



The Contribution of Linguistics Courses to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners' Language Proficiency: A Case Study of the Advanced EFL Student-Teachers at the Higher Teacher Education College of Porto-Novo, (École Normale Supérieure) République du Bénin

Crépin D. LOKO

crepinloko10@gmail.com

Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin

Abstract - This paper is a linguistics-oriented study which explores the possible contribution linguistics and phonetics courses can offer EFL student-teachers in preparing them for their communicative fluency. In actual fact, after seven years of study in secondary school (with English taught as subject), students who successfully pass their A- levels can register in the English section. Thus, one can take for granted that the student-teachers have the linguistic background to be fluent speakers of English. Unfortunately, it is noted that some of them lack fluency not only during formal conversation but also during informal one. The present study is sustained by a qualitative and quantitative method of investigation to pinpoint responsibilities and causes of this situation. Such research instruments as questionnaires and interviews have been used to get information from students. The results reveal the difficulties encountered by the student-teachers are of three types viz. (i) the students' lack of involvement and commitment in the course aims and objectives, (ii) their lack of immersion in the target language via active participations in English clubs and language trips to English speaking countries, and (iii) their lack of didactic material (at the personal level), which hinders the good will of some. Above all, the study concludes that the poor level of the selected student-teachers in speaking is due to the lack of personal practice with their teachers and peers who happen to be very fluent though they all have been trained in the same setting and context.

Key words: Linguistics, Language Proficiency, Meaning construction, Student-teachers, Speaking.

Résumé - Cet article est une étude linguistique basée sur l'exploration de la contribution possible que les cours de linguistique et de phonétique peuvent offrir aux élèves-professeurs d'Anglais, Langue Etrangère pour les préparer à leur maîtrise de la communication. En fait, après sept années d'études au secondaire (avec l'anglais enseigné comme matière), les élèves qui obtiennent leur baccalauréat peuvent s'inscrire en anglais comme domaine de spécialisation à l'École Normale Supérieure. Ainsi, on peut en déduire que les élèves-professeurs ont une formation linguistique susceptible de faire d'eux/d'elles de bons locuteurs de la langue anglaise. Malheureusement, on rencontre certains d'entre eux qui manquent de maîtrise lors d'une conversation formelle et/ou informelle. La présente étude s'appuie sur une méthode d'investigation qualitative et quantitative pour situer les responsabilités et causes de cet état de chose. Des instruments de recherche comme le questionnaire et l'entretien ont été utilisés pour collecter des données auprès des étudiants. Les résultats révèlent que les difficultés rencontrées par les élèves-professeurs sont de trois types: (i) le manque d'implication et d'engagement des étudiants dans l'atteinte des buts et objectifs du cours, (ii) leur



manque d'immersion dans la langue cible via des participations actives aux clubs anglais et des voyages linguistiques dans des pays anglophones, et (iii) le manque de matériel didactique (au niveau personnel) qui entrave la bonne volonté de certains. L'étude conclut enfin que le faible niveau de l'anglais parlé des élèves-professeurs enquêtés est dû à leur manque de pratique personnelle de conversation avec leurs enseignants et leurs pairs qui se trouvent être bon locuteur malgré qu'ils aient tous été formés dans le même cadre et le même contexte.

Mots clés: Linguistique, Aptitude de langue, Construction de sens, Elèves - professeurs, Parler.

INTRODUCTION

After their success in the A- level exam, students can be admitted in the different national/private university institutions among which the High Teacher Education Schools. These are academic institutions specialized in the initial training and the professional one of the secondary school teachers in all domains. For decades now, teachers who graduated from the Teacher Education School of Porto-Novo have been highly desired/recommended in the field of teaching in the Republic of Benin. Such notoriety is due to the wide range of subjects pertaining to the fundamental, pedagogical, and methodological knowledge imparted unto them through lectures, seminars, internships, the practice of English clubs, and defences as well. Once they get to the job markets, they can serve either as primary/secondary teachers, interpreters/translators in communication or junior consultants in educational orientation (School Teaching Program, 2018). Being EFL specialist presupposes that one is capable of listening, comprehending, speaking, reading, and writing English.

