

CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH LEARNERS, IN KINSHASA SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Language is very important for communication and the ability to achieve communicative competence being production skills is a major aspect of language development and academic success among students at all levels of the education system.

However, learning to have a good command of a language is a problem for pupils faced in secondary schools. This study was focused on challenges faced by English language learners: the case of Kinshasa secondary schools in DR Congo.

The survey involved a sample of two hundred and forty-four students (n°244) as respondents in 8 secondary schools selected. We hypothesized that secondary school EFL learners face serious challenges in using English in everyday communication; speaking and writing competencies constitute the main significant areas of challenges learners face.

At the end of analyzes, the results obtained confirm the research hypothesis.

Keywords: *English, challenges, learners, Language, Teachers, communication, competence, production skills, EFL.*

RÉSUMÉ

La langue est très importante pour la communication et la capacité d'acquérir des compétences communicatives dont les capacités de production est un aspect majeur du développement du langage et de la réussite scolaire des élèves à tous les niveaux du système éducatif.

Cependant, apprendre à maîtriser une langue est un problème auquel les élèves sont confrontés dans les écoles secondaires. Cette étude s'est focalisée sur les défis auxquels sont confrontés les apprenants de la langue anglaise : le cas des écoles secondaires de Kinshasa en RD Congo.

L'enquête a porté sur un échantillon de deux cent quarante-quatre élèves (n°244) en tant que répondants dans 8 écoles secondaires sélectionnées. Nous avons émis l'hypothèse que les apprenants d'anglais comme langue étrangère (EFL) du secondaire sont confrontés à de sérieux défis dans l'utilisation de l'anglais dans la communication quotidienne ; les compétences orales et écrites constituent les principaux domaines importants de défis auxquels les apprenants sont confrontés.

Au terme des analyses, les résultats obtenus confirment l'hypothèse de la recherche.

Mots-clés : *Anglais, défis, apprenants, Langue, Enseignants, communication, compétences, capacité de production, anglais comme langue étrangère.*

INTRODUCTION

English is the most common foreign language. It is the international common lingua franca, also the most common foreign language to communicate with people from countries all over the world, not just English-Speaking ones (Crustal, 2003).

At the outset, it may be useful to note that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a country in Central Africa that has about seventy million people. This heterogeneous population originally comes from more than two hundred and fifty tribes, each having its own dialect; mutual intelligibility characterizes many speakers of these dialects. However, it should be noted that four of these local languages emerged and acquired a more prestigious position than the numerous other dialects. These four include: Swahili, Tshiluba, Kikongo and Lingala.

The linguistic situation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has often been presented in the form of a pyramid. The bottom of this pyramid is made up of about 250 languages. Above them come the four national languages mentioned above. French is placed above these four languages. At the top a place is granted to English which is a foreign language in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It is noteworthy that French in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the language of administration and a medium of instruction adopted during the colonial period and imposed by the Belgian colonizers. It is a medium of instruction in primary and secondary education as well as in colleges and universities.

In many schools, depending on the area or region or province, one of the four national languages is used in the first two or three years of elementary school. From the third or fourth year French takes over, and is equally used in churches, sports, drama, business, radio and television. English, on the other hand is used mainly in schools and language centers. English is also a subject from the first year of secondary school. It is also offered in all faculties and colleges in the country.

Currently, there is a new trend in the DRC that tends to teach and learn English in Primary schools as an official language next to French (Bangangi, 2022).

Nevertheless, it is surprising to note that secondary school sixth form students are not able to speak and write English competently. This work keeps on questioning : What are the causes of this situation? « That is why, in this study, the researcher has tried to identify the challenges in question ».

1. PROBLEM

In public secondary schools, the teacher of English is expected to lay the foundations of the English language and develop in the learners the ability to express themselves in appropriate situations and use the language appropriately and accurately by the time they complete their secondary education (Dika, 1984).

