



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

International Journal of Current Research  
Vol. 10, Issue, 11, pp.75292-75296, November, 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.33053.11.2018>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### LANGUAGE TEACHING AND MOTIVATION: FACTORS PREVENTING EFL LEARNERS FROM EFFECTIVELY LEARNING ENGLISH AND STRATEGIES TO MOTIVATING LEARNERS

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2018

Received in revised form

18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018

Accepted 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2018

Published online 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2018

##### Key Words:

Communication,

Foreign language, Motivation,

Target language, Teaching Strategies.

#### ABSTRACT

This article investigates, in the motivational perspective, factors preventing students to develop effective communicative performances and their influence on students' motivation. The participants were 58 sophomore EFL students from Marien Nguabi University and 11 lecturers. Qualitative and interpretative research techniques involving classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires were employed to collect relative data. The findings of the study indicate that teaching strategies used by teachers and the social context in which the target language is taught are not conducive to an effective EFL language learning process and do not sustain students' motivation. To reverse the situation, the present paper suggests a series of language teaching strategies and principles adaptable to the teaching of foreign languages.

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Citation: Kimbouala Nkaya, Allembé Rodrigue Lézin and Moutakala Gilbert Salomon. 2018. "Language Teaching and Motivation: Factors Preventing EFL Learners from Effectively Learning English and Strategies to Motivating Learners", *International Journal of Current Research*, 10, (11), 75292-75296.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Republic of Congo, the English language is officially taught as a compulsory subject from the grade one of junior secondary school (6<sup>ème</sup>) up to the university. As one can see, a total of seven years are devoted to teaching and learning English before the school leavers enter the university. Despite the importance attached to that foreign language, by being introduced quite earlier in the Congolese educational system, when some learners reach university, they still face difficulties to handle an accurate and fluent communication in English. The present research was conducted to the sophomore EFL students enrolled in the Languages and Literatures Department (LLD) at the Teachers Training College from Marien Ngouabi University in the Republic of Congo in the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018. Students had four language courses (English Grammar, English Language Communication Techniques, Comprehension and Study of Texts, and English stylistic) related to communication and rhetoric skills. Each class met once a week for two hours over a thirteen-week semester. The objectives of these courses moved from teaching basic language skills and sub-skills, to paragraph, and essay or

dissertation writing, from informative to argumentative writing, from reading for literal comprehension to critical reading, and finally to oral communication presentations. Learners went through all these language courses, but usually complained about their learning outcomes, the composition writing being the most often repeated assignment. Teachers often complained also about the learners' inadequacy in using the language appropriately and efficiently during class or final semester assignments. Owing to that fact, in a motivational perspective, our paper aims to investigate firstly factors that prevent EFL students from effectively learning English by eliciting teachers' and students' views, and then finally, we suggest strategies to motivate learners to use the target language communicatively.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Research Context:** As we have said in our introduction, the present study was conducted at Marien Ngouabi University which is a francophone university. That is to say, students who learn English here as a foreign language have learned first French which is the official language and have acquired either Kituba or Lingala which are national or vehicular languages in the Republic of Congo. In this multilingual context, there is a great deal of code-switching which is a common trait of the Congolese culture.

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Students and teachers code-switch easily from one language to the other unconsciously (see for instance, Kimbouala, 2016: 314-315).

**Participants:** A total of 58 sophomore EFL students who were selected randomly participated in this study and 11 teachers gave their opinions while responding to the questionnaire. The teachers selected for this paper were all teachers of English and non-English native speakers.

**Instruments:** The present paper used quantitative and qualitative approaches mixing observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires to collect data related to the objectives of our study which is the perceptions of teachers and students of student motivation during the English language classes.

**Classroom Observation:** Four teachers, who were teaching language courses, that is, English Grammar, English Language Communication Techniques, Comprehension and Study of Texts, and English stylistic, were selected for classroom observation purpose. Two class sessions were observed by teacher. So, a total of eight class sessions were observed for this study.

**Semi-structured Interviews:** The second technique of data collection used in this research was the semi-structured interviews conducted to the four teachers whose classes were observed. The purpose of these semi-structured interviews was to find strategies employed by teachers to motivate Congolese EFL students. The interviews of these various teachers were recorded for being well interpreted.

**Questionnaires:** The third and last data collection instrument used to collect the relevant data for the authenticity of our research was the questionnaire. One questionnaire was designed for teachers and another one designed for learners. A total of eleven teachers and fifty eight students were concerned to fill different questionnaires. The instruments used to collect the data complemented each other. They gave us a clearer picture of the problems students face in the language classes. They also drew on teachers' and students' views regarding the issue at hand. Results of this study are analyzed in the beneath section entitled major findings and discussion.

## MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we are going to present first our results which are compared to some previous studies, then end it by discussing our major findings.

**Major Findings:** The results of the classroom observations, the teachers' semi-structured interviews, and the students' and teachers' questionnaires are given according to issues related to motivation as mentioned below.

**Results Related to Classroom Observation:** In this study, the classroom observation aimed at investigating four variables which are classroom atmosphere, teaching approaches or strategies, language learning opportunities, and types of activities. Teaching strategies have an impact on motivation. They enhance students' engagement or involvement in the learning process. Cooperative group learning (Ghaith, 2003) and the use of communicative approach shift the focus from

teacher controlled classrooms to student centered ones. Udvari-Solner (1996) argues for teaching strategies that extend further than delivering instruction to include content that is relevant to the student's lives; Udvari-Solner, Villa, and Thousand (2005) stipulate corrective feedback as part of teaching strategies and designing a teaching-learning process that can promote meaningful participation for all students within the classroom. The chart below brings evidence about teachers classroom practices related motivation. From this graph, we can see that the majority of teachers do not create language learning opportunities where learners may effectively learn the target language. This is justified by the teaching approach used by teachers. That is, they frequently use the teacher-centered approach. One of the significant dimension to language learning is providing learners with opportunities to interact freely and learn from each other's mistakes (Davis, 2003; Ghaith, 2003). Findings also suggest that students prefer more communicative approaches in teaching and learning English.

Interactive teaching methods for teaching English as a foreign language to university students improves comprehension and communicative competence as found by Morell (2004) who compares conventional non-interactive methods with minimal student interventions with interactive classes that use entertainment, students' oral presentation and student interventions. Findings indicate that in interactive classes, teachers are aware of their students' needs to understand and improve their communicative competence and of the importance of student involvement. In non-interactive classes, teachers felt pressured by time and course syllabus and commented that more time and preparation would be needed if they are to convert to interactive teaching methods. Yet again, as Anderson et al. (2001: 15) suggest that "Thoughtful design of learning activities is critical to the attainment of educational outcomes". The design and the way courses are structured can be vital factors that are associated with students' motivation and positive/negative experiences of learning as shown in this research were the types of activities conducted in the class do not attract students. Consequently, the classroom atmosphere in the four class sessions were not conducive to motivation and effectiveness of the target language learning.

**Results Related to Semi-structured Interviews:** After classroom observation, the four teachers whose classes had been observed were interviewed about teaching strategies and approaches in order to see whether they may be conducive to motivation in the target language learning. Their answers are summed-up in the table below:

**Table1. Teaching strategies and approaches**

| Question                                  | Responses                         | Respondents | Total |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| How do you teach English in your classes? | Through classroom interactions    | 0           | 0/4   |
|   | With the help of new technologies | 2           | 2/4   |
|   | Teacher-centered approach         | 3           | 3/4   |
|   | Learner-centered approach         | 1           | 1/4   |

As shown in table 1, four teachers out of four acknowledge that they don't implement classroom interactions. They (3 out of 4) use the teacher-centered approach to teach their lessons. In this type of context, the teachers are controllers of knowledge and whatever they want students to know, they would simply transfer it to them. This way of teaching appears to be far from the expectation of the constructivist method for teaching (Wells 2001) where students are expected to take part

in the construction of their own learning. This latter lends itself to the student-centered constructivist teaching approach. Teachers have to manage themselves to shift from traditional teacher-centered educational approaches to student-centered approaches. This shift requires teachers to learn and to know about their students. They have to be aware of what students already know, how students develop, and why students behave in certain ways. An awareness of these things support teachers' efforts to then find out what students need to know in a given lecture as well as the most effective methods to be used for teaching. Unfortunately only 1 teacher out of 4 attempts to use this teaching approach.

**Results Related to Questionnaires:** The analysis of data collected through questionnaires revealed two main points for teachers' questionnaire and one aspect for learners' questionnaire. Their outcomes are presented in tables below. As far as the teachers' respondents for the questionnaire are concerned, eleven teachers responded to it. It purposed to seek teachers' viewpoints on factors hindering learners' communication using the target language.

**Table 2. Teachers' viewpoints on learners' difficulties to communicate in the TL**

| Question   | Responses   | Respondents | Total |
|--|---|-------------|-------|
| What are, according to you, factors hinder learners' communication in the target language? | Crowded classes   | 11          | 11/11 |
|  | Lack of teaching materials                              | 8           | 8/11  |
|  | The fact of being a foreign language                    | 5           | 5/11  |
|  | Students' competences in the use of the target language | 9           | 9/11  |

The results display in table 2 shows that number of students in classes, the lack of appropriate teaching materials and learners' own competence before entering university were pointed out as factors having negative impact on learners' motivation and performance. 11 out of 11 teachers affirmed that crowded classes at Marien Ngouabi University do not permit sophomore student enjoy or appreciate positively their English language learning process. Along with the above mentioned factors, table n°3 related to English language teaching activities or tasks, some concerned from the teachers have been penned down.

