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TOPIC

Using Student Groupings to Foster Effective Classroom Management in the Competency –Based Approach Context in the Republic of Benin.

(By Estelle Bankolé-Minaflinou. Maitre-Assistant de la Didactique de la Langue Anglaise. Université d'Abomey-Calavi / FLASH).

Abstract

Le travail en groupe se révèle aujourd'hui comme la formule pédagogique la mieux adaptée pour réaliser les objectifs des 'programmes par compétences'. Il permet en effet de développer chez l'apprenant l'esprit d'équipe, le dialogue, l'entraide, la coopération, le respect de l'autre etc. autant de facteurs qui favorisent la cohésion sociale et la paix. Malgré ces vertus indéniables, cette stratégie peine à jouer son rôle dans les classes au Bénin.

Cet article a pour ambition d'éclairer la lanterne des enseignants afin que les doutes et les retenues soient dissipés.

INTRODUCTION

In Benin secondary schools where English is taught as a foreign language, the challenge has been how to develop communicative competence despite the French speaking social context. For decades, learning has been teacher-centered in ELT classes. The 'omniscient' teacher is supposed to pour knowledge into the empty vessels the students represent. So, burdened with theoretical knowledge, they were unable to solve real life problems. In the nineties, the educational authorities conscious of the perpetual change being operated worldwide and concerned about the quality of the end-products of the education system in general and the English teaching/learning in particular, took the decision to move from the content-based to objective- based and then to the competency–based approach which aims at centering the learning on students. The requirement of this approach implies new strategies of learning and new ways of organizing students in class because instructions have to match with the needs of topics, activities, materials and individual students. Grouping them in pairs, groups and collective work receives a new thrust.

Most teachers and the educational authorities as well, are aware of the challenges of the implementation of the competency-based approach (CBA), but not much research has been carried out in the field. The present article has the noble ambition to delve into it, to highlight the concept of grouping and see how it can contribute to a better EFL classroom management and thereby to a more effective acquisition of the communicative competence the CBA is supposed to develop in students.

An investigation was conducted that includes interviews to teachers and classroom observations that offered the opportunities to collect reliable data for interpretation. The findings of this research have helped for some pragmatic recommendations and suggestions to be made.

Key words: Competency-based approach; cognitivism; socio- constructivism; sociometry; trans disciplinary competencies.

1. The teaching and learning situation of EFL in Benin classrooms

The teaching and learning of EFL in a French speaking country is not an easy task. For many decades, grammar rules and vocabulary words learning and reading comprehension texts have been the core of the teaching/learning of this language in Benin. Not much effort has been made to teach it as a tool for communication. In the nineties the diagnosis of the educational system shows this glaring reality: decrease of the students' standard, a high school drop-out, unsuitability between the curriculum and the available manuals, large class size, lack of infrastructures, lack of resources, decrease of interest in school by parents because of high rate of unemployment, deterioration of moral values in school, etc. As a result, many reform programs took place among which the objective-based, the content-based and recently the competency-based approaches. This newly-born approach was experimented in seventy- four (74) secondary schools in the 2001-2002 academic years and generalized in 2008-2009. The main objective assigned to the last approach is to mould a dynamic elite, intellectually prepared to meet the huge challenges of this century which has made the world a planetary village. Many changes took place in the classroom among which the setting of students in groups in all subjects during class sequences. But far from being the panacea for all the problems the teaching/learning of English has been facing in Benin, this strategy seems to be groping in the dark, for many teachers resent it and some even doubt the appropriateness of the competency-based approach.

1. 1 The competency-based approach concept

François Lasnier (2000) defines competency as a complex practical knowledge resulting from the integration and mobilization of a set of abilities and pieces of knowledge efficiently used in a correlated situations to solve more or less complex situations. With such a problem-solving objective, the competency-based approach is therefore a curriculum aiming at developing in students, the competencies they need to successfully face life-problems in the future. These competencies are classified into three main categories as follows: disciplinary competencies; transversal competencies and trans disciplinary competencies.