This means that learners are expected to be able to listen and understand a person conversing in English, to speak the language, and to be understood by other persons. Furthermore, they are expected to read and write English correctly at the end of their secondary studies. These are the main objectives set by the national program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Unfortunately, it is noticed that these objectives are not reached since secondary school learners fail to competently communicate in English. That means that they are unable to understand, speak, read and write English. As far as we are concerned, we dare to think that this failure is, for the most part, due to the challenges English language learners encounter when English is offered to Congolese pupils in general and the pupils of Kinshasa in particular. This hypothesis results from the following observations: pupils of secondary schools are only in contact with English or use it when in class during English lessons of fifty minutes, which occur five or two times per week depending on their orientation. Also, due to overcrowded classes, learners have very little time to adequately practice the language. All the other subjects in DRC's secondary schools are taught in French, which is the language of administration and the official medium of instruction. Outside their classrooms, besides French, Congolese Secondary school pupils use the four national languages (Lingala, Kikongo, Tshiluba and Swahili) in the larger community, at home, at the market and other spheres of public life, even

though they do not use them for instructional purposes beyond the first three years of primary education.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this article is to identify the challenges Congolese secondary school learners face when learning English. First to identify the challenges faced by learners in speaking English and second to identify the challenges faced by learners in writing English.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As matter of fact, this article attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the challenges that learners face in DRC secondary schools when learning the English language?
- 2) Why do DRC learners face challenges while leaning the English language?

By answering the research questions, the aims at identifying obstacles in order to suggest some solution to overcome English Language Teaching/Learning difficulties encountered by some Kinshasa secondary schools, in particular and all the country (DRC) secondary schools, in general.

4. HYPOTHESES

As for as this study is concerned, two hypotheses are stated:

- 1) DRC secondary school learners face challenges in speaking and writing English.
- 2) DRC learners face challenges while leaning the English language because of a lack of English practice outside the class, overcrowded classes and a little English language teaching load.

5. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer our main question, the mixed method research design was used for data collection: quantitative and qualitative method

For quantitative data, we used a survey questionnaire which was administered to a population of all secondary school learners from the selected schools.

The target population comprises all secondary school learners from the selected schools. Six secondary schools were involved: official school in Limete (Institute Lumumba) conventional schools in Limete (Collège Saint Raphaël) and in Lemba (Mont-Amba and Collège Saint Esprit) and private schools in Mont-Ngafula (Complexe Scolaire Tresor and Complexe Scolaire Moanda). Simple random sampling was employed to select them.

Two hundred and forty-four students were selected and expected to respond to the questionnaire, sixty respondents in each school.

As for data processing and analysis, the researcher used graphs to show the frequencies or the number of times each problem or challenge was identified by the respondents to the questionnaire. The researcher also used graphs to show percentage of each challenge identified.

The qualitative data were from class observation that was lesson observations. Field notes were taken in order to find more about the speaking and writing difficulties that sixth form learners would encounter in learning English in the actual classroom.

For data analysis, we used the questionnaire respondent frequencies (in terms of percentages) and field work for observations.

6. FINDINGS

Learners' problems when speaking English

| Learners' problems when speaking English | F | % |
|---|------------|------------|
| Inadequate vocabulary | 70 | 29.2 |
| Pronunciation | 106 | 44.2 |
| Inadequate grammatical structures/knowledge | 46 | 19.2 |
| Shyness | 16 | 6.7 |
| No answer | 2 | 8.0 |
| Total | 240 | 100 |

Chart 1: Distribution related to the learners' attitude when speaking English (How/What do you feel when you are to practice the English language?)

