



CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES AT U.E.A., BUKAVU, DR CONGO

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Abstract:

This article aims to identify some challenges faced by teachers of English in first year undergraduate classes at UEA, one of the major universities in Bukavu, DR Congo. The study focused on 5 Congolese male teachers of English at U.E.A and 750 regular learners (259 female and 491 male). The research was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2015-2016. The research instruments were a survey questionnaire to teachers, analytical and comparative methods. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were considered to produce an interpretation of the data. The findings of the study revealed that teachers experienced problems related mainly to large classes, time constraint, student behaviour problems, different ability levels, insufficient technical supports, and to the lack of National English Course Curriculum and didactic materials from the Ministry of Higher Academic and University Education of the DR Congo. Thanks to a placement test, teachers taught the first undergraduate students English at different levels. Such strategy is rare at most universities in Bukavu when English is taught to students of the same class. Teachers gave some learners practice and remedial lessons at the Language Resource Centre of UEA. They downloaded and freely shared many books related to the needs of learners. Meetings for sharing experiences and harmonizing the course outlines were regularly held by these teachers. Those were some specific strategies used by teachers of English at UEA to tackle most challenges and might be helpful for the development of the discipline.

Keywords: challenges, teaching English, U.E.A.

Résumé

Cet article vise à identifier certains défis auxquels sont confrontés les enseignants d'Anglais dans les premières années de Graduat à l'UEA, l'une des grandes universités de Bukavu, en RD Congo. L'étude portait sur 5 enseignants congolais d'Anglais à l'UEA et 750 réguliers apprenants (259 étudiantes et 491 étudiants). La recherche a été réalisée

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au premier semestre de l'année académique 2015-2016. Les instruments de recherche étaient un questionnaire d'enquête aux enseignants et les méthodes analytique et comparative. Les approches qualitative et quantitative ont été prises en considération pour l'interprétation des données. Les résultats de l'étude ont révélé que les enseignants ont connu des difficultés liées surtout aux classes pléthoriques, à la contrainte de temps, au mauvais comportement de certains apprenants, aux différents niveaux d'aptitudes, à l'insuffisance du soutien technique et au manque du programme national de cours d'Anglais et de matériels didactiques émanant du Ministère de l'E.S.U./RD Congo . Grace au test de niveau, les formateurs enseignèrent l'Anglais aux étudiants des premières années de graduat à différents niveaux. Telle stratégie est rare pour la plupart des universités de Bukavu lorsque l'Anglais est enseigné aux étudiants d'une même classe. Les enseignants donnèrent à certains apprenants la pratique et des leçons de rattrapage au Centre des Ressources en Langues de l'UEA. Ils téléchargèrent et distribuèrent gratuitement bien des ouvrages en rapport avec les besoins des apprenants. Des réunions d'échanges d'expériences et d'harmonisation de grandes lignes du cours furent régulièrement tenues par les enseignants. Voilà quelques stratégies spécifiques utilisées par les enseignants d'Anglais à l'UEA pour relever la grande majorité des défis; lesquelles stratégies pourraient être utiles pour le développement de cette discipline.

Mots clés : défis, enseigner l'Anglais, U.E.A.

1. Introduction

A growing number of universities require English for admission or graduation, and many now offer degree programs entirely in English to compete with the top ranked institutions in the U.S. and the U.K. In addition to all the young people learning English through public education, the private English instruction sector is an estimated 50 billion dollar industry. Indeed, it has been proposed that within the next decade as many as two billion people will be learning English at any given time. (www.ef.com/sitecore/~/media/efcom/.../pdf/EF-EPI-2011.pdf).

All over the world some teachers of English face problems as it was the case in Thailand (cf. Sripathum Noom-Ura, 2013, p.5), in Taiwan (cf. Ming Chang, 2011, p.7), in India (cf. P. Sreenivasulu Reddy, 2012, p.782), in America (cf. Katherine E. Garrett, 2006, p.5), and in Nigeria (cf. Oluwayemisi Florence Fatiloro, 2015, p.28).

English is the main language of science and technology in the world and its spread is advancing in many countries and regions where it has not been traditionally spoken as in DR Congo.

The DR Congo Government also decided to enhance teaching of English by publishing on September 30, 2015 an Academic Instruction (N°017/MINESU/CABMIN/TMF/ SMM/2015, p.10, paragraph 1.10). The latter aims at reminding the Heads of Public and Private Schools involved in Higher Academic

Institutions and University Education to teach English systematically in all classes from the Undergraduate to the Graduate Cycles.