EFL student-teachers are, consequently, prepared for these language skills through pedagogical activities in linguistics courses which include phonetics and phonology, phonetics and communication, advanced English grammar, general linguistics, English linguistics, and linguistics applied to language teaching, i.e., didactics. It can thus be inferred from the foregoing that the mastery of the English Language (in terms of what the language is and the mechanisms governing that language) is a pivotal determinant at the end of the student-teachers stay at the education college. Unfortunately, it happens nowadays that some of these advanced EFL student-teachers seem to lack proficiency during formal and informal conversations. The present study is sustained by a qualitative and quantitative method of investigation based on a questionnaire and an interview. It then pinpoints the responsibilities and causes of such a state of affairs before suggesting useful solutions to the educational system of the Education School under study.

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Background



In actual fact, people use language to connect with each other in social/interpersonal relationships. Language appears then as social cement which creates/strengthens humans' daily relationships or interactions and, English is no exception. Language allows them to participate in a variety of activities in everyday life (Asif, 2007). The different activities are facilitated through communication which can take the written or the oral form. We speak in terms of communication when certain conditions, viz. sender- message-receiver, are met. In the course of the present study, emphasis will exclusively be put on the oral form of communication, which implies the use of the vocal cords to articulate English speech sounds by non-natives.

Carrying out such a study demands that we use a scientific lens, i.e., linguistics, which helps to explore the different facets of language not only as a medium of exchange, but a meaning-making potential also (Halliday, 1985; Eggins, 2004). It studies what language really is in terms of its component parts and how language works to mean what it does as we communicate. According to the teaching program implemented in the training college, the study of English linguistics in the context of EFL student-teachers training offers the latter an intensive exposure to the very detailed subfields of linguistics such as phonetics and phonology, phonetics and communication, advanced English grammar, general linguistics, English linguistics -morphology, syntax, semantics-, and linguistics applied to language teaching, i.e., didactics (School Teaching Program, 2018).

In such a condition of a three-year training and exposure, lecturers equip EFL student-teachers with the didactic tools likely to help them build and boost speaking skills. It must be remarked that speaking is one of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and is also referred to as a productive skill which gives room to the trainees to practice either in classroom setting, internships, language immersion programs, English club sections, and friendly chats. In a real-life situation, there is communication when idea/feeling/information is transmitted from the sender to the receiver. (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015). If there occurs a hindrance to the communicative event, factors which affects this can rightly be checked. Among these, the following list -which is not limited- can be made: environment, message, stress, fear of making mistake, other psychological barriers, lack of personal involvement, sound production problem, lack of appropriate/skimpy vocabulary, misunderstanding or low linguistic background etc. On top of these, a lack of a minimal exposure to native or near native speakers of English can also impede the communicative event. In this vein, Krashen (1986) suggests that: " you have to live in the country in order to achieve any real proficiency in a second (foreign) language... (p.58)". A decade



later, Kang Shumin (1997) argues that: "Due to minimal exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers, EFL students in general are relatively poor at spoken English especially regarding fluency" (p.8). From the foregoing, a stay in an English speaking country and/or a constant exposure via contacts with native speakers can positively affect non-native learners' oral productive skills as well as their receptive competence.

2. Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

2.1. Data Collection Procedure

The data used in the present paper are got through such research instruments as questionnaire and unstructured interviews with the actors involved in the teaching-learning process. As above said, the "qualitative and quantitative method" of research has been used, as suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2009:455) to investigate, to understand, and display the very aspects related to students' language proficiency in speaking. The quantitative method helps to turn data into statistics and numbers so as to explain the phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed through mathematically based methods, in particular statistics (Aliga & Gunderson, 2000; Creswell, 2003). In other words, this method allows displaying the various research results into figures, percentages within tables. As for the qualitative facet of the study, it is devoted to the interpretation of the findings.

