



EARLY ENGLISH EDUCATION EXPERIMENTATION IN SOME PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN BENIN REPUBLIC: A HOT COMMODITY OR A COOKED FOOD?

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ABSTRACT

This study is a survey on English as a Foreign Language Education in Primary Schools in Benin Republic. English was reintroduced within the primary school curriculum in Benin Republic for the second time as experimentation. The purpose of the study is to investigate opinions of primary school language instructors and challenges to the experimentation phase. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions with instructors involved in the program. Preliminary findings suggest that there are many challenges such as (1) Teacher proficiency and qualifications, (2) sustained motivation, (3) L1 literacy, (4) resources, and (5) curricula continuity across level. The introduction of the English language in primary schools has great potential. However, its goals need to be clearly defined, well-articulated and realistic, taking into account research findings in the area of child education. Moreover, unless the identified challenges in the present study are met, there can be no justification for extending the experimentation beyond the primary schools selected for that purpose.

Keywords: Benin Republic, English as a Foreign Language, L1 literacy, Primary school, Experimentation

RESUME

La présente étude est une enquête sur l'expérimentation de l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère dans des écoles primaires en République du Bénin. La recherche a été entreprise dans le but de recueillir les opinions des maîtres intervenant dans ledit programme et d'enquêter les défis liés à l'expérimentation. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen de questionnaire et de discussions de groupe. Les résultats suggèrent qu'il existe de nombreux défis tels que (1) la compétence et la qualification des maîtres en charge du programme ; (2) les conditions précaires de travail dans les salles de cours et dans les écoles ; (3) le problème de motivation des acteurs en charge du programme (4) le manque de ressources (5) le problème lié à l'alphabétisation dans la langue d'initiation et (6) la problématique de la continuité du programme au niveau secondaire. La réintroduction de l'anglais langue étrangère dans les écoles primaires a un grand potentiel. Cependant, les objectifs doivent être clairement définis, bien articulés et réalistes, en tenant compte du contexte d'apprentissage et des études en la matière. Il urge aussi qu'au préalable ces défis identifiés dans la présente étude soient relevés avant d'étendre l'expérimentation aux autres écoles primaires du pays.

Mots clés : République du Bénin, anglais langue étrangère, écoles primaires, expérimentation, alphabétisation

INTRODUCTION

English was reintroduced formally within the primary school curriculum in Benin Republic in 2017 for the second time as experimentation. Some children now study English for up to 3.6 hours per week with 108 instructors involved in the program. There are many reasons behind the re-introduction of English in primary classrooms. Beninese Government recognise the importance of English to their economies and societies have recommended schools to restart the experience. Some critics point out that the English language teaching does not work well in secondary schools; low level of English after 7 years' study. Private schools are advertising themselves as bilingual schools and therefore, are giving so much attention to the English language. Parents are seeing children reciting in English, telling stories as well as greeting and singing songs in English. These parents want to witness this experience in state schools. Also, very recently teaching English Associations have begun to play a very important role in teachers training and some of them with a view to maintaining a good relationship with the ministry of education, are suggesting the introduction of English in state schools at the primary level because this is a way of positioning them as an important stakeholder in the ministry. Linked to the notion that the earlier you start to learn, the better the proficiency outcomes (Baumert et al., 2020), another motive is that in an increasingly globalized world where the English language is a key, intercultural competence is essential, and that it is important to awaken children's interests in English people and cultures at a time when they are open and receptive. More recent arguments are based on the cognitive advantages that learning a foreign language brings such advantages as enhanced problem solving, attentional control or ability to switch tasks, and on the claim that it helps with literacy (Larson-Hall, 2008).

Benin government policy which made learning English compulsory in some English primary schools was almost exclusively linked to the above of motives. But what is the research evidence? It is essential to ensure that the re-introduction of English is not allowed to become an elite skill which is accessible only to a privileged group of society and which itself becomes a means of access to benefits which other members of society are not able to enjoy. This is a destructive phenomenon which has already occurred in some countries like Pakistan. In this context, English contributes to social divisiveness (Coleman 2013). This study makes it an opportune time to reflect on the re-introduction of English as a Foreign Language in some primary schools in Benin Republic and the challenges of its implementation. This research is structured around five points: the literature review; the objectives of the study; the methodology; the results/discussion; and the conclusion.

1. Aims and Research Questions

There is some evidence of hot commodity with the implementation of the early English Education in primary schools in Benin Republic. The main concern is to find out the conditions for success in English early education that can meet the government's expectations. This study purports to explore the re-introduction of English in primary school curricula through instructors' views and challenges. The following research questions drive the paper:

- What are the characteristics of instructors involved in the program?
- How do the respondent instructors view the re-introduction of English in primary school curricula?
- What challenges do the instructors meet in the program?

