Using Technologies to Improve Students' Performance in EFL Classrooms: Teachers' and Learners' Opinions in Some Secondary Schools in Benin

Dr. Hindeme Ulrich Orlando Sèna (richdeme11@gmail.com)
English Department, University of Abomey- Calavi, Bénin, West Africa

Abstract*: The use of technologies has become an important part of the learning process both inside and outside of the classroom. High technology keeps on growing in importance as an instrument to help teachers promote language teaching. This investigation aims to examine the impacts of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on EFL students' academic performance. It discusses approaches which back up the idea that the use of computers and Internet in classroom has the potential to make EFL learning more interactive, and thus, improve students' motivation and academic performance. A questionnaire and class observations were used to collect data. This study adopts an eclectic methodology based on quantitative and qualitative analyses. The respondents include 135 intermediate learners and 26 teachers. The findings reveal that the effective use of technologies positively impacts students' learning motivation and increase their language learning performance. The results also indicate that innovation in language learning transforms students from receptive subjects to active learners, prompting deeper and enriching language use. Students can study English using a variety of multimedia apps. However, the success of the use of technologies in education depends on how technology-based courses are designed and implemented and how teachers are trained to use them in language classrooms.*

Keywords: Classroom Performance, Digital Technologies, EFL Learning

1. Introduction

The incorporation of the English language as a subject in most schools is not at all surprising as it is one of, if not, the most widely used language in the world. In non-English speaking countries, especially French speaking countries, the teaching or learning of this language is of utmost importance to most schools and has been integrated into the curriculum of schools. However, in order to effectively teach the language, which is basically taught for communicative purposes to learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), appropriate methods and teaching practices are to be designed. It is important to state that, over the years, educational advisers, researchers and policy makers had come up with various approaches to ensure an effective teaching of EFL but these were mostly based on grammar. These approaches, as time goes on, have shown their limitations. The current era of digital technology has introduced computer-based learning tools such as video clips, voice-enhanced dictionaries, etc.

The advent of modern technology has brought significant changes into educational systems across the globe. In advanced countries, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has obviously changed the traditional style of blackboard and chalk. Alsied and Pathan (2013) stated that "the advent of computer technology in EFL instruction has led to significant changes in teachers' approaches, methodologies and strategies to teaching foreign language like English" (p.45). Also, "digital technology is considered to be one of the most important drivers of linguistic change in a modern period. Over the last decade with its' remarkable entry as an educational device, the tradition of English Language teaching has drastically changed" (Abbasova & Mammadova, 2019, p.364).More importantly, the introduction of modern technology in the teaching of EFL has been said to "enhance the language learning process" (Ahmadi, 2018, p.115).

However, in Benin, the integration of digital technology in EFL classrooms has not been achieved yet. Teachers continue to use the traditional method of teaching, which contributes to the learners' poor

performance. Since modern technology is said to act as "a catalyst in stimulating teachers and pupils to work in new ways" (Hennessy, as cited in Parvin & Salam, 2005, p.49), this paper examines the barriers to ICT integration in EFL classes in some secondary schools in the Republic of Benin, and discusses how this problem can be resolved to facilitate the learning of EFL in Benin.

1.1 Research Questions

This study revolves around two focal questions:

1. How enlightened are EFL teachers about modern technology and its positive impact on students' learning outcomes?

2. What are the factors hindering the integration of ICTs in EFL classes in Benin's secondary schools?

1.2 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is basically to:

- find out the level of awareness of EFL teachers of modern technology and its impact on students' learning outcomes

- investigate the factors that impede ICT use in the teaching and learning of EFL in Benin's secondary schools

2. Review of Literature

This review of literature highlights the definition of digital technology, its benefits and challenges to its integration as pointed out by previous researchers.