According to the same author, the disciplinary competencies are related to the school subjects such as French, English, Mathematics, Physics, Biology etc. Disciplinary competencies are the abilities each subject aims at developing the needed skills in every student, in the different fields of human knowledge. In English, they are: (1) communicating orally in English; (2) reacting to texts after reading or listening to them; and (3) producing texts of various types and functions.

The transversal competencies are the ones students need to develop throughout all the school subjects while carrying out the teaching/learning activities. They are the competencies that will help students face real life situations better in their future life. They are eight: (1) exploiting available information; (2) solving problem-based situations; (3) using one's critical sense; (4) displaying one's critical sense; (5) managing one's acquisitions to perform tasks; (6) working in cooperation; (7) displaying one's sense of ethics; and (8) communicating in a precise and appropriate way.

It is to be noticed that the central themes of the learning situations are drawn from the concern of these transversal competencies which are of three orders. Some are of intellectual order, some of methodology order and some of socio-affective order.

Concerning the trans disciplinary competencies, they are referred to as competency of life, as they are the one directly connected to the socio-professional life. They aim at preparing the students and equipping them with the qualities and abilities of a responsible citizen fully aware of his/her role in his/her community. There are six trans disciplinary competencies: (1) asserting one's personal and cultural identity in a world in constant change; (2) acting individually and collectively in mutual respect and open-mindedness; (3) getting ready to integrate the professional life in a prospect of self-achievement and social integration; (4)

having riskless behaviors in matter of health, sexuality and safety; (5) acting in harmony with the environment and in prospect of sustainable development; (6) acting as a wise consumer by a responsible use of goods and services.

In every sequence of class, most of these competencies are developed directly or indirectly.

1 . 2 Basic theories underlying the competency-based approach teaching.

Classroom management in the competency-based teaching/learning approach draws on two main teaching theories namely the cognitivism and the socio-constructivism. The two theories are closely associated with some teaching/learning strategies without which their objectives cannot be reached.

Gagné (1985) defines in substance cognitivism as the mental process by which the human brain gathers information, selects, stocks, and recalls it in due time. According to the cognitivism, learning proceeds from the learner's mental capacity to gather, select, stock and recall pieces of information so as to integrate them and build up new pieces of knowledge through teaching/learning activities. Learning is thus student-centered. Moreover, cognitivism puts a great stress on the priority of the personal and individual dimension of learning, hence the necessity of individual work.

The socio-constructivism emphasizes the relational dimension of learning. For a better understanding of the concept, Jannert and Vander Borcht (1999) split it into three components: the constructivism, the socio-dimension, and the interactive dimension.

- The constructivism refers to the subject of the learning, meaning the learner;
- The socio-dimension refers to the partners involved in the learning process, namely the other learners and the teachers; and
- The interaction dimension refers to the learning situations and the learning object.

The socio-constructivism advocates that learning is more effective and more fruitful when it is done in cooperation. This justifies the use of pair work, group work and collective work.

1 .2 . 1 The strategies

In relation with the socio-constructivism, Kanuka and Anderson (1998) recommend different types of interaction: student to student, student to teacher, student to group (small and large groups). Concerning the building up of pieces of knowledge, Perret-Clermont (1980) highlights the role of the cognitive conflicts and shows that confrontation of ideas/representations between individuals is the source of development. This consideration leads to the learning strategies such as individual work, pair work, group work, collective work, etc. These strategies aim at developing in the learners some qualities inherent to good citizenship: being endowed with a sense of creativity, initiative and cooperation. How can these be demonstrated in a classroom?