2. Review of the Literature

Young children are very enthusiastic about and love learning foreign languages. As they find it fun and enjoy discovering new worlds and new ways of saying things. However, they are slower at learning languages than adolescent learners, in all its aspects. Various studies show that older children outperform younger ones; their greater cognitive maturity helps them make the best of the limited input and of explicit instruction. Jonhstone (2009) concludes that Primary-aged children learn language more slowly than secondary school students. The reason is simple; those who have started secondary schools have had time to develop cognitive skills in the language they are familiar with and therefore, more capable of dealing with complex linguistic issues than those who have been struggling in the language in primary schools, probably by singing songs and saying *good morning* and *how are you?* Research has shown that far from what Wilson and Robert (1959) found out, children do not actually learn language better than adults. The average child just survives with fifty (50) words. Studies confirmed that there are virtually no differences in English proficiency when earlier and later starters are compared at the end of secondary schools (Jaekel et al. 2017; Munoz 2006; 2014). A later starter is better than an early start as regards speed of learning. (Blom and Bosma 2016; Nakamura, 2015). An early start is good, if L1 literacy is well developed (Afolayan 1976; Laitin, Ramachandran & Water 2019; Tadadjeu 1980). Most of the studies investigating whether earlier is better in instructed contexts point in the same direction. The very small number of studies which have found a small advantage for an early start were in instructed contexts with many hours of instruction per week and with good literacy in L1. Young children learn mainly by doing rather than by conscious learning, that is, they learn more implicitly than older children (Johnstone, 2009). As a result, they need abundant input and rich interaction to allow their implicit mechanisms to work. However, we have hardly found out studies which focused on how teachers implementing such a program perceive it and what are the challenges

faced by these teachers more specifically in challenging contexts. The purpose of this study is to explore opinions of primary school language instructors involved in the program early English education experimentation in primary schools and investigate the challenges they face to the experimentation phase.

3. Methodology: Participants and Research Instruments

This study covered three years (from 2017 to 2020). A total of thirty-one (n=31) primary school instructors were enrolled in the study and they responded to a questionnaire. Among the participants three (n=3) are females and twenty-eight (n=28) are males. Data were also collected by means of Focus Group Discussions with ten (10) instructors involved in the program. The discussions were open-ended and presented as casual conversations to encourage the participants to talk freely about the program and their challenges. Some descriptive questions were asked at the beginning to introduce the debate. As the discussion went on, some structural and contrast questions followed. These questions emerged from what the respondent instructors said. At the end of the series of interviews and group discussion, the data collected were analysed into grounded categories. The replies were coded to determine common themes. The validity of the common themes was achieved by the agreement of multiple classifiers upon the common themes.

4. Results

The findings begin with the characteristics of instructors involved in the program. Next, it describes respondent teachers' opinions on the early introduction of English in primary school curriculum. Finally, the section discusses possible challenges in the implementation of the program through thematic analysis carried out on the data elicited from the participants.

4.1. Characteristics of instructors involved in the program

The route to qualification as a teacher of English in Benin, for a person who holds a senior secondary school certificate (Baccalauréat), is to undertake a three-year academic programme in English (Licence) at University. This is followed by a one-year postgraduate programme in English (Maîtrise). The process is ended with a one-year professional training programme in the Teacher Training College. This teacher preparation programme is known as the CAPES (Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire), Secondary School Teaching Qualification. A person who follows this route will have spent a total of five years in higher education and professional preparation, therefore, and will be qualified as a 'professeur certifié' (certified teacher). Certified teachers are entitled to teach throughout the secondary school system, at any level from the first year of junior secondary to the final year of senior secondary.

An alternative route for the prospective teacher, after completing the three-year Licence degree at University, is to go directly into a one-year professional preparation programme in the Teacher Training College, without going through the postgraduate academic programme. This one-year period of professional preparation is known as BAPES (Brevet d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire, Foundation Certificate of Professional Aptitude in Secondary Education). This route therefore takes four years (three years academic plus one year professional). An individual who follows the BAPES route qualifies as a 'professeur adjoint' (adjunct or assistant teacher). BAPES-qualified teachers are permitted to teach throughout the secondary school system (except in the final year of senior secondary school, when learners are preparing for examinations).

In this investigation, the one hundred and eight (108) teachers involved in the implementation of the early English education are primary school teachers. Most of them in the program are teachers without holding either the CAPES or BAPES certificates. Among the teachers, the proportion who were professionally unqualified reached 83 per cent. The study found that almost two-thirds of the English teachers had not undertaken any professional preparation. Some of instructors involved in the program have completed the Maîtrise (four years in academic programmes but with no professional preparation). Others have completed the Licence degree (three years at university). Still, some teachers have completed only two years of the University academic programmes. If they leave after two years they are awarded the DUEL qualification (Diplôme Universitaire d'Etudes Littéraire), University Diploma of Literary Studies.