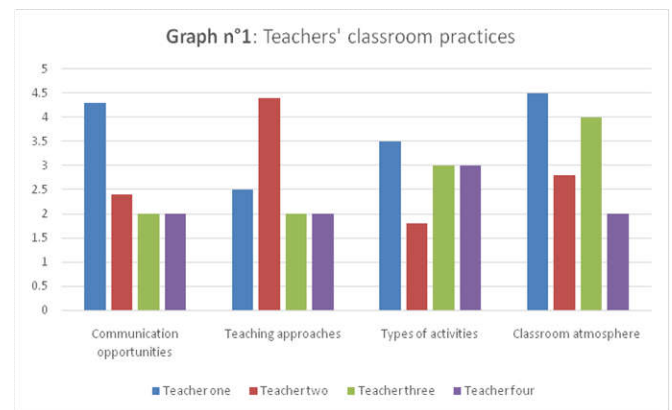
**Table 3. Activities performed to teach English**

| Question  | Responses      | Respondents | Total |
|---|----------------|-------------|-------|
| Do you frequently perform these activities in your classes? | Debates        | 3           | 3/11  |
|   | Role-plays     | 1           | 1/11  |
|   | Simulation     | 0           | 0/11  |
|   | Reading report | 3           | 3/11  |

It appears that only 3 teachers out 11 introduce debate and reading report as teaching strategies. One teacher tries to set role-plays and no teacher (0/11) makes used of simulation. One has to know that we are in the context of foreign language teaching, were simulating outside situations in the classroom may have a positive impact on students' language learning motivation. With simulation, only the langue will be new to learners, but not situations or issues to be dealt with. Referring to learners' questionnaire, their viewpoints about factors hindering their communication in English as a target language are displayed in table n°4 below.

**Table 4. Learners' viewpoints on problems hinder their communication in the TL**

| Question   | Responses  | Respondents | %      |
|--|--|-------------|--------|
| What are, according to you, factors hinder your communication in the target language | Classes which are crowded                          | 52          | 89,65% |
|  | Lack of practices in classroom                     | 56          | 96,55% |
|  | Lack of permanent contact with the target language | 58          | 100%   |
|  | Lack of encouragement from teachers                | 34          | 58,62% |



Similarly, with results of table 2, the present table n°4 shows that 89, 65% of learners view their crowded classes as one of the causes blocking them to handle correctly the target language. Yet, the classroom is the unique environment where they experience the English language. 100% of learners pointed out the lack of permanent contact with the target language. That is, apart from the class, the social context does not offer the opportunity to speak the target language outside the classroom. Most of them (58,62%) claimed not to be encouraged by their teachers. In fact, in the ELT context like the Congo, language teachers must use rewards to enhance motivation in language learning as suggested by Schunk (1983). By motivating students to actively participate to classroom activities, teachers favor learners' intrinsic motivation because using extrinsic rewards to motivate those who are academically frustrated, teachers improved learners' self-esteem, which at its turn increases learners' motivation.

## DISCUSSION

Motivation is the desire which pushes someone to act. Many factors may be the source of the lack of motivation. In the present study, sophomore EFL students were found having some difficulties of expressing themselves in the target language. Data from this study show that the speaking component is nearly non-existent in the language classes (see table n°1); teachers unfortunately do not use interactions as teaching technique. Knowing that students prefer interactive classes Ghaith (2003) and Morell (2004) found that when students interact in class, they learn better and easily. Teachers should frequently adapt their lectures to the students learning environment in order to meet language learners' need. This is only possible through role-plays and simulation. In fact, students also want to see more tangible links between the required language courses and their needs. Language learning should not be for studying purposes only but for effective communication and self-expression (Burden, 2004; Oxford, 1996).