2 Classroom Management

Anthony Mensah (2010) compares a class to a large family where the teacher acts as a father or a mother and the head of the family and the students act as members. In the course of an academic year, the students and the teacher get to know each other. As members of a family support one another and share whatever work they have to do under the leadership of the parents, students in the classroom also work and learn together and share whatever work they have to do under the teacher's leadership. Shafrizt, et al (1988) defines a classroom as follows: *"a classroom is a space that has been designed or made suitable for a group of students to meet regularly for teaching and learning purposes"*. As such, many authors have given their opinion about classroom management. Zabel and Zabel (1996) contend that *"Classroom is how a teacher organizes the class and uses procedures to create a classroom environment that helps students learn effectively"*. They further mentioned that,

*Classroom management means creating and maintaining
a safe, supportive and challenging classroom environment.
This means many things that the teacher does in the classroom
to enable his/her students to learn well. It includes how the
teacher arranges benches, chairs in the classroom and how
he/she handles discipline in the classroom.*

Wong, (2003) states that *"classroom management is the practice and procedures that allow teachers to teach and students to learn"*. According to Wong, there are four things that one can see when one enters a class that is well managed:

- ❖ Students are deeply involved in what they learn in the classroom;

- ❖ Students know what is expected from them in the classroom, and they are generally successful in what they are learning;
- ❖ As compared to other classrooms, little time is wasted and there is little confusion and disruption in the classroom;
- ❖ Because the climate of the classroom is relaxed and pleasant, much work goes on there.

All these stress on the need of a positive classroom environment for teaching/learning to occur. Wong (2003) declared that classroom environment includes the following three components: physical, social and educational. The physical component is provided by the surroundings or everything around and about the classroom in which the teacher and the learners work. The physical climate involves the light and the temperature that range from moderate to cool. Research has shown that physical surroundings of a classroom can directly influence the behavior of the students who use the classroom. The physical surroundings of a classroom can affect even the teacher, which in turn can affect how he teaches and how students learn. Classrooms that are badly lit, overcrowded, without windows and doors in a noisy place can be excessively de motivating. Unfortunately most classrooms in Benin present these features.

The social component entails any group of students that come together with their teacher to make a family in the classroom environment. The educational component is about the school curriculum or the activities that the teacher performs with his/her students, how he/she teaches the activities, and when he/she teaches them. It means what happens between the teacher and the students by way of teaching and learning.

2 . 1 The Need for Positive Classroom Environment

Many authors believe that teachers are not only answerable to their students about what they teach them; they must also ensure that their classroom is a comfortable, attractive and stimulant room where the students can fruitfully spend their time. Nicol (1996) supporting the same idea declares:

*As you are aware the classroom is a place where
you and your students spend a great part of the
day, for this reason, it is important that you make
it an enjoyable place where you and your students*

will feel comfortable and have the desire to arrive every morning.

Many other researchers have pointed out an important relationship between the plan of classroom and the academic performance of students. It is the case of the recent survey Ghanaian public school teachers conducted by Carpet Rug Institute in 2002 which found out that classrooms which are well designed improve the learning and the achievement of the students who use them. Chan and Wilson (2002), stated that “*students who stay and learn in better quality school building have more positive attitude toward learning*”

Earthman and Lemaster (1996) in their study found out that students in positive learning environment are able to score up to five (05) percentages of points higher than those students who find themselves in less positive environment. This means that the effect of good classroom environment on learning has been found to show in test scores as well.

2 .2 The importance of working in smaller groups

Russ (2003), contending on how useful working in smaller group is, says that:

Throughout the life of the students, they will be working with other people in smaller groups. They will be working in smaller groups when they are in school, at their future work place, in their churches or their hobby groups. When they do well in smaller groups, it helps them to feel good about themselves. Students in group respect each other; and they will be willing to cooperate with each other. Students in the group will like each other better. In the future, the bosses of these students will be willing to give them more important work and let them be leaders because they will be able to show that they can work well with people.

So, putting students in groups is a safe way of securing a successful professional future life. In the same view, Chickering and Gamson,(1987) state:

students learning in a classroom cannot behave like spectator watching a football match on a field. They

cannot learn just by sitting in the classroom, listening to the teacher, committing everything that he teaches to memory and give answers to questions that he asks them. They must also talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate what they learn to what they already know and use it in their daily lives.

Mensah, A. (2000) asserts that allowing students to work in smaller groups is one of the approaches that can help students realize communicative performance. He supports that “group work is a good way to organize classes; it favors students involvement in the teaching/learning process”. He stresses on six reasons why it is important that students work in group. These are:

❖ **It will ensure that your students learn.**

This technique of teaching helps raise the achievement of both students who can do well and those who are not able to do well academically. This assertion is confirmed by researchers who have carried out studies in cooperative learning. Mensah, A. (2000) claims that:

Irrespective of the subject matter, students who learn in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain what they learn for a longer time than when the same content of subject matter is taught with other instructional techniques or methods of teaching.