2.1 Digital Technology

Technology is the "practical use of knowledge particularly in a specific area and is a way of doing a task especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge" (İŞMAN, as cited in Ahmadi, 2018, p.117). Therefore, digital technology which is also known as ICT refers to any electronic tool or device that generates, stores and processes data. Examples of digital technologies include computers, laptops, smart phones, tablets, eBooks and internet. The advent of ICT has brought significant changes into the educational system. According to Alsied and Pathan (2013), "with many practical benefits both for EFL teachers and learners, today, the use of computer technology in EFL teaching and learning has achieved great popularity" (p.45). They further stated that "many EFL luminaries and pedagogues have…recommended strongly this use for effective and dynamic teaching and learning of foreign language like English" (p.45). In the same vein, Ahmadi (2018) said that "through using technology, many authentic materials can be provided to learners and they can be motivated in learning language" (p.116). Technology "increases learners' cooperation in learning tasks" and helps them in "gathering information and interacting with resources such as videos" (Gillespie, as cited in Ahmadi, 2018, p. 119). The use of digital technology especially in the EFL classroom not only increases students' motivation and interest to practice the English language but also, as stated by Alsied and Patham (2013), offers students the "option of self-directed learning and to connect learning to valuable work skills and personal use" (p.48).

2.2 Digital Literacy and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Related to Education

As stated earlier, with the increasing importance of modern technology in the world today and the advocacy of ICT integration in education, it is quite obvious for one to have good knowledge about ICT as well as its usage. The ability to read and write is referred to as "literacy". The American Library

Association's Task Force defines digital literacy as the "ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills" (as cited in Harvin, 2020, para.2). Similarly, Royal Society (2012) states that digital literacy should be understood to mean the basic skill or ability to use a computer confidently, safely and effectively, including: the ability to use office software such as word processors, email and presentation software and the ability to use a web browser and Internet search engines. A digitally literate teacher can make use of available apps to make EFL more interesting in his or her classroom. Besides, Harvin (2020) opines that a distracted student can be shown visuals or a student who is more comfortable with hearing what the teacher says can be provided with audio clues. The teacher can also share information based on individual needs, consequently making use of technology. Scrivener (2011) cites Mark Prensky who coined the terms: *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* (p.334). 'Digital natives' is a term that refers to young students who have grown up with 21st century digital technology and is just a part of their normal world. These 'natives' usually have sophisticated phones, music players, games, home computers, GPS systems, digital video recorders and much more. In contrast, many teachers fall into the category of digital immigrants as they are trying to catch up with the digital era. Prensky (2001) argues that those who have grown with "ubiquitous access to digital technology think differently to previous generations whose introduction to technology came later on in life" (Department of eLearning, 2015, p.6)

Many school institutions, nowadays, have seen the importance of ICTs in the teaching process. In most developing countries like the Republic of Benin, the use of ICT is becoming a permanent interest of research for the accessibility and the quality of the learning process. For instance, Araromi (2014) has shown a general overview of the use of ICT in teaching and learning on foreign languages. He has pointed out that "One cannot underestimate the significant values and benefits inherent in the use of ICT facilities in the language classrooms". (Araromi 2014: 421). He, then, concluded that "There is urgent need to revolutionize the teaching and the learning of foreign languages through the intervention of modern technologies such as ICT and language software". (Araromi 2014: 428).

On the same path, Bankole (2014) has conducted a study on integrating the use of ICT tools in secondary schools in Benin. After presenting "a bird's eye view of the existing available resources of ICT in Benin" (p.390), she has observed that ICT is no longer a matter of choice; it is a necessity in today's society which is run by technological and scientific knowledge. Her research work has shown that the use of ICTs is relevant in school curriculum. As she has stated, "Integrating ICT tools into EFL teaching/learning is a necessity today if teachers are aware that one of the roles they need to perform as educators is to teach students to find and learn information on their own and in concert with their colleagues". (Bankole 2014: 402).

