

Requirements and challenges to teach English as a Foreign Language in kindergarten and primary schools: Experiences of Parakou city bilingual private schools

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Abstract

The present study is carried out in Parakou located in northern side of Benin. It aims to highlight the tremendous requirements and challenges of EFL teaching in kindergarten and primary schools. In order to reach this goal, 6 bilingual private kindergarten and primary schools have been selected. Thus, 10 learners, 10 kindergarten teachers and 20 primary school teachers are the target populations which are taken into consideration through random procedures. Which procedures are composed of: questionnaires and interviews techniques used for data collection? The statistical analysis with R (3.2.3) software has revealed that although English teaching in kindergarten and primary schools is beneficial for learners and even for their environment, it necessitates from the stakeholders some requirements. The results deriving from this study have shown that, the schools investigated are still confronted to classroom management problems, infrastructures problem, teachers' skill development issues, lack of practices and strategies etc. However, teachers did their best to give students listening and speaking abilities based on their age. Since, the learners could react with their teachers and interact with one another for the purpose of language for communication.

Key words: *Requirements, challenges, private primary schools, EFL teachers, learners*

Introduction

In Benin, English is taught in the secondary schools but for some years, many private kindergartens and primary schools have emerged to offer younger children the opportunity to learn English. As a result, the necessity to reach bilingualism becomes an obligation. English has to be taught from kindergarten and primary school so that the children will be accustomed to that language before reaching secondary school. They have also understood that doing so will have an important impact in the process of acquiring a second language or foreign language which is English. Children will be able to speak both the official language French and the second language English easily.

In fact, learning English language in secondary schools for seven years has demonstrated many insufficiencies in the teaching/Learning and evaluating procedures. The more people understand the role played by the English language, the more private bilingual kindergartens and primary schools are created and people are sending their children to those schools. As more and more children from the country in which English is not the official language enter those schools, teachers face the daunting challenge of instructing children who have limited skills in the English language. So, this is a new field for English teachers which have assets to the challenges and all the teachers need to know something about how children learn a second and foreign language.

The private bilingual kindergarten and primary schools teach the English language fundamental skills to children all along the nursery and primary career. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be an easy task. It becomes a challenge to get children be accustomed to a new language. However, many former surveys show that younger learners (children from 0 to 7 years) could understand and produce many languages at the same time.

Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that children are highly motivated to read languages than any adult. And we could confess that children's brains are more flexible. They can learn easily because their cortex is more plastic than that of the older learners in learning a new language.

Thus, children have the ability to learn language and they begin to communicate with everyone in their environment by practicing and rehearsing sound, gestures and developing their personality and sense of being. As they experience repeated situations such as mealtimes and play, they hear language associated with the situation and eventually they learn to understand and express themselves in the language.

In the present study, the stress is on the requirements and the challenges of teaching of English as a Foreign Language in private kindergarten and primary schools in Benin as French language speaker.

1. Literature Review

In the framework of the present research work, many former research surveys in the field of teaching/learning and evaluating English language in primary schools have drawn out attention in terms of experiences and outcomes.

Nikolov (2009), Papp (2011), Hsu & Austin (2012) focused their research on the age factor and teaching languages to younger learner. They concluded that these days foreign language curriculums in school are starting at an increasingly early age around the world and English has become the most popular or second language to study. It will better for children to start learning English at the age of five or younger. **Richard Johnson (2001)** also concerning the age factor argues that an early start is in principle advantageous, because it allows a longer time overall for learning; it allows children to learn naturally as younger learners but they have to learn more analytically as older children as they grow up; as such, it gives learners the opportunity to integrate and further develop these different sorts of learning experience. What children learn at that age will have a huge effect in their own life while growing up. So, many factors led these authors to support that early childhood is the most beneficial that's why others authors tried enlighten this issue by carrying out their research on why starting learning English from childhood is important.

Barry McLaughlin (1992), Lenneberg (1967), Penfields (1959), came at the conclusion that children learn second languages quickly and easily. Their argument is that children are superior to adults in learning languages. English in kindergarten and primary school is appropriate. I share their viewpoints; children learn more easily languages than adults. Even in our environment we can notice that when a child lives in an area where its own language is not spoken, he can speak it easily the language of that area unlikely to adults for whom it will be more difficult. For the success of English learning in early childhood motivation is the key elements; it is certainly what motivates some authors think about what will affect children in learning English.

