

# | Enseignement



# SOME FACTORS OF WEAKNESSES IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO CASE OF GOMA SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## **Abstract**

*This article attempts to trace some causes of ascertained weaknesses in English teaching and learning in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in general and in Goma secondary schools in particular. The established fact is that many students ending their secondary school education and entering higher education have serious difficulties in English language in 'its normal communicative use' (Widdowson 1978: 49). In fact, despite the four years (in some schools six years) of English instruction of five hours per week, most Congolese secondary school students are unable to communicate in English. Students' weaknesses are so apparent that they are manifestly incapable either to get into conversation with people speaking English or to write a coherent text in English. What is frustrating is that college and university English teachers often complain about the secondary school level of communicative competence of these students. The evidence is that students are unable to cope with communicative operations such as taking notes in English, listening to the teacher during a class communication, formulating questions or answering the teacher's questions, making interventions or discussions during a lecture and/or writing a short assignment or composition in correct English.*

**Key words:** *Factors - weaknesses - English teaching and learning - Democratic Republic of the Congo - Goma secondary schools.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article essaie d'identifier certaines causes de faiblesses constatées dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais en République Démocratique du Congo en général et dans les écoles secondaires de la ville de Goma en particulier. Le constat est que beaucoup d'étudiants qui terminent leurs études secondaires et entrent à l'enseignement supérieur éprouvent de sérieuses difficultés en anglais dans son usage communicatif normal. En effet, malgré les quatre années (dans certaines écoles six années) d'enseignement d'Anglais de cinq heures par semaine, la plupart des élèves qui terminent l'école secondaire ne sont pas capables de communiquer en anglais. Les faiblesses de ces étudiants sont tellement évidentes qu'ils sont manifestement incapables soit de s'engager dans une conversation avec des gens qui parlent anglais ou d'écrire un texte cohérent en Anglais. Ce qui est frustrant est que les enseignants des instituts supérieurs et d'universités se plaignent du niveau d'école secondaire de la capacité de communication de ces étudiants. Ce qui est évident est que les*

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*étudiants ne sont pas capables de faire face à des exercices communicatifs tels que prendre notes en anglais, écouter l'enseignant au cours d'une leçon, formuler des questions ou répondre aux questions de l'enseignant, intervenir ou engager des discussions au cours d'une leçon, écrire un petit travail pratique ou une petite composition en anglais correct.*

*Mots - clé : Facteurs - faiblesses - Enseignement et apprentissage d'anglais - République Démocratique du Congo - écoles secondaires de Goma.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English teaching and learning at the secondary education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo encounters various hindrances that prevent it from achieving the overall goal for which it is intended. Basically, the main objective of teaching and learning a language consists in communicating in it. This communicative aim of the language in the process of English teaching and learning in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in general and in Goma secondary schools in particular, runs into some weaknesses in its effective and operative application.

When we examine the root causes of weaknesses in the English teaching and learning process, we find out that responsibilities are shared. On the one hand, learners complain that the teaching and learning process fails to bear fruits due to the teachers' counterproductive attitudes and strategies manifested in the way they cope with their teaching. Their assumptions about the teaching process tend to condemn the poor and improper effectiveness and efficiency of teachers in their responsibility of conducting teaching. On the other hand, teachers view learners' counter and weak communicative performances as resulting from their inadequate adaptation to modern view of the importance of English in the world and their negative perceptions and attitudes to change. Learners turn out to be reluctant to view the English language as a crucial vehicle of communication in different domains of modern life today: commercial, scientific, political and diplomatic and telecommunications. They overlook this crucial role English plays and seem not to be aware of the benefits it can provide them with in their future life. Presumably, they are unaware that English constitutes a permanent value in that it is a Language of Wider Communication (LWC). That is, a language used to address some issues certain mother tongues cannot settle.

Goma secondary school learners do not keep in mind that many countries of the world have adhered to learn it and make it their second language after their mother tongues.

## **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE ARTICLE**

This case study is intended to:

Demonstrate that despite the objectives to the teaching and learning of English in DRC in general and in Goma secondary education in particular, there is little purposeful undertaking to promote communicative competence;

Investigate why secondary school learners are not equipped with communicative skills despite the intensive English training allotted to them;

Identify the different factors that hinder the assimilation of English at this level of studies.

## **3. METHODOLOGY OF THE WORK**

This study has consisted in writing reports about classroom observation activities, lesson attendances in secondary schools, school authorities' and inspectors' interviews as well as official documents providing invaluable information about different issues regarding the system of education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The above activities conducted from 2017 to 2019 in the 6<sup>th</sup> forms allowed us to have a comprehensive understanding of the various issues concerning English language teaching and learning in Goma secondary schools and challenges to be taken up in the Congolese system of education.