Indeed, teaching English in the first year undergraduate classes during the first semester/2015-2016 at UEA was a tough task. This situation led us to ask some questions in this investigation: What are some challenges faced by teachers of English in the first year undergraduate classes at U.E.A., especially in the first semester/2015-2016? And how to tackle them?

The following hypotheses correspond to these questions. Teachers face different types of challenges when they teach English course in the first year undergraduate classes in the first semester/2015-2016 at U.E.A.

Firstly, teachers may encounter challenges related mainly to large classes, to time constraint, to student behaviour problems and low-backgrounds, to insufficient technical supports and to the lack of National English Course Curriculum and didactic materials from the Ministry of Higher Academic Institutions and University Education of the DR Congo. Secondly, different factors cause challenges encountered by teachers of English in the first year undergraduate classes in the first semester/2015-2016 at U.E.A.

As possible solutions, some strategies could be used by different educational partners to tackle those challenges confronted by teachers of English at U.E.A. As objectives, this research aims to investigate some challenges faced by teachers of English in first year undergraduate classes at U.E.A. in the first semester/2015-2016 and to propose some strategies for tackling these challenges.

The study was conducted at the Evangelical University in Africa (U.E.A.) which is the first one in Bukavu to divide first year undergraduate classes into different levels (Beginner One, Beginner Two, Intermediate One and Intermediate Two) for an efficient learning and teaching English. The research was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2015-2016 because during this time, all of the five teachers of English were teaching and assessing students' abilities in English at U.E.A.

This study was carried out at U.E.A. for two months starting from September 21st through October 21st, 2015 and from January 16th to February 20th, 2016. The sample of the study consisted of 5 Congolese teachers of English (all of them male), and 750 regular students (259 female and 491 male) in first year undergraduate classes at U.E.A. / 2015-2016. As for their respective nationalities, there were 737 Congolese (252 female plus 485 male), 8 Rwandans (5 female plus 3 male), and 5 Cameroonians (2 female plus 3 male). These 750 subjects formed about 96.15% of the total number community. There were three criteria of selection: registration in the first undergraduate class, having taken the placement test and regular attendance at a given English level.

The placement test was addressed one month before the start of the English course in order to identify different levels of students. Because of a big number of enrolled students in these classes, only written exercises pertaining to *Identification*, *Vocabulary words*, *Grammar* and *Composition* were given them for two hours maximum.

Identification exercise consisted of identifying students' names, nationalities, places and duration of studying English. Vocabulary words were in relation to

numbers, gender, school materials, giving directions and clothes. Grammar section was related to the use of comparative and superlative of adjectives, conditional clauses, prepositions and past tenses. The composition exercise was based on vocabulary knowledge, grammar, spelling, content or the substance, style and length (of three to six full and correct sentences). The topic given them was about the “*importance of English*” in their town or country. The placement test was invigilated by Assistant lecturers and done by these students in six classrooms at the school of Agronomy.

Thus, it was expected that students could be placed in different English levels according to the following grading scale: Beginner one level: 0 - 29% marks; Beginner two: 30 – 49% marks; Intermediate one: 50 – 69% marks; Intermediate two: 70 – 89% marks; Advanced level: 90 – 100% marks.

The research instruments used in this study were analytical and comparative methods, qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The author has analysed and compared answers given by each of the five teachers to find out similarities and differences about challenges encountered by them.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were considered to produce interpretation of the data. The qualitative approach was carried out via teachers’ different challenge perceptions when they were teaching English to students in first year undergraduate classes at U.E.A. in the first semester/2015-2016. It allowed this study to identify and explore the nature and possible solutions to challenges faced by teachers of English at U.E.A. during this time interval. This last approach was helpful to discuss survey findings also.

As for the quantitative phase of this study, a survey questionnaire (cf. Appendix 1) was given to the teachers of English (nonnative-English speakers). The survey questionnaire was designed to collect data, especially challenges faced by teachers of English at UEA during the target semester were expected. Apart from teacher’s background information, this questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions, two structured questions and one semi-structured question. Finally, it was checked, validated and administered to the five teachers. Thanks to the survey questionnaire findings, some challenges and their causes faced by these teachers were identified. The collected data was transformed into tables and calculated in percentage to facilitate interpretation in the following lines.

2. Presentation and Analysis of the Results

In this section, teachers of English at different levels and their challenges have been presented and analysed.

