



Disputes Within Teaching Staff: EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes

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Abstract - This study explores EFL teachers' meanings of school culture and of conflicting atmosphere within EFL teaching staff in some secondary schools in the Republic of Benin. For this purpose, data were collected mainly through two instruments: unstructured interviews to the participant EFL instructors and non participant observation of their interactions in school setting and during teacher professional development workshops. The findings reveal the teachers' perceptions of conflict as a common occurrence among EFL teachers and a limited collaboration among them. Suggestions are made in the study to help promote a school culture supportive of real collaboration, sharing, and professional growth.

Keywords: Dispute, teacher development workshop, school culture, English as a Foreign Language.

Résumé - La présente étude a examiné les représentations des enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère sur la culture scolaire et l'atmosphère de conflit entre enseignants d'anglais dans certains établissements secondaires en République du Bénin. A cet effet, des données ont collectées à travers des interviews non structurées, réalisées auprès des enseignants d'anglais, et des observations de leurs interactions au cours des séances hebdomadaires d'animation pédagogique. Les résultats issus de l'analyse de ces données ont révélé que la collaboration entre ces enseignants était limitée et que ces derniers considèrent le conflit comme étant un fait commun. Des suggestions sont faites en vue d'aider à promouvoir un climat de collaboration et d'échanges entre enseignants d'anglais.

Mots Clés: Conflit, séance d'animation pédagogique, anglais langue étrangère, culture scolaire

1. Introduction

Teacher professional development can be carried out not only through formal training programs, but also through many other valuable informal opportunities that call for teachers' informal interactions within the school context (Patinvoh-Agbayahoun, 2016). Unfortunately, in some educational contexts, as is the case of EFL teaching in the Republic of Benin, many teachers carry out their job as lonely practitioners. In a previous study of Beninese EFL teachers' actions for their professional development, Lanmantchion (2016) found out that only a low percentage of the participant EFL teachers collaborate among themselves. If the purpose of teaching a language is to enable learners to establish good human relationships with each other and the world (Winslade et al., 2000, p.60), the fact that there exist very few models of communication and collaboration among teachers in most school settings is quite paradoxical. Indeed, many language teachers in Benin have very few opportunities to communicate and to collaborate among themselves in the school setting. Relationships are critical to everything we do. They make an impact upon our

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learning, our view of the curriculum, our appraisal of it as well as our interactions with peers within the school setting. Communication and collaboration among teachers are important ways of promoting learning. Darling-Hammond et al., (2009) show in their study that in schools where teachers form active learning communities, students' achievement increases significantly. This study examines interpersonal relationships among EFL teachers in disputes situations and the causes of these situations. It also explores the teachers' meaning of dispute as well as the strategies they use to manage disputes in their workplace.

2. Social, Cultural and Value differences in the school

When asked what comes to mind when a person hears the word dispute, the following terms emerge: "demeanor, anger, stress, frustration, tension; here we go again, no communication, fight, power, no listening..." The majority of these expressions have negative connotations. However, many writers acknowledge that dispute is not always bad. Coser (1956) points to this aspect in the following words:

No group can be entirely harmonious, for it then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony... conflict as well as cooperation has social functions. Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life (p. 6).

Dispute can enhance creativity, stimulate debates, and motivate new ideas. As Dewey (1930) asserts, "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs up to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us up out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving... conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity." (p. 43)

These outcomes are important to school setting and thus, should be encouraged in academia. Dispute between two students defending the validity of their respective theories is different from the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The conflict between a seller and a buyer does not have the same meaning as the one between two leaders of different political parties. It is important to select the definition most appropriate for each context. Dispute is unavoidable in a community where people have different points of view and freedom of expression is encouraged. The effect of conflict can be disruptive or constructive depending on whether the people involved can work towards mutual understanding or simply an agreement to differ without disrespect. Conflict has been the focus of many disciplines such as English, psychology, philosophy, international relations, mathematics, and many different definitions, assumptions and theories have developed, which can result in a very confusing landscape depending on the writer.