❖ **It will enable students to take active part in the learning.**

- ❖ Group work provides a learning environment which enables students to get themselves more and more involved in the learning process, and be responsible for their own learning. Sometimes, when the work in the group is divided every group member is actively involved in the activities. This increases the amount of time each student spends on what he/she is learning; a chance he/she gets to listen to other classmates, to ask questions and explain issues. Working in small groups also encourages students to engage in high level

thinking such as analyzing, explaining things or questions that arise from discussions, synthesizing and elaborating.

❖ **It helps teachers build positive relationship among students in the class.**

The more students depend upon each other in the class, the more they are encouraged to become friends. Cooperative learning gives students the experience that they need for healthy, social psychological and cognitive development. It is in fact considered as the best among all instructional methods. Cooperative learning replaces a situation whereby students are urged to compete with each other in the classroom to find out who performs better on assignments and class exercises that the teacher gives them.

❖ **It teaches students how to work with others**

When students work with others in small groups, they are taught when to do any given work on their own. They know when it is proper for them to seek help and knowledge from other students. They also learn how to cooperate with them when they are given group work in which each student is to complete part of the work.

❖ **It makes it easy for students to interact among themselves.**

When students work together in small groups, they come into closer contact with other students. They learn to trust and accept each other. Learning in small groups encourages friendship among students with different abilities and from different social backgrounds.

❖ **It teaches students how to learn in a variety of ways.**

In groups, students have the responsibility to gather information, to help one another and use their problem-solving skills to complete a given work. This may involve making a careful study of a topic, and not only listen, read and write, but also asking people questions, using role play, building models, making illustrations, observing things, etc. Through group work, learners can realize that class learning can be enjoyable. This means that teachers can create an enjoyable classroom environment for their students. It is a teaching/learning strategy many authors have reported as learner-centered and suitable for managing a classroom successfully.

Tamakloe et al (2005) identified ten characteristics of effective groups.

- (1) The atmosphere tends to be informal and comfortable. People are involved and interested.
- (2) There is a lot of discussion in which everyone takes part. Everyone keeps to the point.
- (3)

Everybody understands the task he has to do. (4) The group members listen to each other, every idea is given a hearing. (5) There is disagreement. The group is comfortable with this, and works towards sorting it out. Nobody feels unhappy with decision made. (6) People feel free to criticize and say honestly what they think. (7) Everybody knows how everybody else feels about what is being discussed. (8) When action needs to be taken, everyone is clear about what needs be done, and they help each other. (9) Different people take the role of leader from time to time. (10) The group is conscious of how well it is working and what is interfering with its progress. It can look after itself.

2 . 3 Using Student Groupings in EFL Classrooms

In the field of CBA it has been recognized that learners must use English to construct meaning and be able to interact with others in authentic contexts. The importance of learners' interaction in the acquisition of a foreign language has made student-centered environment a standard for effective teaching today. This principle has led to the increasing use of group work in foreign language classrooms where students work in teams to build up their knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interactions. According to Judith Roney (2010) even though the research on the quality of interaction in groups is not altogether clear, teachers do generally agree that a well-planned group activity holds a great potential value. She states that:

*Small group collaboration allows learners to rehearse
for the larger whole-class discussion to follow,
to practice pronunciation of words, to structure
conversations conceptually and to build conversational
efficacy in a less formal and more anxiety-ridden context.*

Many other researchers such as Bejarano et al (1997); Mahran, (2000); Ghaith, (2003); Najib, (2003); McDonough, (2004) and Liang, (2005), quoted by Judith Roney (2010) have conducted studies to test the effectiveness of group work strategy as a way of EFL teaching/learning, and all of them proved its effective and positive influence on EFL learning. Their studies proved that this strategy can develop many academic skills such as social skills, cooperation, respecting others and communication with others. These studies proved that oral communication in EFL can be developed through giving learners opportunities to talk, to interact, to participate and to feel less anxious and more confident.