Based on the above results of the investigation, we can conclude that most of the one hundred and eight (108) teachers involved in the program are primary school teachers who have not necessarily gone through pedagogical and professional qualification.

4.2. Participant teachers' views on the experimentation

The instructors involved in the program were asked how important they felt it was for their pupils to learn English in primary school. Thirty-one (31) teachers responded to the questionnaire. Large majorities of respondent teachers agreed that the introduction of English was of great importance. Twenty-five (25) out of the thirty-one (31) respondent teachers believed that the introduction of English was important for their pupils if they want to have an early command of the language. Some of the participants think that if they were introduced to English learning in primary schools, they would have a better command of the English. The majority believe that an early introduction of English in primary schools is good because children are most receptive at this stage; this view has its theoretical foundations in the so-called 'Critical Period Hypothesis', which claims that children are born with

an innate language faculty which atrophies with age, and that it is therefore important to tap into these innate mechanisms before the critical age when they disappear (Harley & Wang 1997). Another opinion is that English education must start at primary level because of the proliferation of bilingual schools for kids. Some teachers indicated that they had 'no opinion' as to whether English was important or not in primary schools.

The findings suggest that there are some issues of dissatisfaction with the implementation of the early English Education in primary schools. Some of the respondents think that the program is tiresome because the model of language teaching delivery currently adopted in schools is the use of a peripatetic specialist teacher going from school to school, or, in many schools. Respondent teachers in the program have to teach 40 minutes per class and this in many surrounding schools per day. They have to run from school to school coupled with many risks of accident. At the end of the day, teachers are very tired and feel abandoned.

4.3. Challenges met in the program implementation

Thematic analysis was carried out on the interviews and focus group data elicited from the participants. The following themes emerged from the descriptions they gave of the program (1) Teacher proficiency and qualifications, (2) sustained motivation, (3) L1 literacy, (4) resources, and (5) curricula continuity across level.

4.3.1. Teacher proficiency and qualifications:

According to the survey, a twenty-three (23) percent of the teachers got an initial training. This means that they have learned in one way or another some basic teaching principles. More than half of the respondents are still in need of initial training. The findings showed that there is a small number of specialized teachers in the programme: a considerable number of teachers lack confidence in their own English and experience difficulties in classes. However, research has shown that specialist teachers are more successful at teaching foreign languages than teachers who have a poor command of the language, and/or who have received little or no training in foreign language pedagogy (Jonhstone, 2019). Attention must be given to the program instructors, who are instrumental in the teaching-learning process. Questions to be asked include: How can teachers most appropriately be prepared for their role? What is the most appropriate balance between subject mastery, pedagogical understanding and classroom experience? How can these three core elements be integrated with each other? How can teachers who lack confidence in their own English be assisted? How can teachers be helped to become and remain analytical and critical of their own teaching and of the context in which their teaching takes place? Who is best placed to provide the ongoing support which teachers

require and how can these 'supporters of teachers' be most effectively prepared for their roles? These questions could serve as guidelines for future research.

4.3.2. Sustained motivation

The study indicates that there is no establishment and maintenance of an effective, motivated workforce in the experimentation. Many respondent teachers complain of their salary treatment. One of the respondent teachers asserts:

Since I have been involved in the English education experimentation, I have to be going from school to school every day and this for the whole week without any transportation aid. The salary I earned before my involvement in the program remains constant.

The teachers' motivation and morale are affected by both monetized and non-monetized benefits. Understanding that triggers for teacher motivation is key to attracting and retaining teachers in the profession, and an important component of building positive teaching and learning environments in the experimentation. In order to facilitate quality teaching and learning, teachers need to be supported and motivated. The low professional morale of the teachers carrying out the experimentation impacts on different dimensions of the programme (high rates of attrition, poor instructional preparation and low commitment).

4.3.3. L1 literacy

Children in the context under investigation have to learn English through French which, for many of them, is a foreign language that they have not yet mastered completely. There is considerable interference from French in their output, particularly from non-standard spoken French in a context where English is absent from the daily lives of many school-age children in the region. The study has shown that primary schools pupils in the context have demonstrated some difficulties in basic mathematics and French. There should be a focus on these specific needs. These needs are of utmost importance for the completion of basic education and they will probably lay foundation for English education. If these conditions are fulfilled, learners will almost certainly have a very clear idea of what they need English for, and they will be motivated to learn it unlike many who have not acquired literacy in L1 study.