Hunter (1998), Gardner, Lambert (1996); through their research, found out that motivation is very important in learning a foreign language. **Hunter** defines motivation as a student's intent to learn and suggests that it is one of the most important factors in foreign language success. She suggests that motivation is not generic, but rather can be learned. If it can be learned, then so it can be taught. Therefore, teachers should become skilled in the use of techniques to increase motivation. This shows that the success of any English class depends on the motivation of the children. So, it is up to the teacher to know how he will motivate the children to learn English. I can say that it is obvious that motivation plays a huge role in learning English because if someone is not motivated, he won't be easy for him to learn it properly. So, whatever someone is doing, if there is no motivation he cannot succeed. To be able to get children motivated in learning English, how the teacher should be and what he should do in order reach that goal. It is to these last questions some authors tried to answer in undertaking their research on the teachers' qualities and qualifications.

Garton (2011), Copland, Burns (2004), Rixon (2000), Cameron (2011) led their research on the teacher's qualifications and on how kindergarten and primary school teacher should be. They found out that the teacher must be a qualified teacher with a good training and a qualification for teaching English to younger children. They suggested that teachers should be given a more specialized training aimed at equipping them with the specific requirement to face the challenges of this job. **Cameron** believes there are two common misconceptions related to teaching English to young learners: firstly, teaching English is a straightforward process that can be undertaken by anyone with a basic training in English Language Teaching, and secondly the language taught to children only needs to be simple as cognitively, they are not as developed as adult or teenage learners. **Cameron's** points emphasize the necessity of specific training for primary school teachers and think that a learning-centered perspective will help to teach effectively English to younger learners. And stipulated as follow: "*the teacher has to do what the child may not be able to do to keep in sight*

the longer view, and move the child towards increasingly demanding challenge, so that no learning potential is wasted. A learning-centered perspective on teaching will, I believe, help us to do that more effectively". As far as I'm concerned, I approve that the teachers in kindergartens and primary schools should be well trained and qualified to teach learners of that age. However, what methods he should use to teach effectively are also important, that's many authors tried to figure out what are the methods to use.

August, Pease-Alvarez (1996); Ernst-Slavit, Moore, Maloney (2002); Gersten (1996); Kubota (1998) Lake, Pappamihel (2002); Miller, Endo (2004) Oxford (1996); all oriented their study on the teaching methods and concluded that using various approaches is better. It is widely recommended that teachers become flexible in using the various approaches so that they more are responsive to the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive needs of individual students. The differential use of strategies by different learners and learners' levels suggests that intervention needs to be varied in order to address student learning needs and learning styles. They suggested that new technologies can be incorporated such as using audio-visual aids in the teaching in order to have their message passed accurately. Noting that a well-trained teacher means that he is able to use appropriate methods to get the learners motivated and to have their attention so that they can easily master what he is teaching them. So, he sees that one method is not fitting anymore the children; he should change it by a new one. By doing so, the teacher should not put aside the children's first language, that's what probably led some authors to carry out their research on the impact of the children first language.

Fred Genesee (1994) focused on the fact that children first language cannot be dropped, the learning of English should pass by the children first language. He argued that children's first language is closely tied to their identity, and encouraging ongoing development of first language eases the social and emotional transition that occurs when children begin school. Teacher should be aware of that and use the students' first language to teach. Concerning the viewpoint of Genesee, Yet, most researchers support that the first language should not be dropped. The teacher should use it to explain the lesson that is tough for them to understand in English when there is no solution but not to teach English in children first language. So, the first language should not be used at any time except when there is no other perspective. As in every class the children are not the same, they all have from different backgrounds; it is how to deal with their individual differences that led authors to work on this aspect.