2 . 4 Developing Communication Skills through Working in Group

Abdelaziz Mohamed (2011) defines communicative competence as *“the learners’ ability to efficiently express what they mean in the target language and successfully achieve communication in real life situations, the use of language in social communication without grammatical analysis”*. Abdelaziz Mohamed (2011) further contends that *“learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Learners must also acquire knowledge on how native speakers use the language in the context of interpersonal exchange”*. He recognizes that teaching oral and speaking skills are not an easy task and that to a certain extent it puts heavy demands on both the teacher and the students. Abdullah (2002) quoted by the same author states that:

Cooperative learning is chosen for implementation in the class in order to increase the amount of interaction among the students in English. By interacting with peers, it’s hoped that students would increase their oral skills, help each other and become less dependent on the teachers.

Acar, (2005) quoted by the same writer declares:

The theory of communicative competence has been taken as aim within the communicative approach, an aim of making a non-native communicatively competent in the tasks that promote oral language. This occurs when students collaborate in groups to achieve a goal or to complete a task.

He asserts that there are many benefits for interaction in EFL classrooms such as:

- Interaction as a way for improving comprehension and enhancing communicative competence on behalf of students;
- The learner will be able to correct lexical mistakes by noticing differences between his/her usage and the usage of peers with higher language competence;
- The learner’s pragmatic competence quickly improves as he/she adopts his/her peer’s expressions and phrases.

In a country such as Benin where very few opportunities are offered to students to practice the target language apart from the classroom, what can the teacher do to encourage his/her students to speak openly and freely after they have been taught the basic skills? One of the best approaches to this problem is to have students work in groups. But one of the challenges in this context is teaching in very large classes. How can we use this strategy?

2 . 5 Group Work in Large Size Classes

Long, M. H. (1987) states that *“in a context of large class, where each individual student gets little opportunities for individual participation and a reduced student talking time, more teachers divide their students in small groups of two to four students”*. He supports that by having students speak quietly to each other in groups, all sixty children in a given class can get the individual practice they need without making the rest of the class wait in silence while they speak and without taking up a lot of time. In the same way, in addition to increasing students talking time, group work can relieve the large class teacher of a great amount of correction of written work, since the corrected work of one member of the group can serve as a model for others. However, managing the various groups in the classroom entails a lot of things including issues related to the management of noise and note-taking by students. Obviously, pair and group work in a large class will be noisy, and this cannot be helped but the teacher should watch out for unnecessary disturbance, and advise students to lower their voices when necessary. The noise created by pair and group work is usually considered “good” noise and should even be encouraged provided students are using the language or engaged in a learning task. Every member of the group is also required to take down notes as discussions progress. Students should be taught the procedures of note-taking as an aid to understanding.

2 .5. 1 The Size of a Group

Many writers propose a range of three to seven students in a group. For Felisia Tibbitts (2010) group size should range three (03) to five (05). She argues that group size can sometimes be larger but groups larger than eight (08) do not ensure that everyone will participate. It seems that there is no rule that demands equal group size but it can be suggested that a group of reticent students can be capped at three to force all to speak while a large group of six dominant students will receive valuable practice, taking turn. Abdelaziz Mohamed (2011), states that *“even two people are a group”*. He supports that the smaller the group, the more

each member talks and the less chance there is that someone is left out, and that smaller groups require small group management skills and can usually come to decisions faster. Mensah, A. (2000), like Tibbitts supports that group size usually ranges from three to five students. Smaller groups of two to three students have several advantages and are more effective when the time available is short. He also agrees that the size of the group when larger than eight may not make it easy for everyone in it to participate actively in group activities.

2.5.2 Assigning Students to Groups

As previously mentioned, the classroom is a social set up because it is an organized community or group. Tamakloe, E. K. et al (2005) found out that:

It is a community in the sense that it is made up of children who come from different homes and have different backgrounds. These children have their own friends and have their own reasons for their choice of friends. If a teacher wants to be aware of the relationships so as to promote effective teaching and learning, he should know the real relationships that exist in the classroom, because an uncontrolled class can be like a lorry without an experienced driver. It can cause accident and misery to many people.