4.3.4. Resources

The introduction of English in primary school curriculum is not sustained by resources, which greatly limited the program implementation. The study has come with a shortage in human and material resources. The expectations are just too high, given the amount of teaching and the current resources and provision. A participant teacher in the study has explained that there is a limited resource in the

experimentation. Resource is one of the problems faced by teachers involved in the program. Resource is the instructional center and is considered as having the most influence on what is going on in the class. Resource is the key to succeed in doing things. In the teaching of English, it is indeed needed because it helps the students to deepen what they have learned. Without materials, the students might find it difficult to comprehend lessons. This finding is similar to the finding of O'Connor and Geiger (2009). They mentioned resource as one of the problems faced by primary school teachers. In the current study the majority of the teacher -around 97, 5% - expressed for the need for specific language teaching resources for teaching the learners, such as simple picture vocabulary theme books and worksheets.

4.3.5. Curricula continuity across level

Crucially, there needs to be greater clarity regarding the purpose of including English in primary school curriculum. Objectives need to be expressed in concrete terms which are meaningful to all those involved in the process and those who guide them once they have started teaching. There needs to be a clear relationship between the objectives and the amount of time allocated for teaching and learning English. Also, the transition from primary to secondary school has consistently been flagged up as a major challenge to progress in English as a foreign language learning. The study suggests that the problem endures. There is currently very little joined-up thinking about how the transition from primary to secondary schools is managed, with secondary schools receiving children from primary feeder schools with hugely varying practices and little coordination between the two. This does not make for an ideal learning context, and it can be demotivating for learners, as well as for the teacher who typically has to assume children do not have any language skills.

5. Discussion and Suggestions

5.1. Discussion

The results show that the experimentation of English introduction in primary schools is full of challenges and unclear objectives. Challenges such as teacher proficiency and qualifications, sustained motivation, L1 literacy, resources, and curricula continuity across level. The objectives of the English language introduction are expressed in very broad and ambitious terms. One instructor of the survey team concluded that:

There is no clear written policy to guide English education in the whole country. English teaching is like a blind man searching for a black hat in a dark room and a plane without a pilot.

Early foreign language learning remains in need of research targeting teacher education, the transition from elementary to secondary education, and the use of

textbooks. For example, the impact that elementary school teachers' language proficiency and overall foreign language pedagogy skills have on students' learning has received little attention despite its significance in the context under investigation (Coleman 2013). Understanding the effect of students' transitioning from elementary to secondary school on their L2 learning also requires thorough longitudinal studies to optimize language proficiency outcomes in the long term. The current results provide at least some reasons for more caution, call for further investigation. At both elementary and secondary school levels, teaching methodology has a crucial role in accommodating the special needs of early-starting students, maximizing the outcome of minimal input in early language learning and allowing for a smooth transition between elementary and secondary schooling. This includes the availability of qualified teaching corps and adequate textbooks, which should account for students' increased language proficiency due to the early start.

It is equally important to get every child literate and numerate, and to keep them in school until they complete their basic education. This means using the child's L1 as the medium of instruction. There is no evidence of a need to extend the teaching of English downwards into primary schools, nor is there a rationale for introducing English as a medium of instruction. If English is to be taught to satisfy a utilitarian need then that need must be explicit, concrete and legitimate. Meanwhile, if English is to be taught simply as a school subject, then every child must have access to learning opportunities which are of the same high standard.

5.2. Suggestions

Introducing English as a subject in primary school curricula could be a luxury and a distraction if the following pressing issues affecting education in primary schools throughout the country have not been satisfied. Among these issues are: literacy in L1; shortage in human resources; overcrowded classrooms; lack of textbooks; lack of libraries; lack of material resources; low teachers' proficiency; qualification and motivation; and other socio-political and cultural constraints. Having assessed and ascertained the problem revolving around an early English education in primary schools, the study comes up with the following suggestions:

- Consolidating the teaching of English as a subject which already takes place in secondary education schools.
- Providing schools with essential resources and making them attractive places for children.
- Recruiting brilliant and highly motivated students in the teaching corps and ensuring their appropriate distribution.
- Making sure that teachers are adequately prepared to teach through the creation of effective professional learning systems

- Providing the necessary incentives to ensure that teachers go from school to school every day and stay in these schools until the end of teaching hours.
- Creating contexts in which teachers endeavour to prepare themselves adequately before teaching and are supported in doing so;
- Providing the means and incentives for teachers to participate in ongoing professional development throughout their teaching careers.
- Evaluating regularly teachers and encouraging the best ones

CONCLUSION

This study is a survey of the English as a foreign language education in primary schools in Benin Republic. The research raises a certain number of challenges for the implementation of the primary English language policy. This does not mean that the initiative is a hot commodity and that it cannot turn into cooked food. However, it would need to be thought about differently, with expectations matched to what research has shown about the way in which young children learn and what motivates them. What is needed is a clear vision of the purpose of introducing young children to English language learning, and of how the teaching can be integrated successfully within the Foreign Language curriculum as a whole, paying particular attention to evolving learner motivation and to the transition from primary to secondary school.

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