Eve Gregory (1997) reported that children learning the English language bring to the classroom many individual differences. They are coming from different ethnic, social or cultural group; they don't have the same background and have brought up differently. This cannot be an obstacle for Requirements and challenges to teach English as a Foreign Language in kindergarten and primary schools: Experiences of Parakou city bilingual private schools
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the teacher and it is a challenge that the teacher will face. He is the one to use the teaching method that will be suitable for all the children at any time. To that end, the individual differences should not be an obstacle for teacher. He is the one who should manage its classroom and put the learners at the same level by being fair.

2. Context of the study and the research site

The present research work was carried out in the kindergarten and primary schools of the municipality of Parakou. Which city, belongs to the “department of Borgou” in the North of Benin. It is limited to the North by the municipality of N’Dali, to the South, East and West by the municipality of Tchaourou (Afrique Conseil, 2006).

2.1 Problem statement and the issue of approaches

With the expansion of the English language in our society especially and in the world generally, Benin is now tending to bilingualism. English is becoming more and more compulsory. That’s the reason why many private bilingual kindergartens and primary schools are created, and some of them which were not bilingual have now turned into bilingual ones. All these schools start teaching English to such younger learners. Many surveys have been carried out in this domain under diverse aspects and have led to very useful and interesting results. The ones we could mention here are as follows: Early childhood programs support approaches for younger learners that encourage developmentally appropriate teaching practices. As Nissani (1990) noted: “learning goes on developmentally as the child matures. Intellectual learning is fostered but not given priority over physical, social and emotional learning. Self –discipline is encouraged as is self-esteem”.

A developmentally appropriate approach puts the child at the forefront of the learning process and stresses the importance of nurturing primary school learners as they develop physically, cognitively, and personally. Teachers should explore the characteristics of children that affect the learning process. As most teachers will attest, primary school learners are talkative and spontaneous. Such developmentally appropriate approaches have their roots in Piaget (1970), who emphasizes that children are active learners and thinkers who make sense of the world by interacting with their physical environment. As the primary school learners will acquire through interaction with an adult needs to support this learning process for them to be granted as new knowledge and skills within their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the difference between what a child can achieve alone and what he/she can achieve with the help of the teachers, parents and tutors.

Consequently, it seems important nowadays to add more value in order to have the best area where both English learners and teachers can reach their goal in the process of learning English in early

childhood. The results of this work could be a support that can help private bilingual kindergartens and primary schools to enhance and reshape the way they teach English as foreign language. So globally speaking, can Benin reach the bilingualism for its real entrance in the world of globalization?

2.2 Objective of the research

The main objective in this research work is to analyze the difficulties that hamper the teaching-learning process of EFL to kindergarten and primary school students in this community of Benin. More precisely, our survey questions are rephrased as follows:

- 1- Could we objectively demonstrate the importance and the benefits of teaching and learning English in early childhood?
- 2- How to figure out with the type of challenges all actors are facing?
- 3- What are the suitable pedagogical, didactic needs and needs analysis for the English language learning in kindergartens and primary schools in Benin?

3. Methodology

Many strategies and tips were used to collect data with the use of appropriate tools in the language didactics.

3.1 Target population and sampling procedure

The target population of the present research work was some private bilingual kindergartens and primary school English teachers of Parakou and some of the learners of those schools chosen at random. Those teachers and learners were from different private bilingual schools of Parakou namely: the Nigerian international school, the “St Hubert” Catholic school, the “Quartier Latin” bilingual school, the “Les Anges” Franco-American school, the “Divine favor” bilingual school and the “Paix Hountondji” bilingual school. The total number of kindergarten teachers was ten (10) and all of them are male teachers (22 – 32 years old) those in primary schools was twenty (20) consisting in sixteen (16) male teachers (22- 35 years old) and four (04) female ones (19- 26 years old) and the learners interviewed were ten (10), comprising eight (08) male learners (3 – 7 years old) and two (02) females (2 ½ - 5 years old).