Most of the data collection was carried out in secondary schools such as Institut de Goma, Institut Mont Goma, Institut Faraja, Institut Visoke, Institut Majengo, Institut Tupendane, Institut Mikeno Officiel, Institut Ndahura, Institut Mama Yetu, Institut Bakanja, Institut Metanoia, Institut Maranatha and Institut Zanner.

It has to be pointed out that the teaching and learning weaknesses this article focuses on concern only an evaluation of secondary schools learners' behaviour, aptitude, motivation for and attitude to foreign language, learning strategies and environment, on the one hand, and of teachers' teaching quality, strategies, degree of competence, methods, motivation for and attitude to teaching, and communication, on the other hand.

#### **4. CAUSES OF WEAKNESSES IN THE GOMA SECONDARY SCHOOL SYSTEM OF ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING**

This section attempts to find out the causes that hinder the development of the English teaching and learning process in Goma secondary schools. The causes are so countless that this study cannot pretend to provide their exhaustive list. The section will sketch the salient ones, specifically those causing hindrance to the development of the language communication. It will parallel learner factors with teacher factors because they match.

##### **4.1. Learner inhibiting factors**

###### **4.1.1. Non-motivational and attitudinal factors**

The prevalent problem in most Goma secondary schools lies in the attitude of learners themselves. The research investigation has revealed that the great majority of learners in most Goma schools are not much involved in English learning. Very few learners are committed to classroom activities during the lessons. English lessons turn out to be their privileged opportunities for shouting and for individual talks between classmates during the English lessons, copying other lessons instead of following English lessons, making useless to and fro instead of participating actively in English activities, attempting to justify non-good excuses for absences, premeditated absenteeism during English formative evaluations and abusing of sleeping in classroom. Thus, lessons obviously tend to be mere formalities in that learners show overtly that their centre of interest is not English but French. English seems not to be among their priorities as they give more importance to French than English. Very often you hear them say, "*What do we have to do with English and where shall we go with it?*" This learners' negative attitude towards English learning undermines tremendously the teachers' action that proves to be inefficient despite their clearly articulated will to maintain and pursue the goals and objectives of building in learners the desire to learn English for communicative purposes.

Unlike other subjects for which they show increasingly enthusiasm, they regard English learning as time-consuming and weighs them down. This preconceived attitude unconsciously predisposes them to demotivation. It negatively affects their performance and inhibits their efforts to pick up the language.

#### **4.1.2. Learners' developed negative strategies**

Learners in Goma secondary schools have developed strategies that are detrimental to successful language learning. Classroom observations and investigations on learners' behaviour have revealed that Goma learners have developed deep-seated mechanisms that inhibit their positive answer to the English learning process. The obvious problem for all learners consists of the "line of least resistance". (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2000: 689). This means that a great deal of learners would like to succeed in English without any personal effort. In fact, social and environmental conditions have fostered in most learners certain inhibiting habits and dispositions that cannot enable them to cope with language learning. Learners have adopted certain attitudes that predispose them to mediocrity and laziness. Some never learn their English notes and are only prone to cheating for their success. Others are totally dependent on their classmates' intellectual capabilities to help them succeed in every classroom activity. Presumably, learners have developed a degrading mechanism they term "co-operation". This means that the strongest learners in the course have to offer generously their services to others by providing them with answers during any classroom activities, tests or exams. So, they do not make personal effort to learn their English lessons and prepare their formative and summative evaluations.

What is worse is that another inhibiting strategy young learners have developed results from the mediocre social and economic context that their teachers experience. As a matter of fact, the poor social and economic context their teachers face has given a room to learners to exploit and capitalize it to the maximum. Indeed, as their teachers earn poor salary many English learners have taken advantage of it and thus do not hesitate to bribe their teachers. The consequence of this situation is that learners no longer make any effort to learn the language as '*the needs that prompt and sustain the learning effort [lead] to its inhibition or rejection*' (Stern 1983: 385).

#### **4.1.3. Learner deficient intake of the language**

The intense language input learners gain from their teachers seems to prove inefficient because of learners' neglect of English learning. Many pupils at the secondary education consider English learning as just a duty to stay present in the classroom and to escape punishment from the teacher or school authorities. In contrast, their physical presence in class becomes symbolic and does not reflect involvement in the language learning process. This kind of learners has no particular objective orientation and interest in English. They end a whole course of study with empty head, unable to display any linguistic and cognitive skills that can help them perform communicative operations.

