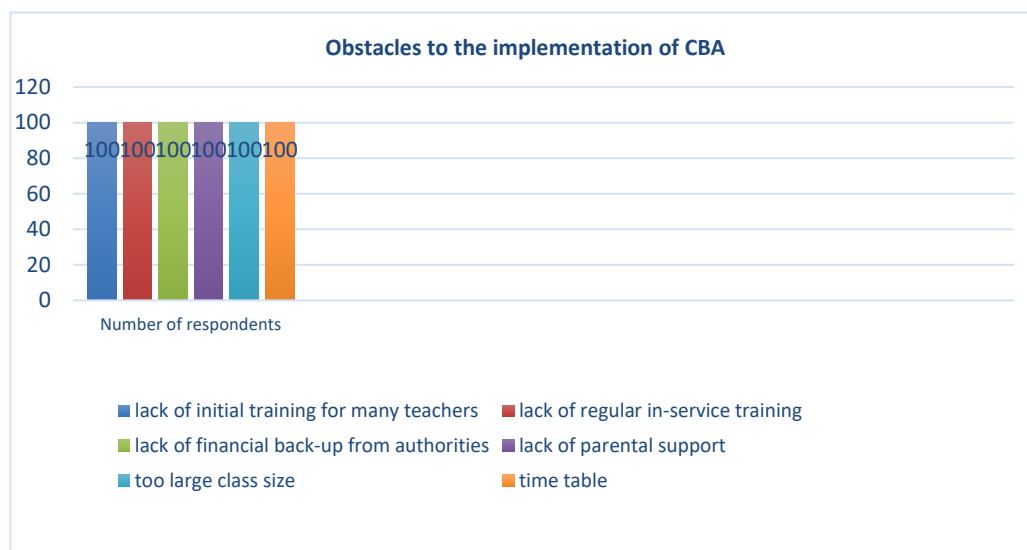

Figure 6: Problems Hindering the Best Implementation of CBA

This chart points out some of the problems hindering the best implementation of CBA. 100% of the teachers have identified the lack of initial training for many teachers, the lack of regular in-service training, the lack of financial back-up from authorities, the lack of parental support, the size of our classes (too large) and the time allotted to English as obstacles to the implementation of CBA.

Students' Questionnaire

Table 6: Students' Numbers of Years in Learning English

Length of learning (Years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0-3	166	22.80
3-6	228	31.22
Above 6	336	45.96
Total	730	99.98

This table reveals that 31.22% of the respondent students have spent at least three to six years learning the language, and more than six years for 45.96%. Only 22.80% of them have been learning English for less than three years.
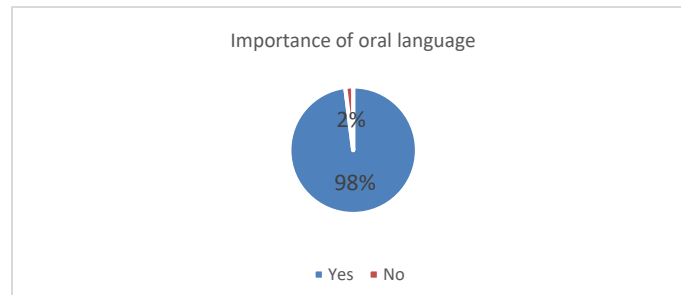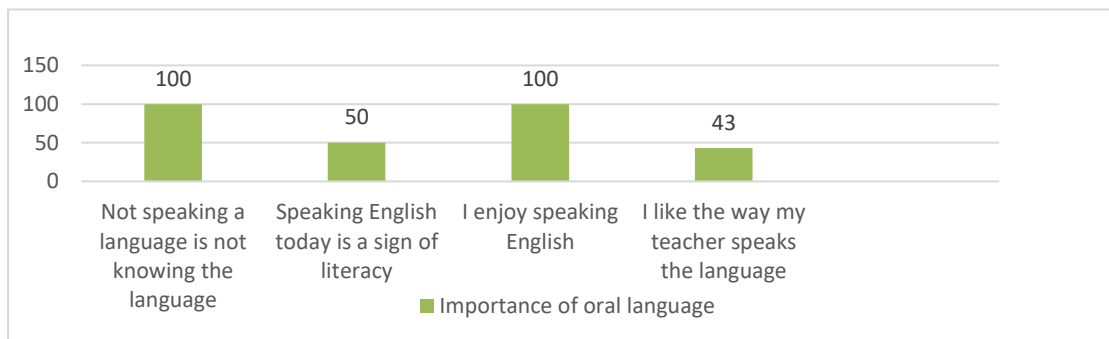