3.2 Instrument and data collection

To reach easily the goals assigned, questionnaires with about ten (10) typical questions about the necessity to learn English in Primary schools were designed for the kindergartens and the primary schools’ teachers, and questions for interviewing some learners about English language learning. The questionnaires for kindergartens and primary schools’ learners were slightly different; and, as

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some of the kindergartens and primary schools learners could not answer the questions. From that perspective, the strategy used in to converse with them in very simple and elementary classroom sequences with them. Before getting access to each school, discussions were engaged with the headmaster so as to get his/her consent. Then, the questionnaires were given to the English teachers directly or via the headmasters. After that, according to the timetable, appointment programs were made so as to come back and collect the questionnaires. For the learners' interview, it was during the break time and some during lesson situation with the consent of the school administrations.

3.3 Statistical analysis

After collecting and spoiling the data, it was proceeded to the computerizing with Excel 2007 software. Brief verification was done and the statistical analysis was realized with R (3.2.3) software. Qualitative tool was used and has consisted to the analysis of the opinions and point of views of the participants. Also, quantitative analysis was done through the calculation of the descriptive statistics such as the frequencies and statistics. This quantitative design is chosen for evaluating the figures revealed in the data survey in consideration to the number of actors involved for better decision making by the appropriate institution.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Presentation of findings

The results of the research obtained have been detailed through three steps. The first has dealt with the presentation of the kindergarten teachers' answers, the one of the primary school teachers' and then the learners' responses.

4.1.1. Kindergarten teachers' answers

The results have showed that five (05) teachers, it is (50%), taught English more than four times a week, 20% of them, that is two (02), taught four times a week, 10% of them three times and 20% of them taught twice a week. When we look at the duration of an English class, we notice that 70% of a class, that is seven (07), lasted less than one hour, 20% of a class lasted one hour and 10% last more than one hour.

As far as the mean age of the children is concerned, 80% of the children were around three (03) years old and 20% of them were around four (04) years old. Dealing with the qualification of the teachers; it was noticed that 30% of the teachers, it is three (03), graduated of o-level (BEPC), 10% of them were graduated of A-level (Baccalaureate), 20% graduated of Bachelor degree, 20% had professional teaching graduation (CAPES) and 20% answered with "any other". The teachers who

answered “any other” are the ones from the Nigerian International School and they are Nigerian teacher with Nigerian English qualifications. Concerning the question about if they were specialists of teaching kinder learners, 60% of them said “yes” and 40% answered by “no”.

For the question of the most taught skills, 20% taught speaking the most, 10% taught listening, and 10% taught reading, 10% writing and 50% both listening and speaking. Concerning the materials used to teach, 20% the teachers used books, 40% used flashcards, 10% used audio-visual aids and 30% the materials such as (books, flashcards, audio-visual aids and others). They responded that all the materials used were adapted to EFL learners in kindergartens. For the question concerning the learners’ reaction, 80% of the teachers answered that the learners react in a good way whereas 20% answered they don’t react very well. Indeed, all of the teachers thought that it is beneficial to start teaching English from kindergarten.

4.1.2. Primary schools’ teachers’ answers

Through the investigations, it was noticed that about the English teaching frequency per week in primary school, 5% of the teachers taught once, 10% taught twice, 25% taught three times, 40% taught four times and 20% taught more than four times in a week. Concerning the duration of an English class, 35% of an English class lasted one hour, 5% lasted one and half hour, 40% lasted two hours and 20% lasted less than one hour.

As far as the teachers’ qualification is concerned, 5% had the O-level graduation (BEPC), 15% had A-level graduation (Baccalaureat), 35% had a Bachelor degree, 25% had certified teaching graduation (CAPES) and 20% had other qualifications (they were the teachers from the Nigerian International School with Nigerian qualifications). Among those teachers, 70% of them were specialists in teaching English to primary schools’ learners whereas only 30% were not. Also, 75% of them had available documents on TEFL in primary school whereas 25% had no documents related to this domain.

Concerning the materials used to teach, 60% used only books, 5% use only flashcards, 30% used books and flashcards while 5% used all the materials possible audio visuals aids and others included. According to the teachers, all the materials used were adapted to EFL learners in primary schools. Also, it was noticed that 100% of the teachers interacted with the learners while class activities.

For the most taught skills, 15% taught listening the most, 10% taught speaking the most, 5% taught reading the most, and 30% taught listening and speaking the most and 40% all the skills. For the skills they want their learners to develop, 15% wanted their learners to develop the listening

skill, 40% wanted the learners to develop the speaking skill, 5% the reading skill, 5% the writing skill and 20% wanted the learners to develop all the skills.