Some might think that school is not really a diverse place. However, diversity goes beyond issues of nationality and culture. Diversity can include gender, socio-economic background, motivation to teach, and many other factors. There is a need to consider diversity very carefully if we are to have a classroom that is responsive to the various needs of our students. The degree of change is strongly related to the extent to which teachers interact with one another or others by providing technical help. Within the school, collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help, etc., is a strong indicator of implementation success. Significant educational change consists of changes in beliefs, teaching style, and materials which can come about only through a personal development, more specifically through relationship in a school context. Learning is seen as essentially a social process, requiring communication among learners, teachers and others. This social process cannot effectively be replaced by anything else (Baley et al., 2001, p. 35).

Dispute resolution in Africa is as ancient as the human society, starting from the relationship between husband and wife to the one between people in a particular community. It is an enviable virtue that is unique to the African society where universality of brotherhood in a community set-up is recognized and practised. Thus each community has an in-built conflict resolution formula and process which ends at the domain of the paramount chief. The way people or groups process or resolve conflicts, generally, is consensual or adjudicative (Yamma 2017, p.27).

Ury (1996) identifies three resolution methods based on rights, power and interests. For them disputes are resolved by determining who is right utilizing an independent standard which can be on law, contracts, and on standards of behavior that are generally acceptable. Also, they think that disputes can be resolved by resorting to power as the ability to coerce someone to do something s/he would not otherwise do. Finally, according to them disputes are resolved by satisfying the interests of the parties involved in the disputes. This study intends to explore how teachers best manage conflict and resolve disputes involving colleagues in EFL context in Beninese secondary schools.

3. Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to examine the participant EFL teachers' understanding of dispute among colleagues and their attitude in the workplace. To reach this research purpose, the following three research questions have been considered in the study:

- What do the participant EFL instructors think of a misunderstanding in the workplace?



- What are the most common disputes among EFL teachers?
- What do the interviewees believe they can do to make an effective learning community in the context under consideration?

4. Method

To answer these questions, two sets of qualitative data are gathered. First, interview data are elicited from twelve (12) EFL instructors randomly selected from the larger group of EFL teachers involved in the study. Second, a workshop observation instrument is designed to get a deeper understanding of the obstacles to the creation of a good learning community that supports ongoing improvements of teachers' practices

4.1. Participants

The best way to improve education for youth is to improve the relationships among the adults who facilitate students' learning (Peery, 2004). This justifies the choice of teachers of English as participants in this survey. Teachers of English of two secondary schools in the South as well as teachers of English of two secondary schools in the Northern parts of the country have been selected. The sample includes teachers in private, religious as well as state schools. The selection of those secondary schools in each region is to check how teachers of English themselves collaborate and the relational atmosphere that prevails in their schools in conflict situation. Table 1 provides information about the secondary schools selected for the study.

Table 1. Overview of the Selected Secondary Schools

Schools	Grade	Number of EFL students	English Language Teachers	Location	Number of classes
School A	Form one to form seven	1,662	11	Littoral	44
School B	Form one to form seven	2,443	15	Atlantic	43
School C	Form one to form seven	2,220	20	Alibori	42
School D	Form one to form seven	3,150	33	Borgou	71
Total		9,475	79		

Source: fieldwork

Note: Form one (6^{ème}), Form seven (Terminale)



4.2. Instruments

An interview has been conducted with the 12 selected secondary school EFL teachers. In the interview only open-ended questions have been used. The reason for this choice is that the researcher wants to have more details from teachers' understanding of collaboration among colleagues in dispute situation in the workplace. The second instrument used is a structured observation, a method for systematically observing the behaviour of individuals in term of a schedule of categories. In this technique the researcher has used explicitly formulated rules for the observation and recording collaborative behavior in the four selected schools. Through this research instrument, two meetings of EFL teachers' professional development workshops were observed in each selected school. This allows the researcher to observe behavior directly and to know how to draw conclusion.