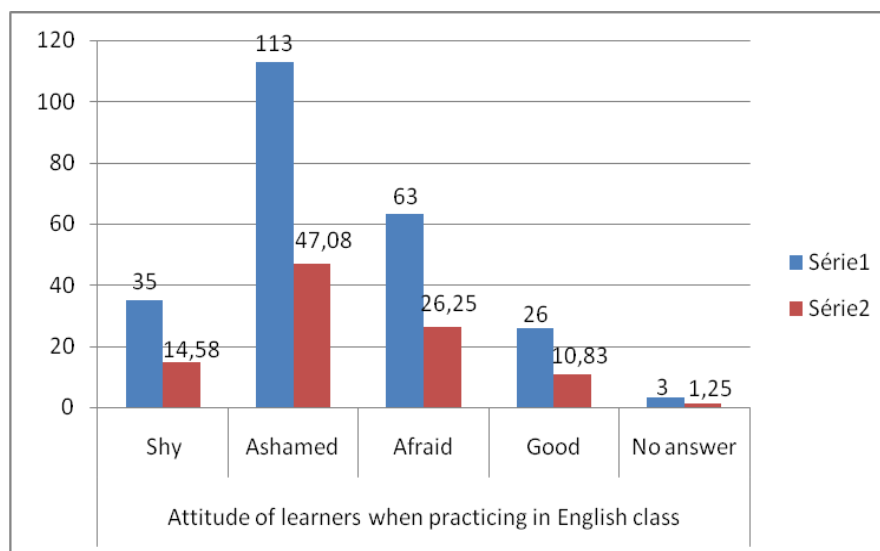


Chart 1 about the attitude of learners when practicing in their English class shows that 14.1 % said that they were shy; 10.8 % said they were ashamed; 26.3 % said they were afraid; 47.1 % said that they felt good; but 0.4 % didn't answer. The total rate of negative feelings towards EFL is eighty-seven percent. It is therefore obvious that the subjects are facing a difficulty in EFL use.

Chart 2: Distribution related to learners' problem when speaking English (What problem do you have while speaking English?)

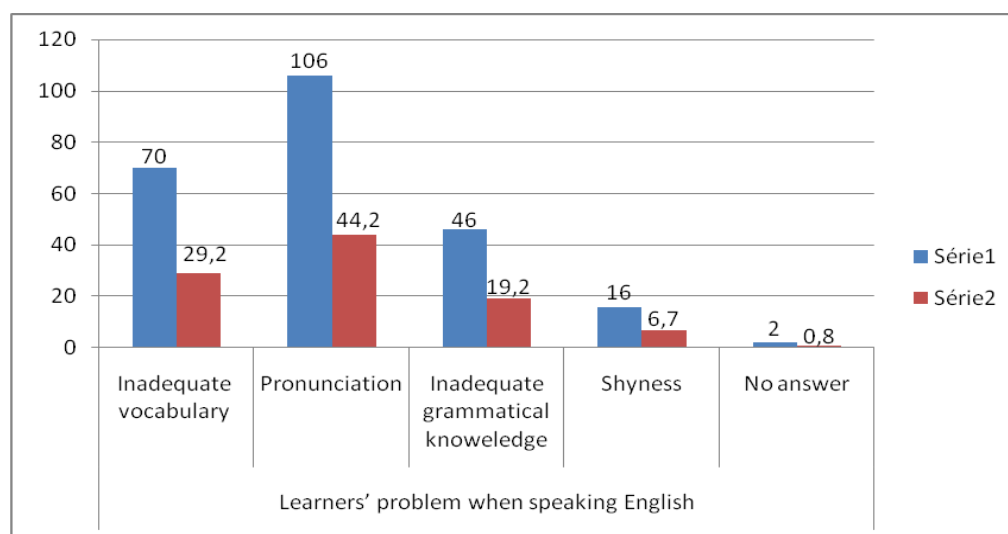
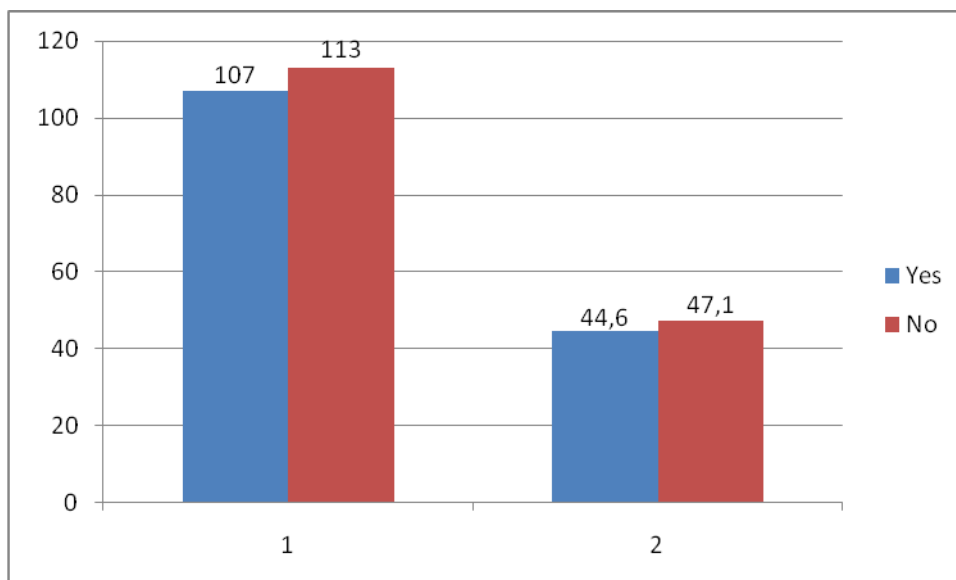