The target population is based on a sample population consisting of 4 lecturers and 25 students of the teacher Education School, Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS), of Porto-Novo, in the Republic of Bénin, West Africa. For this purpose, 25 copies of the questionnaire have been administered to the student-teachers while unstructured interviews have been carried out with the lecturers and the students, as well. The questionnaire and the interview were conducted with the respondents during the two-month break time, i.e., July-August, 2020, we (lecturers and students) were forced to have due the pandemic of covid-19, via a whatsapp platform devised and managed by myself for this purpose. Their feedbacks were gradually sent in my inbox (not on the platform) for analysis.

It is worth clarifying that only the finishing student-teachers are sampled out in the present study as they are expected to have satisfactorily been trained. Such a choice is not surprising since the researcher is a lecturer, specialist of applied English linguistics, on duty in that very school. The results will serve as new paradigms for further orientations and/or stimulus to boost the student-teachers' speaking proficiency.

Apart from the documentary research and the interviews, it can be clarified that the questionnaire is a set of 10 questions meant to explore the student's



considerations regarding the linguistics courses, their contribution to the building and/or the consolidation of his/her language proficiency, and later on, the possible causes which can probably hinder the manifestation of such proficiency. The interviews carried out in the course of the present study have helped to balance and to itemize the list of unlisted realities/facts on the questionnaire sheet.

2.2. Data Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

Data obtained through the questionnaire are gathered into three major categories. The first category comprises questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see appendix). These questions aim at exploring the advantages linguistics courses can offer to the respondents in terms of constructing their meta-linguistic knowledge, on the one hand, and the relationships that can exist between these and the respondents' productive skills, on the other. The results are gathered in the following table.

Table 1. Exploring the respondents' meta-linguistic knowledge.

	Question 1			Question 2			Question 3			Question 4			Question 5		
Answers	Yes	20	80%	Yes	18	72%	Yes	24	96%	Yes	20	80%	Yes	21	84%
	No	5	20%	No	7	28%	No	1	4%	No	5	20%	No	4	16%
	Total 1	25	100%	Total 2	25	100%	Total 3	25	100%	Total 4	25	100%	Total 5	25	100%

In the light of the figures and percentages herein, the majority of the respondents, i.e., 80% (question 1) are aware that linguistics courses help them to understand the meta-language. Out of these, 72%, (question 2) entrusted that the meta-linguistic knowledge participate in increasing their understanding of language-learning resources. Furthermore, the great majority, i.e., 96% (question 3) has recognized that linguistics courses allow them to demonstrate their ability to understand how language functions. It can then be inferred from these that those courses have allowed the respondents to be aware of the form and the function of language patterns they are using. As for questions 4 and 5, 80% of the respondents agree that language proficiency can be thought of in terms of speaking and writing while 84% are aware that the secondary school students' language proficiency depends on their teachers' one.

The second category of data embraces questions 6 and 7 and is intended to check if the respondents' consideration of speaking as a facet of proficiency. Also, the questions address their frequency of oral practice. The following table



informs about the figures and percentages got for these aspects of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Checking student-teachers' consideration of speaking performance.

	Question 6			Question 7		
Answers	6a	5	20%	7a	12	48%
	6b	20	80%	7b	8	32%
	6c	0	0%	7c	5	20%
	Total 6	25	100%	Total 7	25	100%

The percentages inform that the respondents are used to engaging in oral communication on different occasions. The respondents frequently (i.e. 48% and 32%) exchange during oral presentation in formal classroom setting and with friends on informal occasion. Few of them (i.e. 20%) take the floor during English club sessions. It can be noted that English club sessions are weekly gathering of the EFL students where teaching, learning, correction, training and diverse performance activities are managed and conducted by the peers in a relax atmosphere. These occasions offer room for the student-teachers to express thoughts and, consequently, construct meaning with friends, mates, and lecturers in a relax atmosphere.

The third category of the collected data gathers information from questions 8, 9, and 10. It seeks to validate the level of oral fluency of the respondents and the factors hindering its flourishing before checking if the linguistic courses have effectively contribution anything to the building of the student-teachers' language fluency. Data are displayed in Table 3.