2.1. Teachers of English at different levels

Table 1: Teachers of English at different levels (1st Semester/2015-2016)

Gender	Nationality	English Levels	Experience
Male	Congolese	All	He has taught English at university for 39 years.
Male	Congolese	Beginner One	He has taught English at university for 2 years.
Male	Congolese	Beginner Two	He has taught English at university for 4 years.
Male	Congolese	Intermediate One	He has taught English at university for 12 years.
Male	Congolese	Intermediate Two	He has taught English at university for 2 years.

Source: Based on survey questionnaire results

Table 1 describes teachers' background information: all of them male and Congolese; among them, one got a long experience of 39 years, another of 12 years, another of 4 years and two others of 2 years teaching English at university. The same table shows that one of the five teachers taught English at all levels because he was the most experienced, whereas each of the four others taught English at one level. This situation tends to mean that none of these latter teachers had an assistant lecturer in spite of overcrowded English classes (see table 2 below).

2.2. Challenges encountered and strategies used to tackle them by teachers of English at UEA (1st semester/2015-2016)

In the following sub-point, challenges encountered by teachers of English in the first year undergraduate classes (1st semester/2015-2016) at UEA are identified before strategies used to tackle them.

2.2.1. Challenges encountered by teachers of English at UEA (1st semester/2015-2016)

Results of the survey questionnaire showed that teachers of English in first year undergraduate classes at UEA (1st semester/2015-2016) experienced the challenges below: large classes, time constraint, student behaviour problems, different ability levels of students and the lack of the National Curriculum and didactic materials.

Table 2: Student numbers at different English levels (1st Semester/2015-2016)

English Level	Students		Total
	Female	Male	
Beginner One	76	194	270
Beginner Two	65	110	175
Intermediate One	74	106	180
Intermediate Two	44	81	125
Total	259	491	750

Source: Based on the lists of regular attendees (September 2015 and February 2016 at UEA/Bukavu, DR Congo)

Table 2 above demonstrates student numbers at four different English levels organized in the first year undergraduate classes (1st Semester/2015-2016) at UEA : Beginner One (270 students= 36 %), Beginner Two (175 students= 23.33 %), Intermediate One (180

students= 24 %), and Intermediate Two (125 students=16.67 %). There was no Advanced level. Female students were 259/750 which represent 34.53 % against 491 male ones or 65.47 %. Such student numbers mean large classes and time constraint (cf. Question 1 of the survey questionnaire): Overcrowded classes of 125 to 270 English learners caused overload to all teachers (5/5= (100%). During practice, reaching each student in order to help him/her resolve particular problems was a tough task. And marking assignment copies for such large classes was a tremendous task. The class size and running behind time were two main causes of these last problems. Except the attractive Internet access at UEA, classroom facilities such as audio-visual clues (CD, DVD, projectors, loudspeakers, etc.) were insufficient. Most students did not own laptops. Nor did they want to freely photocopy the syllabuses.

Moreover, student behaviour problems were identified of psychological factors (cf. Questions 2 and 6): According to all teachers of English (5/5 or 100%), noise was made by students who usually had seats in the back rows of the classrooms. They were distracted not only by their classmates joke, but also by the use of their cell phones during English classes. Actually, most of them were very weak at English language. Being afraid of making mistakes and because their classmates could laugh at them, some students were shy. Others were not ashamed of cheating on quizzes or on examinations. Besides their inconsistent behaviour in classrooms, some students lacked interests in joining the English clubs as practice opportunities organized at UEA. Because of students who were late, teachers often had to organize remedial catch-up. It was disgusting also.

Indeed, different ability levels, especially low-backgrounds of students (cf. Question 3) caused problems to the teachers of English. Although students were placed according to their English levels, all teachers of English (5/5 or 100%) at UEA agreed that problems remained in each classroom. As they came from different high schools, they had different backgrounds. A few students were strong at English; the others were average or weak.

All teachers of English (5/5 or 100%) were aware of the lack of the National Curriculum and didactic materials from the Ministry of Higher Academic Institutions and University Education for teaching the English course in all promotions (cf. Question 4).

2.2.2. Some strategies to tackle those challenges

Some strategies to tackle those challenges (cf. Questions 5 and 7) were notably:

The long experience gained by some teachers of English at university (3/5, i.e. 60%) helped them cope with those challenges. Students were divided in different groups of 10 to 30 members for practical and/or supervised works. With genuine preparation and strong concentration, these teachers (5/5, i.e. 100%) worked hard. That was the way they dealt with large classes.