2.4 Integrating ICT in EFL Classrooms

Introducing ICT in English language teaching has been a point of discussion in recent times among researchers. Studies have shown that digital technology has with no doubt transformed the human society and is significant in providing quality teaching and learning (Garba, Singh, Yusuf & Ziden, 2013; Ahmadi, 2018). However, with the advent of digital technology, innovations such as, the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is now popular in the EFL classroom. CALL "makes it possible for teachers to more easily provide the necessary engagement with language that allows learners to improve their skills in ways that have proved very difficult in the past" (Motteram, 2013, p.117). In fact, laptops, palmtops with programmed courses with lessons, assignments and much more are used in the classroom. Poudel (2018) stated in an article that teachers have to integrate technologies in order to teach effectively. He said that "…modern electronic devices such as computer, television, overhead projector, mobile phone, multimedia and web-based applications have vital roles in language teaching…" (ibid. 7). Although, McKenzie (1993) and Stallard (1998) argue that the main problem in teachers' decision to use

or not to use ICT concerns their attitude (as cited in Tezei, 2010), integrating digital technology provides real teaching or learning experience for both learners and teachers.

2.5 Adverse opinions on ICT for Education

Olaore (2014) has examined the positive and negative impacts of ICT on education. He has explained that "There are large costs involved and poorer students and educational establishments may end up being disadvantaged…Students, and sometimes teachers, can get hooked on the technology aspect, rather than the subject content." (p.156)

Besides, as it is written on UKessays' webpage (2018), ICTs still show some negative effect on education. Twelve of these negative effects are mentioned as follows:

> "1. Huge Expenditure, 2. Insufficient Teaching Methods, 3. Waste of Time, 4. Misguided due to Wrong Information, 5. Major Source of Distraction, 6. Creates Enough Opportunities for Cheating, 7. Learners Get Disconnected from the Real World, 8. Losing Assignment of the Students, 9. Difficult to Deal with the Online Courses, 10. Extinction of Good Handwriting, 11. Partial to the Low-Income Group of People, 12. E-Books Replacing Physical Books ». Both teachers and students are affected. "Teachers who depend more on the ICT do not perform well as a teacher. For example, they may not check through the details of the work that they searched from the web… Through this type of behavior, reliability of the students will be affected.", (UKessays' webpage, 2018).

Olaore (2014) has concluded that "The advantages of ICT on education overweigh the disadvantages. Therefore, it can be said that ICT has a positive impact on education". He has gone further saying that "the manner in which the subject is taught has a larger effect than the mere use of ICT".

3. Methodological Approach

This research work uses an eclectic research design. It explores quantitative and qualitative data to analyse the various impacts of digital technologies on learners' performance in EFL class in Benin. The people involved in this work are 26 EFL teachers who have been teaching EFL for more than a decade and 135 EFL intermediate students from public and private secondary schools in Benin. The research instruments are questionnaires, interviews and documents. Questionnaires are used to get the data related to the teaching activities based on the use of technologies in EFL classes. Interviews are conducted with teachers to identify the challenges related to the use of digital technologies in EFL classes.

Another type of research instrument used in this work is the documentary research survey. Articles, textbooks prescribed by the institutions, books' chapters related to technologies were analysed, especially in terms of types of activities. This provided support for the findings related to the other data collection instruments. The analysis of the data consists in classifying the items into categories, only categories. Only information related to digital technology, its integration and implications on the educational system has been consulted. Data drawn from these different sources have been processed and displayed into tables and figures.

4. Findings

The findings of the study are reported in two sections; one containing the results of the questionnaires and the other the results of the interviews.

4.1 Results Related to Students' Questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire addressed to students are presented below. It is important to state that only the most relevant data have been presented.