Table3. Examining fluency and handicaps to its manifestation.

	Question 8			Question 9			Question 10				
Answers	8a	1	4%	Answers	9a	1	4%	Answers	Yes	22	88%
	8b	22	88%		9b	8	32%		No	3	12%
	8c	2	8%		9c	9	36%		Total	25	100%
	Total 8	25	100%		9d	6	24%		10		
					9e	1	4%				
					9f	0	0%				
				Total 9	25	100%					



Concerning the level of fluency (question 8), 88% of the respondents attest that they have an average level. While 4% of the students entrust that they have a low level of fluency, 8% attest that they have a very good command of the English language. Such fluency is in accordance with the academic register, i.e., the context of situation, and their experiential meaning they construct (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Concerning the reasons and factors that might hinder the flourishing/expression (question 9) of fluency, the majority of the respondents recognize that problems related to English sounds production, the fear of making mistakes, and the lack of appropriate/skimpy vocabulary prevent them from actively being involved in communicative events. Only 4% have confirmed that the grammatical rules and a psychological aspect, i.e., shyness, are the factors hindering the flourishing of their fluency. Furthermore, 88% of the respondents have recognized that the linguistics courses have contributed something to the building of their meta-language. The justification is that through these courses (phonetics and phonology, phonetics and communication, advanced English grammar, general linguistics, English linguistics, and linguistics applied to language teaching, i.e., didactics), the trainees have not only scrutinized the basics of the language, but have been put in practical situations likely to improve their language proficiency. The next section is devoted to the discussion of the findings in order to question a possible anticipatory preparation for oral communication that can be done via some linguistic courses as above enumerated.

3. Discussion of the Findings

This last section exhibits in three rubrics the discussion of the different findings of the study. These discussions are displayed along with the schema followed by the above analysis of data. Finally, comes the concluding note of the study.

Actually, the great majority of the respondents are conscious that attending linguistics courses is beneficial for them because it not only helps them to study language in terms what language is and how it functions, but it also participates in building of their meta-linguistic knowledge. In other words, these courses help the attendants to understand the language-learning resources which, in their turn, offer them a wide range or possibility to use language depending on contexts or situations. For example, when student-teachers master sentence structures, words, parts of speech, and pronunciation as well, they can easily understand and/or interpret new language patterns as they are engaged in oral/written communication. In addition, knowing meta-language help the student-teachers to better follow their interlocutors since the former can make the difference between two language patterns/constructions and avoid using language as ordinary language users.



Apart from the above mentioned benefit, the linguistics courses, actually, offer them the possibility to acquire the Educated Variety of the English language so as to describe and/or discuss its functioning. This is an asset they are endowed with and which makes the difference between them and ordinary speakers of the language. To reinforce their language skills, the student-teachers are allowed to participate in debates and exchanges according to their levels of proficiency and depending on the subject matter.

So, one can rightly suppose that those students, for three years of training, have been given opportunities to study scientifically and to practice language through exercises, courses, and activities such as personal research, class oral presentation and role-play, drama and song performance, etc. Thus, such lectures, in their contents, might be seen as means to construct student-teachers language proficiency –putting aside the aspect of fluency- where the latter are highly equipped to effectively handle language in oral and written communication as well.

Concerning the link the respondents can make between their language proficiency and that of their future students, 84% of the respondents have recognized that the secondary school students' language proficiency depends on their teachers' one. This implies that the respondents have to do their best to improve their own level, in terms of proficiency, be it oral or written, as so to positively impact their future students' in secondary schools.

Through unstructured interviews with the lecturers, it can be noticed that most of the student-teachers take an active part in grammar courses but fail to convert those grammatical notions into concrete communicative events. It can be drawn from the foregoing that knowing the grammar of a language, i.e., phonology plus syntax plus semantics, does not allow anybody to be fluent. Thus, being good at English grammar does not guarantee fluency. Such a situation raises the issue of communicative grammar teaching so as to enhance the students speaking ability. In fact, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a theory which views language, first and foremost, as a system of communication (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1973). Here, effective language learning comes through the ability to communicate real meanings and thoughts. If learners are effectively involved in authentic communication, as a result, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be drawn on as a contribution, and their language accuracy will follow later on.