Chart 2 showed that learners face a set of difficulties in speaking. 44.2 % said they have problem with pronunciation; 29.2 % have problem with vocabulary; 19.2% have problem with grammar; 6.7 % have problem of forward interference; and 8.0 % didn't specify their problem.

Teachers' qualification to teach speaking and writing skills

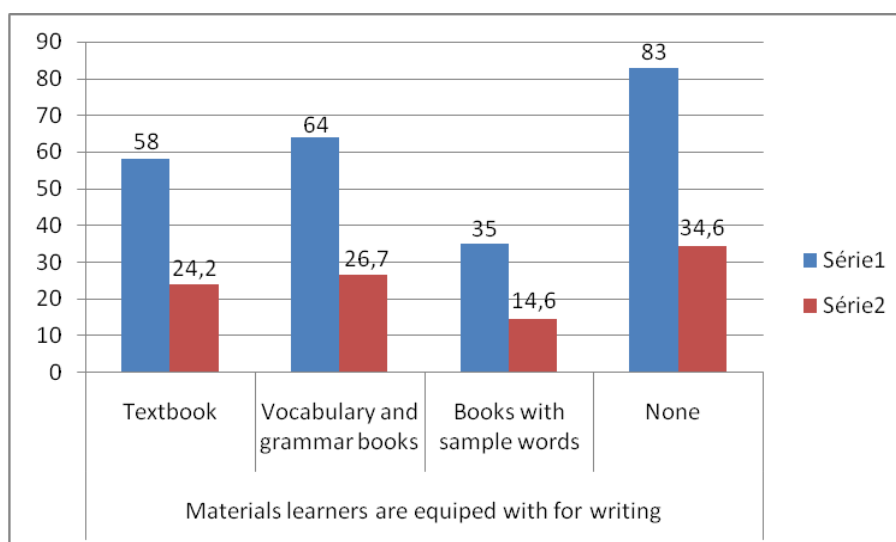
| Is your teacher qualified to teach speaking skills? | F | % |
|---|-----|------|
| Yes | 206 | 85.8 |
| No | 34 | 14.5 |
| Total | 240 | 100 |

Chart 3 : Distribution related to the ability to write 5 sentences in English without making grammar errors (Can you write 5 sentences in English without making grammatical errors?)



The results from chart 3 showed that 44.6 % of learners said yes, and 55.4 % cannot write 5 sentences in English without making grammatical errors. This means that the learners have problems with writing.

Chart 4: Distribution related to the kind of materials learners are equipped with for writing (What materials do you have for writing English?)



The chart above showed that a lot of students do not have any books for writing. 26.7 % of learners use vocabulary and grammar books for writing, 24.2 percent use textbooks to practice writing, 14.6 % use books with the sample words, and 34.5 % have none. The score of 34.5 % regarding lack of resource materials to writing English seems too high to the investigator for the subjects of terminal classes of secondary school. The difficulty finding writing materials is obvious, and it is a challenge.

Chart 5: Distribution related to the greatest difficulty faced by learners when learning writing skills (What is the greatest difficulty faced by learners while learning writing skills?)