Figure 7: Importance of Oral Language

According to the results of this pie chart, the highest number of students know the

importance of oral language. 98% of them point 'yes' against 2% of 'no'.

Figure 8: Reasons Accounting for Oral Language Importance

According to these students, many reasons account for oral language importance. They all believe that not speaking a language is not knowing the language, and they added that they enjoy speaking the language. 43% of them also point out the way their teacher speaks the language.
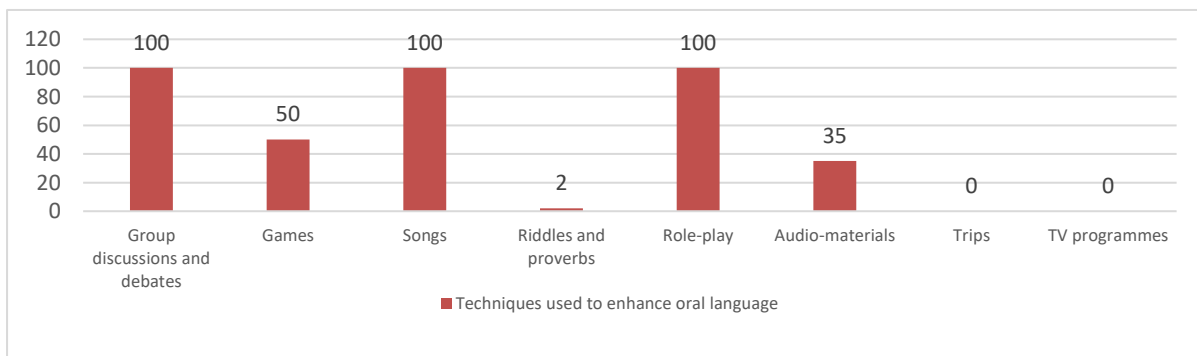

Figure 9: Techniques Used to Enhance Oral Proficiency

The results in this figure reveal techniques used by teachers to enhance their students' oral proficiency. 100% have confessed that they are involved in group discussions and debates, songs and role-play. 50% and 35% respectively, say that their teachers use games and audio materials. This chart also shows that only 2% of teachers rarely use riddles and proverbs as techniques to improve their learners' oral fluency.
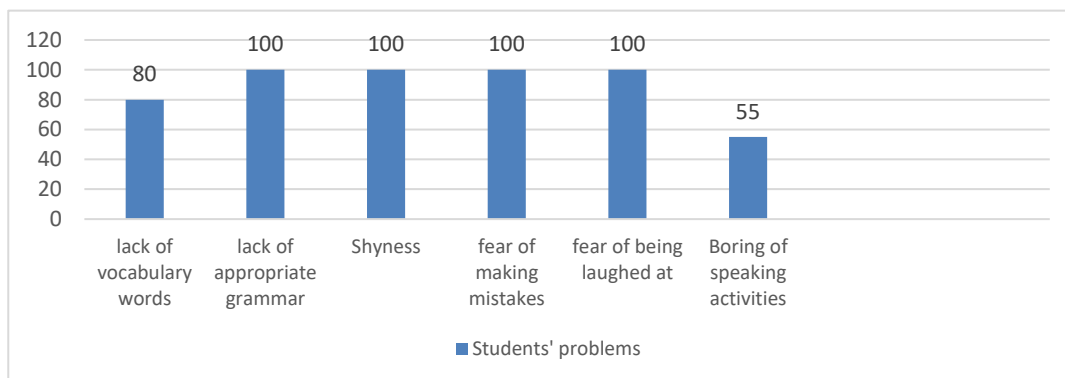