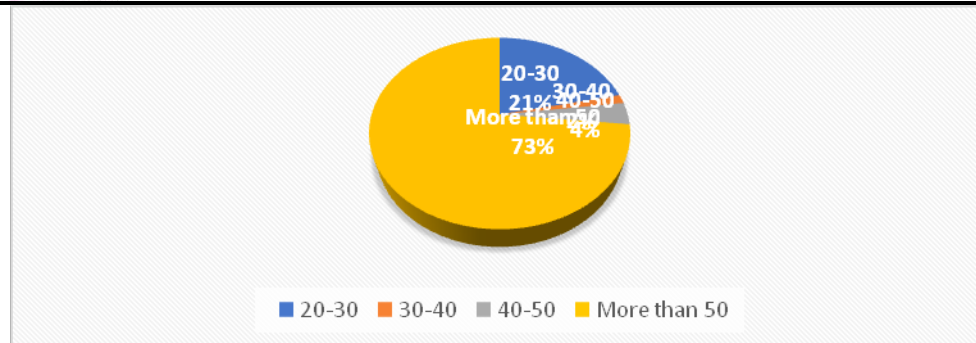1- How many are you in the English classroom?

5

Figure 1: Class Size (the figure is not well fitted; you could use histogram or just table like in No2)

This figure on classroom size shows that most of the classrooms are overpopulated. This is true from the response of 99 students, which amounts to 73% of the participants who revealed that there are more than 50 students in a classroom. This is quite common, especially, in public schools.

2- How do you qualify your English lessons?

Table 1: Students' Appreciation of English lessons

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Boring	56	41.48
Interesting	42	31.11
Neutral	37	27.40
Total	135	99.99

This table presents students' appreciation of their English lessons. It is a well-known fact that most intermediate EFL students find their English lessons boring. That almost 50% of the participants involved in this study claim that their English lessons are uninteresting is a confirmation that it is true. While 31% of them find English lessons interesting, close to 30% of the participants gave a neutral response, that is, they find English lessons neither interesting nor boring.

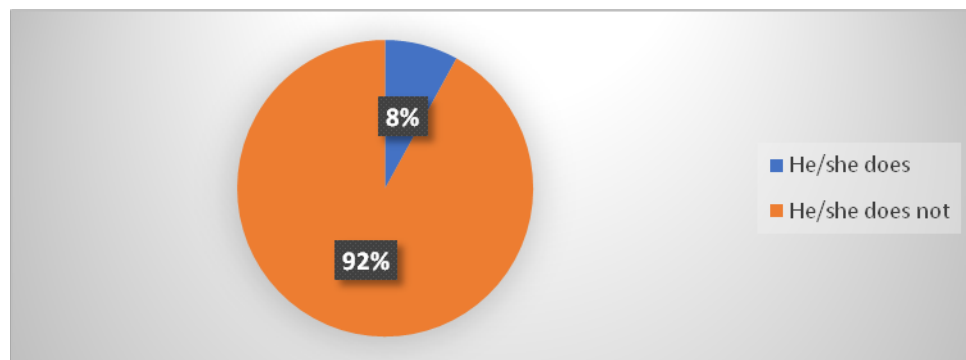3- Does your teacher use ICT equipment in your English lessons?

Figure 2: Teachers' Use of ICT in the EFL Classroom

This figure shows teachers' use of ICT during English lessons. As expected, only 8% of the EFL students asserted that their teachers use ICT tools to teach while the majority, that is, 92¨% revealed that ICT is not

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used in their English classrooms. It is important to say that the 8% of the students who responded yes to this question are from a/the private school where part of the data for this study was collected.
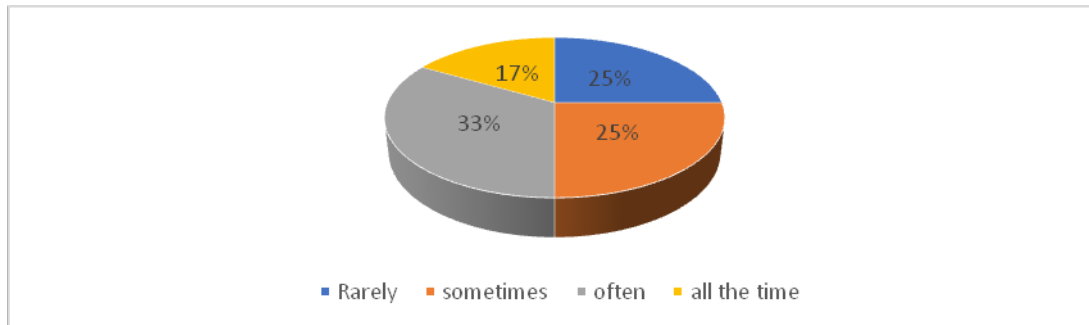
4- If yes, how often does s/he use it?