5. Results

This section displays what research has revealed about EFL teachers collaborative status in conflict in four secondary schools in Benin. The first part provides a comprehensive survey of EFL teachers' perceptions of dispute among colleagues in the sampled schools. The second part gives a snapshot of the direct observation in the selected secondary schools.

5.1. EFL teachers' perceptions of conflict among colleagues in the workplace

To inquire into the participant EFL teachers' perceptions of conflict among colleagues in the workplace, interview data were gathered from them. These interviews were semi-structured to enable the researcher to prompt the informants to expand on their responses when the need arises. A cross-subject comparison of these responses was carried. To do this, each interview question was isolated and the informants' responses to it were examined across subjects in order to identify the major trends in their perceptions.

In their answers to question 1, the one that seeks to know whether or not they have ever been in conflict with a colleague, the majority of the informants (10) answered positively. They perceived conflict as an unavoidable event in human relationships, a common occurrence in most educational settings. One of them contended in the following words:

"Yes, of course. I have, hum, once. OK. It happens most of the time. You know, we are living in a society, and the school is a micro society. We are living together, so one day, somebody may offend you."

However, two (2) of the interviewed teachers were reluctant to acknowledge the presence of specific conflicts involving them in their



workplace. Expanding on the same question, the informants, in their narratives of the conflicts they experienced on the job, pointed to a variety of causes, the main being the right person is not at the right place debates, distrust, structural issues, miscommunication, opinion leaders' influence on the school administration, lack of communication, harmful behaviour, selfishness, professional status, interpersonal differences, academic degree, personal characteristics, jealousy, negative history, emotions and hatred. This confirms Mayer (2004) who believes that the causes of conflict are many. He identifies the following as the five basic sources of conflict: the way people communicate emotions, values, interactions, the structures within which it takes place and history. On the whole, all conflicts can be traced back to someone's feelings getting hurt. The categories of disputes that the interviewees identified as being the most difficult to manage relate to misconduct, opinion leaders' influence on the school administration, and interpersonal disputes.

Faced with these situations that constitute major hindrances to a normal pattern of relation among colleagues, the interviewees confessed having resorted to the following main solutions: patience, dialogue, and the intervention of school authorities. The same solutions are the ones they alluded to in their answers to question 4, but this time, most of them pointed to the value of dialogue between colleagues as the most efficient solution that could help maintain good rapport among colleagues and a peaceful atmosphere within the workplace. Here is what some of them had to say about this aspect:

- ✓ "In case of conflict, what could be done is not to remain silent, but to discuss with the colleague in order to restore peace in the workplace."
- ✓ "The best thing to do is to try to settle the matter. You have to go to the table of negotiation to settle the matter peacefully."

Peace is a concept that receives a special emphasis in the informants' responses to question 5. In their description of the ideal atmosphere among colleagues in their responses to the same question, most of them pointed out that mutual understanding and mutual respect can bring about peace. Pointing to that reality some said what follows:

- ✓ "Peace cannot flourish in a warlike relationship."
- ✓ "We definitely need to set a vivid and peaceful atmosphere among colleagues in our educational setting."

The paradox is that peace is not the absence of dispute but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to dispute (Thomas et al., 1974). Every period of human development has had its own particular type of human conflict, its own variety of problems. Frustratingly enough, force has never really settled any problem. Instead, it persisted through a series of conflicts, and



then vanished of itself. In certain situations, manifesting anger is the right attitude; in others, it is not the right thing to manifest because it will only add to the violence. In their description of the type of collaborative environment they wish to work in, most of the informants declared that they prefer to work in a friendly atmosphere where experiences are shared and mutual respect is observed.