Instead of two weeks, for a total number of 45 hours, teachers (5/5, i.e. 100%) spent one month for an intensive English course in first year undergraduate classes at U.E.A. They varied teaching methods and multiplied activities according to different

situations. By marking students' assignments, for instance, practical works, quizzes, examination, as soon as possible, scores were handed over by teachers to Faculty Secretaries on time. That was the solution to the time constraint.

In order to cope with students' behaviour problems, the following strategies were used by the teachers: Saying, "hello class, give me your attention, please," switching cell phones and assigning students a "pop quiz" for 15 minutes sometimes reduced noise and distraction. But in case of tangible evidence, any cheat was expelled from U.E.A. Students who were late had to stay out for fifteen minutes. Thus, they sat for a catch-up at week-ends.

For improving English low-average and average levels, such students were asked to attend evening classes at the Language Resource Centre of UEA three times a week for two hours during two months.

To cope with the lack of didactic materials, all these teachers (5/5 or 100%) made profit of Internet access to download a lot of major textbooks for different schools organized at U.E.A., for instance: Medicine, Agronomy, Economics, Social Sciences, and Protestant Theology Faculties. Sometimes a group of three students were asked to share the same copy of a text. According to one (1/5, i.e. 25%) of these teachers, two marks were often scored for any student willing to photocopy the syllabus: it was attractive and a good motivation for most students. Finally, the course outline of each English level was assessed by the most experienced Professor, Director of the Language Resource Centre of U.E.A. This list is far from being exhaustive.

3. Discussion of the Results and Recommendations

This section deals with discussion of the results and recommendations.

3.1. Discussion of the results

Large classes (between 125 and 270 students, at one level) are experienced by teachers of English (100%) in the first semester/2015-2016 at U.E.A. This finding copes with P. Sreenivasulu Reddy (2012, p.789) whose investigation reveals that with Indian large population, they "*do not find any class where student's number is less than 60.*" But both findings are inconsistent with other researchers' investigation, for instance, Dr. A. Boniadi, et al., p.52), and Paul Surgenor (2010, p.2), showing that the language classroom should not be more than 25 students.

It is evident that the DR Congo Government does not pay salaries for private universities' personnel like those of U.E.A. That probably is reason why the latter has some overcrowded classes which might be the money source to pay all personnel, all taxes and to supply other needs.

About noise as it has been decried by all teachers of English (100%) at UEA, Pairote Bennui (available at <http://repo.uum.edu.my/3266/1/P1.pdf>. [Accessed on April 8, 2016]) observes that because of a noisy classroom and poor quality equipment, "*Students' listening and comprehension certainly decreases.*"

While three out of five (60%) teachers of English at UEA have considered the mobile phone use in classrooms and some classmates' joke as causes for distraction, Kelly (1974) has highlighted that the noise was distraction grounds. This inconsistency can be explained by the fact that each milieu often reflects its realities.

Most teachers of English (4/5 i.e. 80%) at UEA were aware of the fact that psychological factors caused students' speaking difficulties. According to Ming Chang (2011, p.7) when Taiwanese students spoke English, they were afraid that people would make fun of them. They felt embarrassed and shy.

All of the teachers of English at UEA (100%) were aware of the insufficient technical supports. To this point, Oluwayemisi Florence Fatiloro (2015, p.29) showed that "*lack of basic facilities and equipment*" is a challenge that hinders effective teaching and learning of English Language in Nigeria also.

Based on the findings of the research, some recommendations, which may help teachers reduce more and more those difficulties, are made in the following section.

3.2. Recommendations

These recommendations are related to teachers, students, UEA Executive Committee, parents and DRC Higher Academic and University Education Ministry responsibilities.

1. In order to promote the levels of English language proficiency at UEA, students should be taught not only at different levels of English, but in small groups (not more than 25 students) although it requires more than five teachers of English.
2. Teachers and students should regularly attend English clubs and the Language Resource Centre for practice.
3. Technical supports (Internet, projectors, and loud speakers) should be multiplied and provided in every classroom by UEA Executive Committee.
4. Each parent should provide a computer for his/her son/daughter. This could help them retrieve a lot of electronic books, audio-visual materials and teachers' syllabi.
5. The Government of DR Congo should pay honoraries to teachers of private universities, like U.E.A., as it is done for public ones. It should provide, via the Ministry of Higher Academic and University Education, a lot of facilities including English books and training programmes for teachers of this target language as well. It should add to the National Curriculum, via the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the *Elementary English Course*. This new programme could allow the Congolese to learn English from bottom to top, following the example of French language teaching in D R Congo.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the article dealt with some challenges faced by teachers in first year undergraduate classes at UEA in the first semester of the academic year 2015-2016. At the end of the teaching programme, a survey questionnaire was submitted to the five teachers of English at Beginner One, Beginner Two, Intermediate One and Intermediate