Figure 3: Teachers' Frequency in Using ICT

The figure above reveals how often teachers use ICT. From the results on figure 1, only 12 students, that is 8 % of the students, claimed that their teachers use ICT to teach English. Out of these 12 students, 3 students (25%) revealed that ICT is rarely used; another 25% stated that it is used sometimes by their teachers while 4 of the students (33%) claimed that their teachers often use ICT to teach them. However, only 2 students (17%of the total number) stated that their English teacher uses ICT tools to teach all the time.

5- Do you think that ICT can facilitate the process of learning English?

Table 2: Students' Perception regarding the effectiveness of ICT in the English Classroom

Responses	Frequency	%
Yes, I think so	89	66
No, I don't think so	29	21
Neutral	17	13
Total	135	100

The total number of students who think that using ICT can facilitate the learning of English is 89, i.e., 66% of the participants. However, 21 % of them clearly stated that ICT could not facilitate the process of learning EFL. The remaining 13 % are neutral. They neither think that ICT will facilitate nor weaken the learning of EFL.

The students' questionnaire has shown that many Benin EFL intermediate students find English lessons boring. As a result, they hardly participate during lessons. However, the results of the questionnaire reveal that most of the students are quite enthusiastic about using ICT to learn English. Large class size can hinder the effectiveness of ITC in the learning process. The next section gives the results of the teachers' responses during the interview.

4.2 Results Related to Teachers' Interview

The results of the interviews conducted with EFL teachers have basically revealed the following:

- Many EFL teachers do not use ICT tools to teach their English lessons;

- Teachers are not trained to use or integrate digital technology in their EFL classrooms;

- Teachers revealed that most of them are often more concerned about completing the syllabus and helping students to pass national examinations which are mostly based on grammar;

- Teachers have revealed inadequate support from government. They stated that the mere fact that there are no ICT facilities in schools should not be surprising because most schools in Benin lack basic equipment such as libraries ;

- Teachers have complained about inadequate classroom infrastructure in most schools. They said that even if the ICT were available, oversized classrooms would affect the effectiveness of these technologies and would undermine learners' active participation and motivation;

- Many teachers support the use of ICT to teach English as this will motivate learners, lessen teachers' difficulty in controlling their classes and help make the EFL class livelier and more interesting.

In conclusion, most teachers and students do agree that ICTs are effective in EFL teaching and in promoting learners' English proficiency. However, certain challenges, such as raising both teachers' and students' awareness of ICTs need to be addressed.

5. Discussions

The goal of this study is to explore the level of awareness of digital technology among Beninese EFL teachers and to examine the various obstacles to its integration in the EFL classroom.

5.1 Teachers' Awareness of ICT and its Impact on Students' Learning Outcomes

Many EFL teachers are aware of modern technology and know of its positive impacts in EFL learning. However, being aware of ICT is quite different from utilizing it in the teaching or learning process in the EFL class. As indicated in the students' questionnaire, very few teachers use digital tools in their lessons. This finding is supported by that of Kamaruddin Abdullah, Idriss & Mohd (2017) who revealed that "the level of ICT integration in teaching and learning…is considered low". This can be attributed to a lack of training and other factors which will be discussed in the following section.

5.2 Obstacles to the Integration of ICT in the EFL Classroom

Findings from this study have revealed that digital technologies are very important to EFL teaching across the globe. However, particularly in Benin, there are major impediments to using ICTs in language classrooms. Four major hindrances to the integration of digital technology in EFL classrooms in Benin include:

Lack of Equipment or Funding: Secondary schools, especially public schools, in Benin do not have ICT facilities. Although in some private schools, there are language labs fully equipped with ICT facilities such as projectors, speakers, laptops and standby generator for EFL learners to practice the English language, this is still not an achievement because large number of learners are found in public schools. Only very few students attend private schools.