Answering question 6, the majority considers once again mutual respect and understanding as being the patterns of behaviour that teachers should adopt in the way they treat each other. They said:

- ✓ “We should treat each other with great respect.”
- ✓ “We should treat each other with respect.”
- ✓ “To treat each other, I think that we have to develop mutual respect. Don’t do to others what others don’t do to you. So, based on this notion, we have to promote mutual understanding and respect.”

Finally, to the last question, the one that prompted them to say whether or not a relation exists between teachers’ collaboration and teaching/learning, most of the informants acknowledged the undeniable value of peer collaboration among the teaching staff. In their opinions, such collaboration impacts teaching/learning positively. Some declared as follows:

- ✓ “Yes, of course. As long as the collaborative environment is good, learning will be successful.”
- ✓ “The better the collaboration environment, the more efficient the learning that takes place. Learning will be more productive and effective if there is collaboration among teachers in a school.”
- ✓ “Yes it does exist a relation between teachers’ good collaboration and learning. Good collaboration results in effective learning.”
- ✓ “There is a relation, of course. Teaching/learning objectives cannot be reached in an environment where collaborative relationships prove unpleasant.”

5.2. Teacher-Teacher collaboration in the workplace: The study outcome

Based upon the observations, the state of collaboration among EFL teachers in the visited schools presented some positive aspects. There is a collaborative and safe learning environment for teachers in one school out of four. Teachers’ collegiality in that school is reflected in the way they respect one another especially, during teachers’ weekly team meeting in which they discuss class issues and establish standards for students. Teachers share a common vision which is the success of every student in the English Language. Teachers receive timely and constructive feedbacks from colleagues as well as from



administrators and there is a mutual respect among teachers. Teachers try their best to observe a colleague's class almost every workshop. All in all, in that school there is a supportive environment for students and this is through teachers' collaboration. The atmosphere of respect among teachers and authorities is tangible.

However, the observation data also revealed some flaws. These negative points vary from one school to another. The two consecutive observations carried out in each of the selected schools display that enthusiasm for collaboration is not evident in two out of the four schools and there is an atmosphere of hypocrisy in the collaboration. Only a few EFL teachers exhibited some cooperative effort among colleagues in the workshops in these two schools. Overall, the observation data reveal that the participant EFL teachers show an individualistic behavior in collaborating with their colleagues. The observed teachers have not yet developed a strong tradition of collaboration. Few of them (39% in the South and 48% in the North) appear to have particularly a low rate of communication with their colleagues. Nonetheless, a cross-region comparison of the observation data revealed that there is more effort of collegiality in the visited schools in the North. In the South, each teacher spends most of his/her time alone from other teachers. Through collaboration, teachers could get useful feedback from each other and build strong relationships within staff. In schools where teachers share leadership and value feedback from colleagues, not only do students benefit, but teachers also know that they are respected professionals whose voices are critical to creating successful schools (Murray, 2010, p. 16). If the purpose of teaching a language is to enable learners to establish good human relationships with each other and the world (Underhill, 1986, p.60), then it is ironic that many language teachers have little communication among themselves. Those teachers of English could hardly encourage students to communicate with each other, when they have some difficulties to communicate with their colleagues. Collaboration among teachers is an important way to promote teachers' development. It is important for teachers to reflect on their current teaching practice to identify students' problems. Darling-Hammond et al., (2009), show in their study that in schools where teachers form active learning communities, students' absenteeism and dropout are reduced and achievement increases significantly. The simple way to break isolation and improve instruction is through valuing feedback from colleagues. Learning lots and lots of theories is not sufficient. Having experience with other colleagues and learning and applying individual things work well as opposed to just having theoretical knowledge. (Ur, 2002, p.34)

Many of the observed teachers (62%) do not like opposing views and accordingly would like to be on their defensive. Shall one knock out another



person's brain because he differs in opinion? It would rather be rational to knock oneself on the head because one differs from oneself ten years ago. There is not a total climate of courtesy and mutual respect in the workshops. There is not always a warm and friendly relationship among teachers and comments to a teacher's opinion are not totally free from sarcasm or humiliating remarks. Some teachers are very approachable and others are not. Behavioural limits are clearly spelt out. The majority of the teachers do not acknowledge criticism.