The consequence of this irresponsible attitude results in learner low level and deficient intake of the language. Obviously, learning as the acquisition and the application of knowledge proves deficient in many learners. In the light of different tests, we gave them during our investigation, a great number of learners did not display sufficient intake of the language despite the many language sessions and opportunities provided to them to learn English.

This state of affairs is due to endless reasons. The first reason stems from their glaring poor intake of the language due to their own unconsciousness of interiorizing the importance of language learning. You hear them say, *“Sir, if I’m weak in English, it is because I neglected English or I was not attending English classes”*. This statement bears a heavy consequence. Learners implicitly endorse their own responsibility in recognizing their own fault. The second reason is due to pedagogical methodologies. In many circumstances, learners complain a great deal about their teachers’ inappropriate teaching methods. They do not hesitate to justify their glaring weaknesses in English for having received insufficient input by weak teachers or even for lack of teachers of English (in some areas or schools) during their learning process. You hear them say, *“If we are not able to do anything in English it’s because we didn’t have good teachers, or, because our schools had no teachers of English in some class grades”*. This statement can be justified by the fact that in remote areas schools obviously lack qualified teachers. The third reason which is aroused consists of the considerable overlap in the English training between technical sections (having 1 or 2 hours a week) and the other sections having (5 hours a week). The above advocated various reasons prove to be sufficient to justify learners’ potential breakdowns or pitfalls in their language learning process. For some, the learning process has been insufficient and irregular, for others, it appears to be discontinued and fragmented in that their language learning potential is annihilated by a host of circumstances that are dependent or independent of learners.

#### **4.1.4. Learner inhibiting language learning environment**

Goma learners evolve in a multilingual society where they face languages such as Kiswahili, French, Lingala, Kinyarwanda, Kinande, Kihunde, Kinyanga and the like. Among these language Kiswahili and French are the most dominant ones whose repercussion is felt at school where English becomes ineffective in the classroom. The learner only practices English in the classroom but once outside he/she uses mainly Kiswahili and sometimes French. This means, in fact, that English has no place among languages used at school and outside the school. As the learner resorts every time to Kiswahili, French and particularly English are relegated to the second place.

It is also important to note that teachers and school authorities seem not to be in the position to enforce the use of English since they are themselves aware that students do not attach great

importance to the acquisition of English as the learning environment proves unfavourable to it. In other words, there exists a sort of laissez-faire and carelessness in schools where no one is interested in speaking English. Those who should impose its use are themselves indifferent to it and fail to stimulate students to speak it.

Thus, language communication practices become inoperative in that learners undergo teaching instead of becoming the genuine users of the language. They learn English as a subject and not as a tool of communication.

This situation is obviously exacerbated by lack of exposure to the language in that Goma learners have tremendous difficulty to be connected to any external opportunity. This lack of opportunities to use it cannot favour its growth; it creates, on the contrary, dislike that inhibits any incentive that could enhance the need to learn.

## **4.2. Teacher factors**

### **4.2.1. Teacher quality**

Teachers in the DRC face a particular social environment that has a bearing on the system of English teaching and learning. Three decades ago, the country had undergone a political system based on bad governance which caused generalized unease and unrest, poverty and unemployment, political upheavals, civil strife, etc. in society. This situation had created poor socio-economic conditions and other malpractices that had a negative impact on the Congolese educational system.

Obviously, this improper environment in which the Congolese system of education has unfolded has surely a destructive influence on the performances of educators and educated. The evidence is that if educators face poor social conditions they cannot perform their duties adequately and produce the right kind of education that can provide learners with knowledge, skills, strategies, attitudes and perceptions. This means, in other words, that the inherent weaknesses observed in most secondary school teachers result from the inadequate instruction due to the improper socio-economic conditions which have prevailed and still prevail in the country.

The point is that most young teachers in different secondary schools are the fruit of malpractices and poor social conditions in which they themselves evolved. Therefore, the graduates of this kind of education system can hardly cope with English teaching at the secondary school level. The failure displayed in their way of teaching obviously reflects the non-mastery of subjects due to their negligence, lack of seriousness and commitment,

corruption and carelessness during their studies. Such mediocre teachers can logically only produce mediocre learners.