To overcome the challenge, a technique called *sociometry* is invented by an American called J.L. Moreno (1953). It is the measurement of social relationship existing among individual members in a class for given tasks. It also helps in the study of organization of a group by helping the teacher to put individuals into groups for a better adjustment to the group. For May Bruder and Christina Bratt Paulston (1987) “*there are several criteria for assigning students to establish criteria for their class*”.

They support that from the various criteria, students’ proficiency is probably the most important. They contend that:

No class is homogeneous in knowledge and one way is to group students of equal ability in English in the same group; another way is to make sure that each group has some of the best students who can translate

*words, explain grammar points etc... to the other students
in the group.*

They however recognize that there are advantages and disadvantages to both, and each teacher will have to use his experience to find out which way works best for his/her class.

Rance Roney, J. (2010) holding similar views states:

*One of the first instincts of a teacher is to group students
heterogeneously so that the members with higher proficiency
can support the learners with lower proficiency.
However, without intervention and planning, the students
with higher spoken English proficiency will often take
over the conversation work load, giving the less proficient
little practice in speaking.*

She proposes other groupings such as: controlled affiliation groups, shared first language groups and academic orientation groups. Another grouping scheme suggested is random grouping. Advocates of this type of selection such as Abdelaziz (2010), report it as a quick and easy grouping, effective for short-team tasks. This kind of grouping is said to convey the idea that one can work with anyone, and it provides leadership opportunity for low-achievers and builds perception of fairness and possibilities for learning from a wide variety of different peers.

2 .5 . 3 Organizing Students within the Group

It is important that the teacher organizes his/her students to work in their various groups. When a general assignment is given to a group and students are left to organize themselves, the teacher may be using laissez-faire approach to group work. As a result, indiscipline problems may occur in the classroom as students may not know who is going to do what. They may begin to misbehave as they become bored as a result of their inability to do the work assigned to them. Mensah, A. and Tibbit. F. (2010) propose two approaches:

A highly structured approach. The teacher gives specific role to each member of the group such as: a group leader who leads the group in doing the work; a secretary who writes down

all that the group needs to write down; a time –keeper, who keeps the group informed of the time left for them to finish the work; a reporter, who will report the findings of the group to the whole class, a material handler, a devil’s advocate whose role is to present opposing point of views to test the strengths and weaknesses of the original views, and so on. These responsibilities are advised to be rotated among students in the group, to enable each of them to get an opportunity to do different things and develop new skills.

A semi-structured approach: here the teacher recommends certain roles for members of the group, but leaves it to them to give the roles to specific students. This approach may be used with older students who have experience in group work or for simple activities which do not require students to take on different roles.

For group interaction within the group, Mensah, A. (2010) claims that teachers should teach their students basic group skills such as: (1) how to make clear the purpose of the group; (2) how to take turn and put on cooperative behavior; (3) how to present practice materials; (4) how to follow direction; (5) how to give correct, supportive comment and assistance.

For these skills to be effectively used, certain rules should be observed in the group. Russ (2003) has suggested the following rules to guide the students as they learn in small groups:

- Students should not laugh at the ideas other students come out with;
- They should not suppress or prevent other students’ ideas from being heard;
- They should use majority rule to agree on what idea to use;
- They should not let other students do all the work;
- They should not play. They have to concentrate on the work to do;
- The group leader:
 - Is not a boss;
 - Should make sure that all the work is done;
 - Should try to get every student to contribute to the work they do;
 - Should make sure that the final result of the group is ready to be handed;
 - Should make sure all instructions given by the teacher are followed;
 - Should make sure that the names of all the group members are on the finished work (if necessary);
 - Should make sure that every page of the finished work is put together and stapled or clipped.