6. Discussion

One of the most important causes of the lack of collaboration among EFL teachers in the visited schools is that the right person is not at the right place due to political and administrative involvement. This often constitutes a hindrance to the creation of an effective and supportive learning community. This confirms Holton (1998) who says that in schools the following are source of disputes: scarce resources and interference from others. However, he believes that there has been no agreement on the primary sources of conflict at schools. The EFL respondent teachers are not reluctant to acknowledge the presence of specific disputes involving them. This positive reaction to dispute shows the fundamental and necessary role dispute plays. McFarlane (2002) shows that the failure to acknowledge the existence of conflict often exacerbates hostility and leads to destructive confrontation that could be avoided if conflicts were recognized, the issues examined, and the differences managed in a way that encourages cooperative problem-solving. When conflict develops between teachers, they should be sure to let conflict surface and deal with it constructively, solving problems, not fixing blame.

7. Implications of the findings

Positive relationships with colleagues and school leaders are necessary to help any school improve. Improving professional relationships for educators is a crucial step in transforming secondary schools and improving academic performance. Many language teachers have very few opportunities to communicate and to collaborate among themselves in disputes situations in the school setting. Consequently, they can hardly encourage students to do so, as they are not imitative models. Relationships are critical to everything we do. They impact our learning and how we see the curriculum and its assessment. They make a difference to our learning on our own and with others. They enable us to work well, or not so well, with other people in the school. Communication and collaboration among teachers are important ways to promote learning in a school context. They enable teachers to create active learning communities and to improve students' learning (Darling-Hammond et



al., 2009). Teachers can play a crucial role in developing appropriate workplace structure that is capable of nurturing the kind of learning communities and workplace norms for teachers, but would also be reinventing their own roles within the system. They would be committing themselves to looking diagnostically at the needs of the entire teaching community.

8. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes on disputes in some high schools in Benin Republic. The research findings reveal the occurrence of dispute situations within the EFL teaching staff and the resulting lack of collaboration and communication among teachers. Only a low percentage (32%) of the participant EFL teachers collaborate among themselves and the lack of collaboration among EFL teachers is mainly due to the fact that the right person is not at the right place due to political and administrative interference. This often constitutes a hindrance to the creation of an effective and supportive learning community. EFL teachers must strive for excellence in everything they do, especially how they collaborate. For all war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal. Teaching is a profession that deserves respect rather than being viewed as an assembly line of workers producing human products. Teaching is regarded as an honored profession and as such, an eye for an eye will only make the whole school environment blind.

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Appendix A: interview with Instructors

- 1) Have you ever been in a conflict with a colleague in the workplace?
- 2) If yes, could you talk about this experience?
- 3) How did you solve the problem with that colleague you had difficulty getting along with?
- 4) If a misunderstanding arises in the workplace, what do you think could be done?
- 5) Could you please elaborate on the kind of work climate that co-teachers should create in a school setting?
- 6) How should we treat each other in educational settings professionally?
- 7) Is there any relationship between good collaborative environment and learning? How do you approach this?

**Appendix B: Teacher - Teacher collaboration Checklist.**

Observe the presence or absence of these behaviours. Tick “√” in the appropriate box)

BEHAVIOURS	YES	NO	COMMENTS
There is a warm and friendly relationship between teachers			
There is a climate of courtesy and mutual respect in the school			
Enthusiasm for collaboration is evident			
Comments to a teacher's opinion are free from sarcasm or humiliating remarks			
Teachers value feedback from each other			
Teachers are very approachable			
Behavioural limits are clearly spelt out			
Teachers acknowledge criticism			

Other comments