Dealing with the reaction of the learners during the English class, 85% answered that the learners react in a good way and just 15% answered that they didn't react in a good way. Additionally, 65% of the teachers answered that the learners were able to speak spontaneously and 35% answered that they are not. As teaching strategy, 90% of the teachers mixed both French and English in their class whereas 5% did not and 5% did not always mix. For partnership relations, 75% of the teachers collaborate with the other bilingual schools teachers whereas 35% did not. To sum up, teachers at 100% have answered that it is beneficial to start teaching English to students from primary schools.

4.1.3. Learners' interview answers

Through the result, it is remarkable that all the kindergarten and primary schools' learners have at least the basic knowledge of English. Such observation is evidenced by the learners' capability to greet people and to answer some elementary questions based on language classroom sequences (Learning situations). For example, concerning "if they like their English teacher", "they all answered" ("yes"). All of them interact with their English teacher, their mates and they all like English language.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Kindergarten teachers' answers

The study revealed that 50% of the kindergarten teachers have taught per week English more than four time and 20% four times; and 70% of the classes last less than one hour and 20% one hour. This is good remark because it permits learners to be always in touch with English. As far as the duration is concerned, it is appreciated because children cannot concentrate themselves in something more than one hour. Thus, teachers can draw the children attention for some minutes but if the class want to exceed one hour, it sounds boring for the children and they will start having fun. These findings corroborate those of Blanka (2012) who thought that kindergarten students need a required timing in English class. He goes further to suggest a limitation in the classroom hour which can be between 20-30 minutes. However, it is up to the teacher to focus on the required topic in class which in adverse can motivate the learners (Blanka, 2011; 2012).

The mean age of the children was 3 years old and as research have revealed, it might be beneficial to acquire a second language at that age. Then, it is an asset for the child since s/he picks up the language in the same way as s/he acquires his/her native language (Blanka, 2012; Mahu, 2012).

Only 30% of the teachers had O-level graduation (BEPC), 20% other degree and the 50% remaining had the A-level (Baccalauréat), CAPES and the Bachelor Degree and the majority said that they had specialists in teaching English to children of such age. Such situation although seemingly was uncomfortable, on other hand was an asset since that majority of teachers were specialist; and it remains just to reinforce their capability. Teaching younger learners is something that should be undertaken by someone specialized in this domain because it is a huge task.

Almost all the teachers taught listening and speaking the most. That is normal because those two skills are the most important among the four competencies needed in EFL learning: speaking, listening, reading and writing (Tebea, 2017). Therefore, students can communicate easily in English. For reaching that goal it is noticeable that teachers used books, flashcards and others, but only 10% used audio-visual aid which was as result very important in teaching EFL. Anyway, the majority of the materials used were appropriate and connected to kindergarten learners. This was a fundamental condition to reach the goal assigned to those schools and for their success. Moreover, it is demonstrated that the children have reacted very well in English. That means that the effort made by the teachers was important. These results have confirmed those of Blanka, (2012) who has claimed that by adopting suitable materials and strategy such as practical working method of drawing, conversing and singing or reading poems by the medium of total physical response.

4.2.2 Primary school teachers' answers

The results have revealed that primary school teachers have taught English more than three times per week (25% three times, 40% four times and 20% more than four times) and the mean duration of a class was from one to two hours (35% one hour, 5% one and half hour and 40% two hours) whereas 20% less than one hour. The duration of the English has varied according to the class (from class one to class six). The children would always be in touch with the English language and environment through everyday routine which will help them to quickly master the language. Roughly, both the duration and frequency were acceptable like in kindergarten since the children were growing up. Such observations fitted those made by Muhammad and Tobar (2017) who had rejected full-day at the primary bilingual level. They argued that primary school students are young enough to support such a heavy curriculum.