Deficient Infrastructure or Large Class Size: Insufficient classroom infrastructure is a major barrier to the use of ICT in secondary schools. Beninese public schools lack classrooms and most classrooms are over-populated. In Benin's secondary schools, there is no permanent class for students and lessons do not take place in all classes at the same time.

Lack of Appropriate Training: Most EFL teachers are not computer-literate, which makes it difficult for them to integrate ICT in their classrooms. Since English evaluations are generally grammar-based, teachers generally do not bother about the impact of digital technology on the learning of English. The implementation of ICT greatly depends on whether teachers think that it is important. It is also important to note that some EFL teachers do not feel confident while delivering their lessons. This could make the use of ICTs in their classes more difficult.

Availability of Power Supply: Electricity is a major factor determining the successful integration of digital technology in Benin's EFL classrooms. In rural areas, it will be difficult to provide ICT facilities if there is no power supply. Although teachers might use tape recorders to conduct listening activities, these are not as powerful as laptops which can make the lessons more interesting and motivating.

Given the above-stated barriers, there cannot be a successful integration of digital technology in Beninese EFL classes. Therefore, urgent attention is needed in addressing this issue.

5. Recommendations/ Suggestions

In view of the barriers impeding the integration of ICTs in EFL classrooms, here are some suggestions to the Government, teachers and school authorities, which might pave the way for a change.

- Government should provide significant investment in the educational sector by building adequate classrooms in public schools; there should also be special classrooms for EFL teaching with ICT and power supply.

- To ensure effective and practical learning of the English Language, Government should provide language laboratories fully equipped with ICT facilities for EFL teachers and learners.

- Government should train teachers to use ICTs and to integrate them in their curricula and lesson plans.

- The main purpose of teaching EFL is to enable students to communicate with both native and non-native speakers of English. Therefore, in the absence of available ICT facilities, school authorities should provide tape-recorders with English recordings or voice notes that may enhance students' listening and speaking skills.

- With the advent of smart phones, teachers should encourage their learners to use their android phones to practice the English language through applications such as YouTube and to use the internet to download listening and speaking activities.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the use of digital technology in enhancing the learning of the English language in Benin. Its purpose has been to find out about the level of awareness of EFL teachers of the positive impacts of ICT on students' learning outcomes and to examine the obstacles to the integration of digital technology in secondary schools. The results show that ICT provides authentic materials to learners, thereby, improving their speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. It also helps in creating an atmosphere where learners could be motivated to practice the language. However, unlike developed countries, the educational sector in Benin is not yet up to date with modern technology.

Findings from this study have also revealed that many teachers are aware of the importance of ICT in the 21st century, but only a few of them, actually, make use of digital tools. More importantly, as revealed in the interview, teachers are not able to integrate ICTs because there has not been an investment in ICTs in schools. There is no funding to equip schools with language labs and ICT facilities. Furthermore, as pointed out by students through their answers to the questionnaire, inadequate classroom infrastructure and the large number of students per class are also major obstacles to the provision of ICT facilities. Moreover, findings have shown that most EFL teachers are not trained to use digital technology and others do not seem to be educated on the benefits of integrating digital technology in their EFL classes. Additionally, the lack of power supply in rural areas can impede the installation of ICTs in schools.

To sum it up, recommendations have been proffered, especially, to the Government to provide schools with enough ICT facilities and language laboratories. These will enable EFL students to practice inside

and outside of the classroom. There is also a need to organize training sessions for teachers to acquire skills to use and integrate digital technology in their EFL classes. The implementation of these recommendations will enhance students' curiosity and motivation in learning the English Language. Further research works will embrace some specific components of the learning of the English language by means of ICTs.

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