If the respondents can, thus, focus on the communicative aspect of language, this will allow them to unconsciously put more emphasis on speaking skills and meaning construction than grammatical rules or systems. One can easily remark that a learner who communicates more information with fewer



mistakes related to accuracy is more likely to be proficient than the one who conveys very little with no mistakes.

The last rubric of the discussion questions the average level of language command of the respondents to pinpoint solutions for its improvement. The majority, i.e., 88% of the students have declared that their level is average while 8% confirmed that theirs is relatively high. It can thus be perceived from this that the simple fact that the student-teachers spend three years at this Education School for their training does not automatically guarantee language proficiency. The causes of such a handicap range from difficulties related to English sounds production, the fear of making mistakes, the lack of appropriate vocabulary, shyness, and non-commitment. It can thus be noted that while some of the above are linguistic factors, others are non-linguistic but psychological ones. The linguistic factors related to English sound production, a skimpy vocabulary, and grammatical mistakes can be associated with the difficulties brought about by the learning environment of English as a Foreign Language. In such a situation, learners need to be exposed to extensive reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Harmer, 2003; Krashen, 2003; and Renandya, 2011) if they cannot have the possibility to organize immersion programs during the academic year. Also, they need to maximize their active participation in English clubs activities where most of the active members engage in role play, song performance or dramatization to adjust their use of the target language to different social contexts with their peers.

In all, lectures, class oral presentations, and English clubs are varied occasions where students regularly work in isolation, in pairs or in groups to negotiate and share roles. But, when a participant regularly lacks personal commitment, s/he gains nothing and, consequently, his/her English does not improve. Concerning the psychological factors in the framework of the present study, these can be associated with a question of personal will and choice. If some students can choose to actively participate and perform well, we think that the others who are being trained in the same working conditions have no choice but to try their best.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has studied the possible contributions that linguistics courses make to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student-teachers' language proficiency. In order to arrive at reliable data, research instruments such as questionnaire and interviews have been used with a sample population of 25 student-teachers and 4 lecturers of the High Teacher Education School of Porto-Novo. The findings disclose that the different linguistics courses contribute to the building of the meta-linguistic knowledge of the trainees and, consequently,



help them to, not only, acquire the language-learning resources, but also the Educated Variety of the English language. In addition, the courses equip them to effectively use language and positively impact their future students in secondary schools. In terms of factors hindering student-teachers' proficiency, three types of these have been revealed viz. (i) the students' lack of involvement and commitment in the course aims and objectives, (ii) their lack of immersion in the target language via active participations in English clubs and language trips to English speaking countries, and (iii) their lack of didactic material (at the personal level), which hinders the good will of some.

Finally, the study recommends that the student-teachers, as they are studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), resort to extensive language input, i.e., listening and reading, so as to improve their linguistic performance.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire to student-teachers

Instruction: Tick only the cases that reflect the truthful answer you have.

1-Are you aware that linguistics courses help you to understand the meta-language?

Yes No

2- Can you imagine that the meta-linguistic knowledge increases the understanding of language-learning resources?

Yes No

3- Can we rightly say that taking linguistics courses allows you to demonstrate your ability to understand how language functions?

Yes No

4- Have you ever thought of language proficiency in terms of productive skills like speaking and writing?

Yes No

5-Do you know that on your language proficiency depends your future students' English proficiency?

Yes No

6-Do you communicate orally in English with lecturers/mates/relatives?

6a-Frequently 6b-Sometimes 6c-Rarely

7-On which occasion do you orally communicate your thoughts:

7a-Oral presentations 7b-chats in/out of the college setting

7c-English clubs

8-How fluent are you in oral communication?

Low Average High

9-What prevents you from performing in oral communication?

Grammar English sounds production fear of making mistakes



Skimpy vocabulary shyness non-commitment

10- Do you think that the different linguistics courses have contributed something to your fluency?

Yes No

Justify your answer -----

(End)