To put it in a nutshell, it can be seen that many researchers have drawn out the great positive influence of student groupings on classroom management in general, and particularly on EFL classroom management. In fact, through collaboration during group activities, students end up knowing each other better, getting more confidence in themselves and strengthening the relationships student-student and student-teacher. As a result, the classroom becomes a happy family, where every family member feels happy to live.

All the body of knowledge and research seem to favor the use of student groupings in EFL classrooms; but for the specific case of Benin which is implementing the competency-based approach, research is still needed for effective adjustment.

3 A research report

I carried out a research on a small scale about student groupings efficacy in three secondary schools in the region of Ouémé. Twenty teachers were randomly sampled for the investigation. To collect data, instruments such as interviews and classroom observations were used.

3.1 Interviews

The interview was semi-guided as it was based on questions prepared beforehand. The questions were to discover:

- ❖ What the teachers think about the way student groupings are being used in Benin EFL classrooms today;
- ❖ how far the new seating arrangement (in groups) and group work can impact learners' acquisition of English for communicative purposes;
- ❖ whether they are professionally equipped to implement the CBA using this strategy;
- ❖ what problems they have to overcome in grouping their students in large classes;
- ❖ space for comments recommendations and suggestions were offered to interviewee teachers.

3.1.1 Interview results

To sum up the interviewees' responses most of them 18 out of 20 that is 83.33 percent confessed that grouping students for work is a very good strategy that stands the chance to make the new approach a success. But unfortunately they are having problems with its

implementation. The new seating arrangement is said by 80 percent of the respondents to be a golden opportunity for students to use the language for real life communication. But the class management remains a real problem. A teacher declared “*group work is for most students, time for entertainment and for some teachers rest time*”. Another teacher said “*group work strategy has proved so troublesome that I sometimes jump over it during my lesson. It even happens that I ask my students to arrange in the old way, because they are too noisy speaking French when they sit in groups*”

For the third question, most teachers confessed that they are not yet comfortable with the CBA strategies though they have gone through at least two trainings so far. As for problems they encounter, they can be summarized as lack of professionalism or lack of appropriate training. The interview revealed that many teachers are aware that they should make their students work in groups, but they don't know how to go about it or what are the competencies they are supposed to develop in students through this strategy. As a result, students are not taught how to work in groups. That is why they misbehave during group work. Some trained teachers because of lack of motivation or for some of them because of laziness fail to do the job appropriately.

3 . 1 . 2 Class Observations

I observed three EFL classrooms from the selected schools. This gave me the opportunity to see directly what really happens in the classrooms. The observation focused on: the different strategies used; the seating arrangement; the type of interactions that is teacher- students, student-student; and how students behave in the groups.

The class observation revealed that in all the classes, students are in groups of five, six, seven, or even eight. One out of the three teachers observed, followed the different stages of the teaching/learning process, namely presentation – practice – and production. These stages were dealt with through activities following the strategies which are: individual work, pair work, group work and collective work. Less than half of the students owned the prescribed handbook. Because of that, when activities were to be taken from the book, the size of the groups increases up to ten or twelve students, which led to much disturbances, distractions, high level of noise and much pain for the teacher to manage the class. In one of the class observed, the teacher, an experienced one knew at what stage of the lesson to introduce pair or group work and spite of the usual hurdles, the objective of developing communicative

competence in students seems to be achieved. In the two other classes observed, the chaos was total in terms of the use of any class management strategies.

4 Using Student Groupings to Promote Effective Classroom Management in EFL Classes in Benin

Language teaching/learning in an EFL context is not an easy task. Therefore teachers should take account of a variety of factors that are likely to promote effective class management, for the language communicative value proves very important. Because of lack of adequate training, most teachers in Benin stick to textbooks losing sight of creating the basic motivational conditions needed for effective learning in an EFL classroom. To be able to form a cohesive and coherent group, they should be able to turn most goals set by textbooks into goals accepted by the group members that are students. Therefore, some prerequisites are to be met before any attempt is made that can generate motivation for independent learning.