Figure 10: Problems Encountered by Students in Speaking English

According to the results from this figure, we notice that 80% of the students think their weaknesses in the speaking skill are due to the lack of vocabulary, while 100% say that grammar, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being laughed at are the reasons behind their weaknesses in speaking. And 55% answered that their difficulties to speak rely on the boredom of speaking activities.
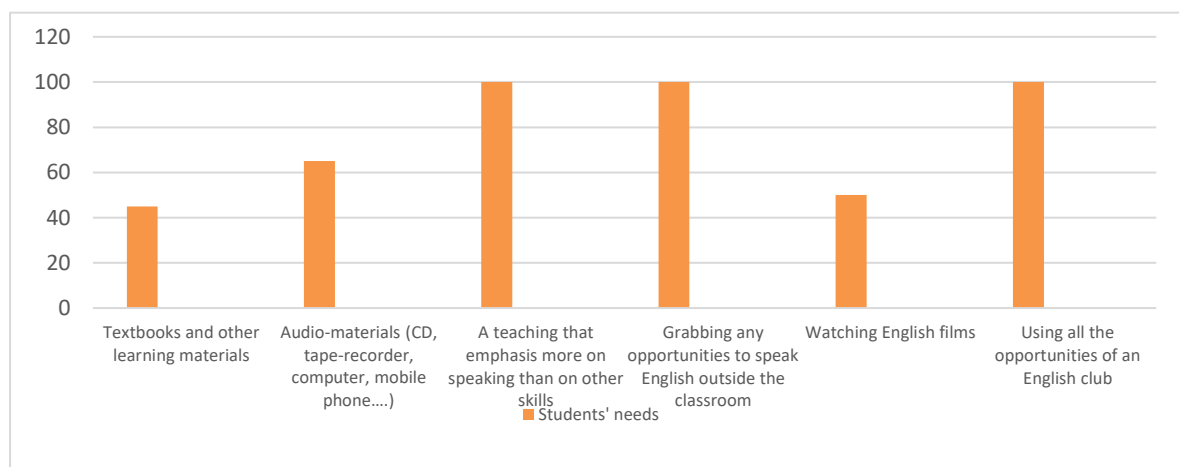

Figure 11: Students' Needs to Improve Their Oral Language

Here, the results reveal the students' needs to improve their oral language. 100% of them need teaching that emphasizes more speaking than on other skills, opportunities to speak English outside the classroom and they call for English clubs. Many others need audio materials (60%) and textbooks (45%). And 50% would like to watch English films.

A Summary of the Data Got from the Class Observations

The data collected from the class observations can be summarized as follows:

- lack of adequate materials leading to the use of the teachers' voice only;
- lack of students' books;

- inopportune timetable;

- teaching deficiency as an obstacle for effective English learning;

- the necessity of practicing listening to develop linguistic, phonetic and phonological knowledge through various activities;

- learners' negative attitude as a hindrance to English learning;

- social and linguistics environment of Benin as an impediment to effective English learning;

- stringent economic factors accounting for the lack of infrastructures—and teaching materials, inappropriate classrooms, overcrowded classes, etc.

INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

These results show that many students like English. But they are not taught the right way that could help them use the language. We can say that students really desire to speak English, but their attitudes in class show that they are learning it to pass school examinations and evaluations. Both teachers and students complain about the same difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, and lack of materials…

The problem of teachers' training is acutely raised through these data. The teachers' teaching experience and their qualifications, reveal that the majority of questioned teachers are young with academic degrees, but without professional qualifications. Only forty percent of the respondent English teachers are trained. So, the teaching staff, in general, is poor in most of the secondary schools in Benin. This mainly accounts for the students' failure in the English learning process as Valetta stated, *'the most important factor of success of a second language course, is the teacher'*. This lack of initial training is an obstacle in the teaching/learning process.

But the fact that the majority of the respondent teachers have been trained for CBA, certainly through in service-training, points out the important role of regular in-service training. This is the only way to improve teachers' capacity and empower them. It will also help to better the implementation of C.B.A which is part of their challenge. Unfortunately, not using appropriate materials in the appropriate way, is one of the breaks to oral fluency in our context of a French-speaking country. In fact, in this context, only audio materials are the only authentic means to bring a native speaker's voice into the class.

Most English teachers and their students think that oral proficiency should be taught through group discussions and debates,–games and songs, and role-play. Regrettably, teachers complain about many problems encountered in trying to enhance their students' oral proficiency. These problems reveal in chart 4 are almost the same in most of our secondary schools. They point out the non-existence of language teaching/learning materials especially audio equipment in our secondary schools. As an evidence, the class observations during my investigation, reveal that our secondary schools have none of those materials. This correlates with one of the administrative

problems raised by Christopher Brumfit (1984). In fact, he states that *'Language teaching and particularly English is subject to many external political considerations which may justify taking many decisions but which will not justify spending enough money to make learning successful'*. So the problem of dotation of our schools with appropriate materials should be solved to make language teaching efficient.

Moreover, the results show students' lack of interest in speaking English, lack of administration support, and lack of time to cover the programme. This investigation also reveals that class tests and national exams are not consistent with the importance of oral proficiency. In fact, oral proficiency is not really tested during exams. Then less time is devoted to its teaching in our classes. Consequently, CBA is not having a real impact on the teaching/learning of oral proficiency because of many obstacles to its proper implementation revealed in chart 6 (page 61). This does not mean that our secondary schools reject it. In fact, hundred percent of the questioned teachers confessed that CBA has failed in impacting oral proficiency because of the lack of initial training for many teachers, the lack of financial back-up from educational authorities and the lack of parental support.

SUGGESTIONS

To find solutions to the above-mentioned problems, suggestions are addressed to educational authorities, teachers, parents and learners to improve the target language development in the process of EFL learning in the secondary schools in Benin. It is obvious that the government, the educational authorities and the other actors of education should

- recruit well-trained English teachers, and allot enough time to English learning and teaching in the syllabus. Furthermore, what is particularly recommended here is to allot more time to practice than theoretical lessons to involve learners in the process of EFL learning for oral proficiency.

- endow Benin schools with teaching materials which bring other voices into classrooms and give the students valuable practice in listening to varieties of English.

- build up more classrooms to avoid a plethoric number of students in our secondary schools' classrooms, since overcrowded classrooms do not enable teachers to work in comfortable conditions. Furthermore, teachers' motivation implies an increase in their wages.

- design short and vivid activities to get students familiar with them and to raise their interest and confidence through task-demand activities that are contextualised. These activities should be varied and multifaceted: monitoring activities; information processing activities; problem-solving activities and projects; production activities; communication and representation activities.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights some important aspects of the process of foreign language teaching and learning. Through this research, we hypothesized that if we are going to develop the students' oral proficiency, we should provide them with more opportunities to use the language. We believe that the proper implementation of CBA in the field of language learning is essential for promoting oral communication because it creates many situations where learners interact with their peers, help each other, discuss different issues and increase their level of understanding.

The study seeks to illustrate that learning a foreign language is not only a matter of developing linguistic competence, but also improving the ability to communicate in various social contexts. If teachers apply CBA in the classroom, learners' speaking skills will be developed. Indeed, the CBA allows students to speak, interact with each other and express themselves, to acquire this foreign language.

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