#### **4.2.2. Teacher individual degree of competence**

Assessment of the teacher's competence depends on how well he/she has been trained and the way he/she fulfils his/her task. A teacher's competence can be measured in terms of pedagogical and methodological performances, i.e. In terms of teaching and learning outcomes. As Stern (1983: 508) argues: *For the individual teacher, the evaluation of his own teaching and of the learning of his pupils provides feedback for further teaching. It is a necessary part of the teaching-learning cycle.*

To paraphrase Stern, the teacher's performance reflects the teacher's competence. It is only when learners can practically cope with the target language that the teacher's action can be viewed as productive.

Classroom observations in different Goma secondary schools revealed that the reasons why Goma teachers failed in their teaching were manifold: (1) many teachers of English have insufficient intellectual capacity despite the college or university training they received. Those teachers display deficiency in methodological knowledge and weakness in knowledge and skills to transfer the target language. (2) despite the intense instruction they have received at the college and university level, many of them are incapable to express themselves correctly in English. They utter inappropriate language and write incorrect sentences on the blackboard. Their lesson preparations are full of mistakes. (3) most of Goma teachers lack positive attitudes and strategies in their natural way of teaching. Many of them do not display any particular objective about what they teach. They teach just for the sake of teaching. Developing learners' skills is none of their business. (4) many others lack personality in classroom, which leads learners to indiscipline, leaving free way to learners to shout, to sleep, to remain indifferent towards English, to copy other subjects instead of following English lessons and to let them go to and from during classroom activities. (5) Other teachers never seek to sustain their knowledge by intensive and extensive reading in order to acquire integrative knowledge. They are so limited to the class textbooks that they are unable to extend their English knowledge to other fields. They never seek auto-learning after their college or university studies. Perhaps, it is logical to admit that most Goma teachers are too busy with searching for survival and have no time to think about activities regarding their own ongoing teaching development.

### **4.2.3. Teacher individual teaching style**

#### ***4.2.3.1. Teacher talk centrality***

Observations of attendances at the Goma teachers' lessons have led us to be keen on carefully considering the main components contained in the preparations of their different lessons, specifically the two of the central prerequisites of the success in lessons indicating the estimates of the Teacher Talk Time (TTT) and that of the Pupil Talk Time (PTT). In most of their lessons, teachers estimated the TTT to 25% and the PTT to 75%. The ideal here consists in providing learners with more time to express themselves in order to enhance their communicative abilities. In other terms, the teacher is supposed to talk less than the pupils. The insight gained from the teachers' lessons conducted us to realize that the reality on the ground was quite different. As said earlier, those estimates do not reflect the reality. Indeed, the reality about these sample lessons demonstrates that the estimates indicated by teachers were fallacious and hardly materialized in classrooms. The truth of the fact, is that teachers talk themselves during the lesson times. It is they who talk more than 75% while learners are not even granted 15% of talk. Teachers are the genuine actors and learners are the passive spectators watching their teachers' theatrical monologues and eloquence. The impression is that teachers seem to forget the two teaching principles TTT and PTT, indulge in verbal demonstrations of rules and ultimately are always surprised to hear the school whistle regulating the teaching time duration and announcing the end of the lesson period. What is worse is the disastrous way in which lessons end. Most lessons end without language practices that could enable learners to be engaged in using the language taught so as to allow teachers to appreciate, criticize and provide corrective remedy to their way of teaching.

Learners should be given the opportunities to speak, to ask questions and to learn how to answer them, to listen to each other, and to react to the answers from each other. It is only these interactive practices that are conducive to communication. On the other hand, teachers should bear in mind that the goals of language teaching and learning are to lead learners to '*communicative competence*' to use Richards's terms (2000: 2).

Presumably, one the sacred language teaching principles requires the teacher to reduce the centrality of his / her talks. He / she should always be aware that he / she prepares his / her lessons for his / her learners and not for himself / herself.

#### **4.2.3.2. Teacher overlook of importance of humour**

Attendances at teachers' different lessons have demonstrated that some teachers make their classes a hell, a place of confrontation between teachers and learners, of humiliation, domination, fear, anxiety, insults and terror while teachers should make them a place of pleasure, joy, friendship, socialization, closeness and togetherness. Their teaching should inspire sympathy and confidence and provoke laughter, joke, relaxation and happiness.

The EFL teacher should be endowed with a sense of humour. If teaching a particular language item or structure requires dancing, whistling, joking or flattering, teachers should perform them to relax the mental fatigue or concentration of learners. This means that the teacher should not change the English course into a burden weighing on the learners' mental effort to understand what he / she teaches. On the contrary, he/ she should imagine strategies to make it easy to understand and attractive. Making English attractive should be his major concern by inventing tricks that can stimulate learners to make enough effort and to love it. For example, organizing competitions for rewards (exercise books, books, pens, etc. offered by the school or himself, if possible), marking those students who make efforts to perform well, etc. Every time he finds out that learners' attention wanes, he should imagine strategies or change his naughty nature to relax the classroom atmosphere in order to make his English lesson vivid.