Teacher's behavior should have a motivational, formative and positive influence on students. In other words, teacher's behavior is a powerful motivational tool in classroom. A key element is to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with learners, by means of talking with them on a personal level. This mutual trust could lead to a contagious enthusiasm. This influences the way the students react towards the target language and, therefore, their success in learning it. Enthusiastic teachers impart a sense of commitment to, and interest in the language, using verbal and non verbal cues that students copy from them for life. In other words, creating a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere is another must for effective student groupings. A good intimate, happy emotional relationship between students and teacher is a very effective motivating device. This depends upon the individual teacher's attitude towards the language and the students, how and what type of atmosphere he creates and maintains in his class, and the degree of acceptance he has for them and vice versa. Better acceptance leads to better understanding; better understanding leads to better motivation and this in turn to better learning. In a warm supporting stress and anxiety-free atmosphere, inhibition disappears, inventiveness and self-expression increase. As mentioned earlier, creating a cohesive learners' group characterized by appropriate group norms is also important. There are several devices a teacher can use to promote group cohesiveness, such as having students spend time together even in extra-curriculum activities such as in English clubs, sharing group history, learning about each other, intergroup competitions etc.

Setting up pair and group work in a large size class is not an easy task but the good side of it is that students coming from different backgrounds, having different experiences give more life and dynamism to the class which the teacher can draw from. So, even less motivated ones can become motivated because of the dynamism which most of the time springs out from the group. Organizing our students in groups should be done from the very beginning of the year, so everyone is made responsible for his/her own learning; is convinced of the usefulness of the strategy, and made aware of the future benefits of learning the language. There are at least three options available: pairs or small groups who are sitting close together – which is less threatening for them - then combinations of weaker and stronger students where the stronger help the weaker ones, or separating weaker and stronger so they can all work at their own pace, with the teacher ready to help the weaker ones and to give extra challenges to the stronger ones, monitoring the whole work by moving from group to group playing the role of facilitator, prompter and resource person. Variety in these arrangements keeps students on their toes but it means clever planning and organization from the teacher, depending on his/her objectives and the type of activities set. Giving clear instructions, being ready to demonstrate some activities before the class and providing motivating activities, close to students' daily lives, interests and needs or choosing topical issues are key factors to avoid boredom which leads to indiscipline and students' misbehavior. Sometimes, it is best to give opportunities to them to work with their favorite friends for it has all sorts of advantages: they gain confidence, they feel free to open up because usually everyone likes to talk to somebody he knows, because being used to his /her voice.

To overcome the challenge of the prescribed handbooks or textbooks shortage, teachers' creativity, imagination and sense of humor should be encouraged. Newspapers and magazines in English are one of the most versatile and freely available materials that can be used for a wide variety of purposes. Asking students to provide resources, for example bringing letters from any sources or pictures from home for class activities keeps the students more motivated because they feel part of the class and as contributors for their own learning. Our textbooks and handbooks are full of group activities such as role playing and simulations that can be selected, adapted if need be and kept in the teacher's bank of activities to be written on the board for everybody to copy at appropriate time. What is interesting in these two activities is that they are highly motivating because students can learn through experience and apply their learning in a relevant, yet relaxed, low-risk situations. They can also help promote student-student interaction, encourage empathy for others, and develop social skills and values.

Individual work is another factor for the effectiveness of student groupings in Benin.

The class observation reveals that because of unclear instructions from teachers when grouping students, this important stage of the group work process is not taken good care of. What we must not forget is that learning has above all an individual dimension. Each student has first to storm his/her brain, to make the representations and understanding of the topic or activities at hand. Then he/she shares them with his/her mates in the group, in order to improve his/her own understanding and to help the mates improve theirs. Therefore, teachers must get students involved in individual work first, by providing time for it, making instructions clear for them, assisting them and making sure that each student has produced something individually before the group verbal contact begins. It is at this cost that group productions will reflect the real level of all the members in the group and having students work in groups will reach the objectives assigned to it by the competency-based approach.

CONCLUSION

This article has shed light on the reasons why and how to use student groupings for effective class management in the context of competency-based approach. An investigation was conducted that revealed that this strategy is still misunderstood and misused by many teachers. Therefore, some practical suggestions and recommendations are offered for the benefits of students and teachers.

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