Two levels. Those were four possible English levels organised for first year undergraduate students during that teaching period. Analysed and compared results showed that teachers experienced some challenges in teaching English in the first year undergraduate classes at UEA during the first semester/ 2015-2016. These challenges were in relation mainly to large classes (comprised of 125 to 270 English learners per classroom), to time constraint, to student behaviour problems, such as shyness, distraction, making noise, cheating, lateness, to insufficient classroom facilities and to the lack of National English Course Curriculum and didactic materials from the Ministry of Higher Academic Institutions and University Education of the DR Congo. These results confirm the author's first hypothesis about different types of challenges faced by teachers of English course in the first year undergraduate classes in the first semester/2015-2016 at U.E.A.

As solutions, the long experience gained by some teachers of English at university, to divide and teach 1st year undergraduate students at different English levels and in small groups for practical and/ or supervised works, genuine preparation and strong concentration, working hard, spending a one-month intensive course period, marking students' assignments, as soon as possible, handing the marks over to different Faculty Secretaries on time, disciplining students for their behaviour problems, giving late students remedial lessons and assignments, downloading a lot of major textbooks for different schools organized at UEA, varying teaching methods and multiplying activities according to different situations helped them cope with those challenges. These findings meet the writer's second hypothesis according to which different strategies are possible to tackle challenges encountered by teachers of English in the first year undergraduate classes in the first semester/2015-2016 at U.E.A. This list is not exhaustive. Further research should be conducted to deal with overcrowded classes and needy students whereas a few teachers' salaries are not paid by the government.

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Appendix I

Survey Questionnaire To The Teachers Of English At Uea/Bukavu Topic: “Challenges faced by teachers of English in first year undergraduate classes at U.E.A./Bukavu (1st semester/2015-2016)”

The purpose of the survey questionnaire is to identify challenges encountered by teachers of English in first year undergraduate classes at UEA during the first semester/2015-2016, without forgetting their nature and how to tackle them.

I assure that your responses will be treated with the strictest confidence according to research Ethics. Thank you for your kind assistance.

I. Teacher’s background information

Instructions: Please, with a semi-structured question, tick (√) an answer, and fill in the blanks which are provided for open-ended questions.

- Gender : () male/ () female

- Adult : -----

- Nationality : -----

- Education level : -----

- Experience: How many years have you taught English at the University? -----,
at High School? ----- or at a Language Training Centre? -----

- Have you ever taught English at UEA before this Academic Year 2015-2016? Yes () /
No ()

II. Teacher’s opinions concerning his/her challenges and their nature

Directions/Instructions: Please, with a semi-structured question, tick (√) an answer, and fill in the blanks which are provided for open-ended questions.

1. As a teacher of English in first year undergraduate classes at UEA, could you list some challenges faced in your profession and their nature during the first semester/2015-2016, compared to different viewpoints below:

- The size of class? -----

- Audiovisual materials (availability of computers, projectors, loudspeakers, microphones, Internet access, etc.) and how did you manage problems in their use? -----

-----.

- Classroom management? -----

- Time constraint (45hours:30 for theories plus 15 for practical assignments):
was this time enough? () or insufficient? ().

- Daily timetable for teaching English? -----
-----.

2. How did students behave? Were some students attentive or motivated? Yes ()/No ()
Were some students noisy? Yes () / No (). Were some students shy? Yes () / No ()

3. Comment on this question: Do you think that students you taught English were at
different ability levels? Was it a problem? Why? / Why not? -----
-----.

4. Was there any National Curriculum (i.e. "Course Programme" and didactic materials
from the Ministry of Higher Academic and University Education) you could use for
teaching English at university? Yes () / No ()

5. What kinds of methods did you use to teach English?-----

-----.

6. What were other teaching challenges and their nature and source?

-----.

7. How did you tackle these challenges?

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Thank You for Your Cooperation

C. T. Buhendwa Rubango Jeff
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IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES AT UEA/BUKAVU, DR CONGO

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