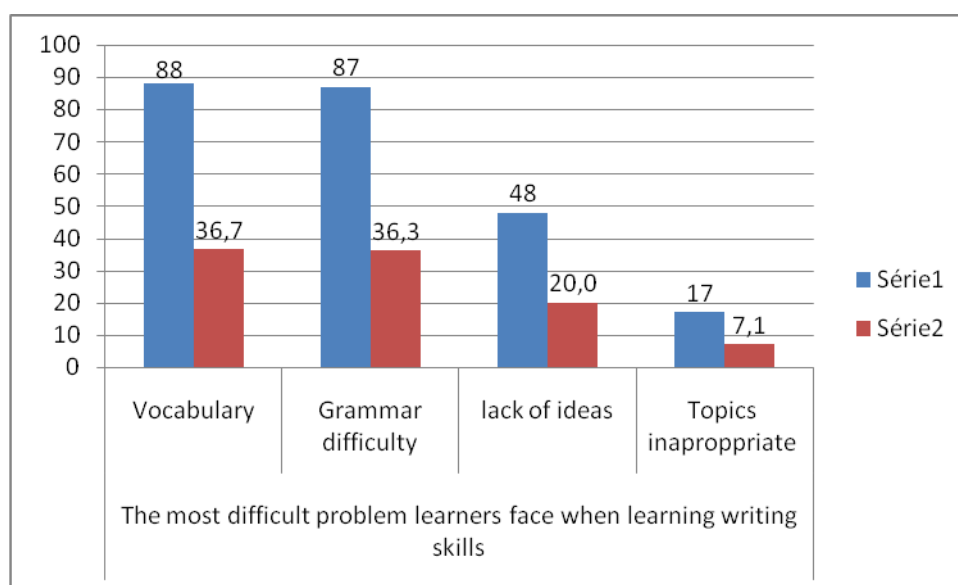


Chart 5 showed that the lack of vocabulary is the greatest difficulty in developing writing skills as it represents a rate of 36.7 %; however, it competes with grammatical difficulties which exhibit a rate of 36.3 %. Another problem to be is cultural difficulty, beside the difficulty of vocabulary and grammar. The difficulty of topic inappropriateness observed at 7.1 % is part of cultural difficulties also.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Table or charts/ statements to which survey participants responded eight statements (1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) were considered by the majority of participants affirmed that they faced challenges in speaking and other participants affirmed the challenges in writing. The result appears in the following list:

a) Challenges in speaking

- The attitude of learners when practicing in English class is shy, ashamed and afraid
- Learners almost never participate in class discussions
- Difficulties of pronunciation
- Lack of stimulus from the evaluation system
- Negative feeling/ frustration in their learning process
- Difficulty of interaction with people, native speakers
- Language interference

b) Challenges in writing

- Grammatical difficulties
- Resource materials not available
- Lack of ideas for writing
- Lack of familiarity with target culture
- Lack of interest for writing skill
- Large numbers of learners in the class, class size thus smart learners are active while weak ones are neglected or forgotten.

CONCLUSION

The learning of English as a foreign language in the DRC has been affected by several challenges over the years. In our quest to unravel these challenges and to help contribute our quota to the solution towards improvement we came up with this article/study: the challenges faced by English language learners, the case of Kinshasa secondary schools and also across the country.

Despite the limitations of present exploratory survey has mainly focused on three areas: Mont-Ngafula school area, Lemba, Limete and Gombe Schools areas.

We have noticed that all areas faced the challenges of medium of instruction in classroom, students' anxiety and classroom environment. These difficulties concerned Teachers, pupils and classroom environment: the common challenges are:

A) Teachers

- The duration of the class was not sufficient to practice speaking and writing in classroom
- They taught conversation to enhance speaking skill
- They worked with bright pupils and neglected weak learners
- They had no support speaking and writing skills

B) Pupils

- They had very poor vocabulary, poor grammatical knowledge and bad pronunciation
- They were shy when asked to speak in English
- Most of them were not motivated

C) Classroom environment

- Large classes
- Noise in the classroom
- Some areas do not have big rooms

As it comes to test our hypotheses, both of them have been confirmed based on the findings. It is true that DRC secondary school learners encounter challenges related to speaking and writing skills due to the abovementioned reasons for the teachers, pupils, and classroom environment.

Consequently, some appropriate remedies in order to help solve the problem by raising educational authority's policy makers' awareness of the weaknesses in the teaching that prevent secondary school learners from acquiring a good command of the English language, and finally for teachers, to improve their teaching methods and adapt materials to the real situation of the learners.

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