And for the teachers' qualification, most of them have had at least the A-level graduation (Baccalauréat), some had the Bachelor degree and other the CAPES. It has shown that those teachers have had at least diploma (Baccalauréat), and among them 70% were specialists in the domain. Such remarks are not conformed to those of Eitan and Aviva (2017) who indicated that a

kindergarten or primary school teacher will train in a teachers' training college or university for four years and receive at the end of this time, a first degree with a "Bachelor Degree" to teach.

Indeed, the majority of them had available documents on EFL teaching for primary schools. This means that the children were certainly getting a good English instruction. The materials used to teach were adapted to EFL learners in primary schools, and had fitted with the documents authorized by government. Those materials are books, flashcards, audio-visual aids etc. However, just 5% use the audio-visual aids which were nowadays the most appropriate one. This is interesting and have demonstrated the primary bilingual schools' great effort to give relevant teaching to their learners. This is apprehended in the attitudes of the children who react in positive way.

As in the kindergarten, most of the teachers have focused on listening and speaking which are the first skills that people aim to improve language skills. According to Teba (2017), Abdelshafy (1994), the four (04) skills including listening and speaking are essential to English language mastering. This could be attained through interaction and that's why all the teachers interact with their learners easily. So, the teachers use songs, poems and games to stimulate children to speak even the shy ones. That fits with Blanka, (2012) who has focused on game, singing and others funny activities to catch learners' attention. Thus, many of them are able to speak spontaneously.

Most of the teachers mixed French and English to teach (90% of them), just 5% did not mix the two languages and 5% did, but not always. This was not bad because for the fact that learners' first language should not be dropped while acquiring a second language. Such observation is similar to those of Mahu, (2012), who thought that having an understanding of English as a foreign language also helps native language development. Collaborating with the other bilingual schools' English teachers was recommended and was adopted by 75% of the teachers; just 25% did do so. The collaboration with other teachers from different bilingual schools will help them to enhance how they teach and to share knowledge and experiences. All of those teachers agreed that it is beneficial to start English in primary schools. Starting English at that level is definitely profitable at the era of globalization and the increasing importance of English as an international language of communication (Mahu, 2012).

4.2.3 Students' answers

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The study has revealed that all of the learners interviewed master at least the elementary and primary English notably simple greetings. This is demonstrated through their capability to introduce their name, to answer simple questions, to interact in context etc. These remarks are also notice in Blanka (2012) who thought that students need to study a foreign language at younger age. Moreover, psychologists claim that it is good to start learning a second language as soon as possible because till the age of seven, all the percept is stored in the same area of one's brain (Blanka, 2012). However, after that age, each foreign speech has a different network of neurons, which consequently requires switching among individual networks (Blanka, 2012).

By so proceeding like this way, learners will become fluent as native speakers before they finish their secondary school in Benin system of education. Since, they have acquired good pronunciations and then, they understand in a quick way.

5. Recommendations and pedagogical implications

- Advanced teacher development in TEFL is a necessity
- Teacher development program on modern strategies in teaching English in primary schools must be a motive to a program efficiency
- Necessity to design visual aids related to the elaborated teaching guide
- Organizing contextualization sessions to clarify the mission goals of the new English teachers in primary schools
- Training sessions for school headmasters, pedagogical advisors in all bilingual schools
- Designing specific training program for modelling Benin strategies to the teaching / learning English in primary schools as a formal curriculum
- Organizing national forum of validating teaching / learning tools for all primary schools in Benin
- Organizing forum for designing professional training curricula for teachers of English to any primary schools whether private or public
- Determination and dissemination of primary school teachers' profile during entrance and exiting procedures of the program
- Determination and dissemination of primary school learners' profile during entrance and exiting procedures of the program.

Conclusion

The present research work on the challenges to the teaching of English language in kindergarten and primary schools of Parakou, have appeared like a diagnostic of the system. Through the study, it is demonstrated that various difficulties affect the teaching of EFL in those schools. Most of those problems are related to the lack of the infrastructures, the teachers' training, the class management, the frequency and the duration of English sessions.

However, this program needs deeper analysis in terms of pedagogy, psychology of learners and teachers. Such program in its objective implementation requires many forums of intellectual discussions. Anyway, technical and financial partners are needed for achieving the goal of bilingualism in Benin education system.

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