Thus, teachers should not focus just on language accuracy but take into account whether students are communicating their ideas. This by itself is hindering the progress of the students as teachers are not changing their teaching approach (see table n°1) to accommodate students (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Thus any feedback to students should be made clear so as to help students improve their communicative skills (McCune, 2004). Our research findings go hand in hand with some of our predecessors. Linguistic self-confidence as a motivational factor in the L2 classroom is a key factor as Pae (2008:11). Originally argued that in “...*multicultural contexts, where direct contact with the L2 is available, positive attitudes toward an L2 would promote interactions with the L2 speakers, which in turn develop an independent motivational process identified as self-confidence*”. Therefore, in an EFL setting such as the Congo where direct contact with the target language is not available, an individual’s attitude and effort to learn and speak to L2 members would result in L2 success. The table n°4 confirms that teachers rarely encourage learners (58,62%). So, the self-confidence which is the most significant determining factor of motivation to learn an SL is scarcely developed. Thus, according to our results, having permanent contact with the TL is an important aspect of developing competence and self-confidence in the language. In our results, the majority of students acknowledge that their parents speak very little English or not at all, consequently many students do not have another opportunity apart from their classrooms and English is, by the way, taught and studied as any other subject, thus leading to a lack of motivation to learn English. This suggests that teachers have to encourage motivation in their students. Pae (2008:23) supports this by pointing out that, in an EFL context, because of the lack of contact with native speakers and that English is learned as a school subject, “...*it is natural that the English instructor should play a more active role in promoting ... motivation*”. Therefore, in the Congolese context, we think that the language teacher has the main responsibility to improve the levels of motivation in a student and in the language classroom.

**Suggestion for Strategies to Motivate EFL Learners:** In this section, our objective is to present some important principles that can help teachers of English to have lively classes. Most teachers, as Baloto (1996) said, are not knowledgeable of methods that will arouse interest or increase their students’ commitment to learn English.

**Make Use of the Learners’ Environment:** Foreign language teaching should always be linked to the environment of the learner. A teacher who teaches English without alluding to the immediate environment of the school makes the English lesson detached from the learners’ experiences. In order to remedy the situation, teachers can link the environment of the school (and implicitly of the child) to any activity or exercise that they want to carry out in the classroom. A child has a natural context in which he organizes the various activities that make up his life. If these activities are “reproduced” in the language classroom, it is possible to motivate him/her to do the task at hand. Therefore games and other daily activities should constitute the heart of the English class. The only new factor will be the language itself. Used in this way, English will no longer be feared and students will be more inclined to study it.

**Present the Language in Natural Chunks:** In a foreign language situation, the teacher remains the main source or

model for the pupils. S/he should strive hard to use the language as naturally as possible. If the teacher should use the target language unnaturally, i.e. break a sentence into smaller units to help the students get the correct pronunciation of a word or the intonation of a phrase, etc., s/he must not forget to return to the whole sentence.

**Use Appropriate Visual Aids:** Visual aids are important tools for the teacher. Used appropriately in the classroom, they enable the teacher to avoid long and confusing explanations. At the same time they help the teacher to have a lively class as students associate real objects with their English equivalents. In this way, they can exchange information with each other since they will be familiar with the topic and/or object under discussion.

**Include Cultural Components:** Language and culture are interrelated. One cannot study a language without noting the cultural aspects of the people who use the language natively. However, cultural aspects can be a real hindrance because they may set up barriers to comprehension. This is more evident to teachers who are not native speakers of the target language themselves. For this reason, teachers should provide sufficient background information to enable the learners to understand the cultural content that is naturally present in the target language.

**Become an Efficient Manager:** A company’s success is usually attributed to the way in which it is managed. Likewise, the success of a language course reflects the teacher’s dexterity or expertise. In other words, the teacher should know how to talk to his students if they are to fully participate in the lesson. In this respect, their interests, needs, and experiences must be taken into consideration. The student factor, as it is often called, should be carefully examined. Just as it takes a good factory manager to obtain positive result in the factory. It takes a good teacher to instill in his/her student a positive attitude towards the new language. The deciding factor here is the way in which the teacher talks to his/her pupils. When the teacher is human and sensitive, seeing his/her students as capable of contributing something to the lessons, a warm and enjoyable classroom atmosphere can be created and maintained.

**Adapt Materials to Local Realities:** It is desirable that materials presented in a foreign language class be varied and stimulating. Ideally, they should be adapted to the needs of learners but most importantly they should be interesting. The teacher should know how to adapt existing materials to materials to be taught to reduce the gap between the materials and the target language.

## CONCLUSION

What factors preventing EFL learners from learning appropriately the target language and how to motivate learners were the two main issues investigated in the present research paper. The results of our investigation conclude that teachers involved in this study did not create classroom’s atmosphere conducive to effective language learning. They used traditional teaching approach (teacher-centered approach) to teach their lessons, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they did not use suitable language teaching activities such as role-plays, simulations, etc. Consequently, the classroom which is the sole environment where learners were supposed to learn the language by being in real contact with the target language and practicing it becomes a hostile environment the learning of that

target language because teachers do not succeed to break the classroom language learning constraints. To get the maximum and effective EFL learners' participation, some language teaching strategies and principles were suggested to teachers in the last section of this research work.

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