#### **4.2.4. Teacher selective teaching process**

Language teaching is not passive but active. It is not selective but holistic. It is exploratory for all the opportunities that can be encountered and used in the language in order to enable learners to take advantage of it.

English teaching and learning in Goma secondary schools turns out to be selective in its process. Several attendances at teachers' various lessons we undertook in different schools have revealed that some language skills such as listening, speaking and writing remain quasi-unexploited and not taught at all as they are not scheduled for the English State Exam or because of technical or material reasons. This restriction in the language teaching not only inhibits learners' development of language skills but also shrinks their opportunities to communicate in the language. Presumably, Goma teachers are trapped in this web and do not seem to extricate from it. Their teaching being restricted to only text reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar, they prevent their learners from basic language training that EFL teachers should be aware of before starting teaching and how to guide their learners in the basic communicative abilities.

When Goma teachers focus their teaching on some skills and leave out others, they distort the language teaching and learning foundation on which English communication stands. What is worse is that they prevent their learners from the active skills (speaking and writing) that are the causative means of the practical use of the language. Indeed, active listening as Gebhard (2006: 147 - 148) argues *“is not a passive activity. Rather, listening places many demands on us. When we participate in face-to-face or telephone exchanges, we need to be receptive to others, which includes paying attention to the explanations, questions, and opinions”*. This argument clearly demonstrates that those skills constitute the English language backbone of communication.

Therefore, Goma teachers should bear in mind that teaching listening, speaking and writing has direct relevance to the “Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching” (COLT) (Richards (1988).

Hence, leaving some skills out in the teaching process to the detriment of others constitutes hindrance to the language development of learners. This means, in other words, that not teaching and testing the secondary school learners in listening, speaking and writing have evident consequences on their language learning process.

#### **4.2.5. Teacher lack of motivation**

Motivation can be considered under a two-fold angle: material and professional. Instrumental motivation refers to material advantages such as good salary for example generating other additional material advantages. Such material advantages can generate a positive attitude and great efficiency to work. Moreover, teacher’s material motivation may be coupled with professional motivation. This means, in addition to his daily tasks such as regular preparation of lessons, building of supportive lesson materials, involvement in communicative activities, implementation of varied homework assignments and their prompt corrections, arrangement of debating and other language practice activities, the teacher may be also encouraged to participate in various seminars and training courses.

Teachers’ socio-economic conditions in DRC pre-empt a great deal of teachers to fulfil their main task adequately. The struggle for life teachers face does not ease them to devote their entire time to teaching.

In the case of Goma, many teachers teach in two or three schools in order to meet the family requirements. Others are engaged in parallel activities such as sales business in their small shops, or taxi bus or motorbike driving after school. Some others make themselves pastors

in various churches of the town and others open their own English language centres to train people for two or three hours in order to earn some money for their survival.

This overwork does not enable teachers to do anything else when they come back home. They get too exhausted that they are no longer in a position to fulfil the work they have been employed for. This means, in other words, that overload paralyses their teaching action and self-development. They become incapable of providing their learners with regular tests and assignments whose implementation requires regularity in their execution.

It is true that teachers who are too busy with multiple activities cannot cope with teaching demanding tasks. Their unavailability constitutes a serious hindrance to the development of learners' education. It decreases and affects to a large extent the quality of their work and makes their teaching unproductive. The pursuit of socio-economic ease no longer allows them to concentrate on the essential task but it urges them to be dispersed and split into various activities. Quality teaching is no longer an ideal and priority requirement because of poor socio-economic conditions they face.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has been intended to provide and discuss the causes of weaknesses in the English teaching system in the Goma secondary schools. The causes are complex and stem from various sources. Some are attributed to the learners themselves for their negative attitude to English language which alienates them from regarding objectively the benefits of the target language and others to teachers whose input given to learners proves weak and inadequate to promote language communication. Equally, school authorities have been pointed out to hold a part of responsibility for their lack of integrated vision and strategies to carry their mission adequately despite the scarce resources at their disposal. Their negligence to relegate the implementation of the English culture in the second place in schools has negatively contributed to the consolidation of English teaching and caused obstructive and uncontrolled situations in the pedagogy immersion of the Goma educational system.

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