FOSTERING EFL LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE BY MEANS OF MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITIES

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Abstract:

The ultimate goal of teaching EFL to students is for them to use English for communicative purposes. This paper seeks to examine the communicative competence of EFL students in the Republic of Benin and to study the effect of motivational activities on their oral proficiency. Moreover, the enquiry aims at examining students' views about the use of motivational activities during English lessons and to find out the extent to which teachers integrate these activities in the classroom. To achieve these objectives, a mixed research method was used. This includes questionnaires and classroom observation. 205 EFL intermediate students and seven EFL intermediate class teachers participated in the enquiry. The results show that students lack motivation or interest to speak English because teachers do not make their lessons lively by introducing motivational activities. Many teachers ignore that motivational activities are effective in the classroom. It is understandably so because they are not trained to incorporate motivational activities in their lessons. Furthermore, students do not speak in class because they are either bored or they do not know the appropriate vocabulary to use. Though motivational activities make learners eager to practise the language, students revealed that their teachers hardly involve them in dramatic activities. These include various tasks such as role-play, simulation, improvisation. This study concludes that motivational activities have a significant impact on learners' communicative competence, and calls on teachers as well as trainers and pedagogical advisers to ensure their incorporation in the EFL classrooms.

Keywords: motivation, motivational activities, communicative competence, EFL intermediate students, EFL teachers

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1. Introduction

Human society cannot exist without communication which is as vital as water for its survival. A lack of communication can lead to misunderstanding, conflicts and destruction. Therefore, communication is indispensable to mankind. As stated by Otano Villamer, Lopez-Lopez, Sanchez-Vera, Perlaza-Estupinan, & Lopez (2016), its importance can be "*reflected in all the aspects of our lives: social, work, etc.*" (p.1). In the educational context, students learn a foreign language basically for communicative purposes. Apart from that, learners who speak one or more foreign languages have more advantages than their peers in the labour market.

In the world at large, English has virtually become the most widely spoken international language across nations. Iamsaard and Kerdpol (2015) say that English is now a language that is as important as the first language of every nation. This is why English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is taught in most schools in francophone countries such as the Republic of Benin.

Speaking is the basic way through which communication takes place on a daily basis. That is why this paper focuses more on oral communication. Fabio (2015) states that speaking is the "*most important and interesting component of any language*" (p.3). He is of the opinion that people speak more easily than they write. Therefore, speaking is "*probably the main goal for anyone studying a foreign language*" (Fabio, 2015, p.3).

However, getting learners to speak in the classroom is one of the most challenging tasks that teachers face. Derakshan, Taheri and Mirarab (2015) observe that "*it is necessary to overcome it and encourage learners to use their speaking skills. Learners are afraid of simple slip of the tongue and seeing others to laugh. Language learners prefer writing to speaking. They are more skilled in writing*" (p.520). Also, teachers find it difficult to motivate students to speak English. Students are often afraid to express themselves in English, not only because they do not know the right words to use, but also because they are not motivated. This raises the following question: "how can teachers motivate their learners to speak English?"

According to Murray (2020), there is more to being an English teacher than solely teaching grammar and vocabulary. Teachers must inspire the love of the language, build confidence and make learning fun. To this effect, teaching EFL requires the use of motivational activities that are likely to engage students and make them eager to acquire knowledge.

1.1 Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Motivation is a key issue that determines learners' success in oral communication. The inclusion of motivational activities in EFL teachers' practices is not yet popular among teachers in Benin. The fact that English is introduced as a foreign language (EFL) in Benin from the first grade has not helped students to speak it fluently or fairly. Beninese EFL students do not develop their communicative competence because most teachers do not carry out activities that will boost their confidence and motivation to do so. Besides, some EFL teachers use most of the time French as a medium of communication during their

English lessons. Though this can help students understand the main point of the lesson easily, it does not help them to develop their oral skills.

In addition, Beninese EFL teachers are not yet fully enlightened on the various motivational activities that may help students improve their oral skills. More importantly, teachers do not attach much importance to these activities, and the overwhelming majority of them are not aware of their effectiveness. This study intends to highlight the importance of motivational activities and most importantly to identify their significant impact on Beninese EFL learners' communicative competence.

1.2 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer two main questions:
1) What are the various methods employed by teachers to motivate their learners?
2) What impact can motivational activities have on students' communicative competence?

2. Literature Review

This part briefly reviews the previous research on the effect of motivational activities on EFL students' classroom performance.

2.1 Motivational Activities

Motivation is some kind of "*internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something*" (Harmer, 2007, p.98). Woolfolk, Hughes, and Walk (2012) also define motivation as: "*an internal state that arises, directs, and maintains behavior*" (p.372). Therefore, motivational activities are activities used in or outside the language classroom to intensify students' desire to learn. Motivational activities are "*instructional interventions applied by the teacher to elicit and stimulate student motivation*" (Guilloteaux, & Dornyei, 2008, as cited in Azarnoosh & Tabatabee, 2008, p.2). These activities create a conducive environment that motivates learners to actively participate in classroom debates.

However, Martin (2003) observes that learners are not highly motivated because teachers always let them work and discuss topics in the textbooks without providing them with any related information on real-life situations. Furthermore, teachers are controlling oral activities and do not allow learners to take the floor and speak out their minds freely. On this score, it is important to mention Brawer (1982) who provides four basic steps to help teachers select appropriate motivational activities:
- The first is to determine the media needs of the learners (e.g., lower ability groups generally respond better to visual stimuli such as films, overheads, or displays);
- The following step is to determine whether the motivational activity should focus on related past instruction, or whether remedial activities are needed;
- What comes next is to examine the feasibility of that activity within the learning environment (i.e., the time and materials available);
- The final step is to develop or select the actual motivational events of instruction. It is suggested that, by examining the problem of motivation, identifying student

characteristics, and carefully planning lessons, many of the motivational problems teachers face in the classroom can be overcome (Brawer, as cited in Otano et.al, 2016).

2.2 Some Previous Studies Related to the Topic

There are many studies on how to improve learners' communicative competence and keep them motivated to speak in class. One of these studies is the one carried out by Egounleti, Iwikotan, and Zounhin Toboula (2021). Their study aims at finding out effective techniques to improve EFL learners' speaking fluency in intermediate classes. They found out that regular use of classroom communicative activities is one of the strategies for motivating EFL intermediate learners to speak English. However, they noted that:

> "*Motivation is an essential aspect of English language teaching and learning. Unfortunately, EFL teachers in Beninese secondary schools scarcely motivate their learners to speak English. The results in Table 5 show that 100% of teachers investigated do not take time to motivate learners to speak the English language fluently; as a result, most of the learners are unable to speak English.*" (Egounleti et al., 2021, p.17)

They concluded that the lack of training sessions for the EFL teachers is the most important obstacle to learners' communicative competence. In the same vein, Mahdi (2015) discusses a variety of strategies that teachers use in the classroom to motivate reluctant students to converse and participate. To do so, he critically reviews some articles based on motivational strategies and teaches using games and other co-curricular activities. Further, he highlights the role that teachers as well as parents and students must play to improve learners' communicative competence.

Other research articles focus on particular strategies. For example, Marzuki, Prayogo and Wahyudi (2016) explore the benefits of interactive storytelling to improve EFL learners' speaking skills. Through a Classroom Action Research method, in two cycles, their results show that the learners' speaking ability improved from 17 to 72, 27% (2016, p.22).

Another motivational activity that has been the focus of studies is the role of games in promoting students' willingness to communicate. This has been carried out by Liu, Vadivel, Rezvani and Namaziandost (2021). These researchers used two groups of learners (control and experimental groups) to show the role of games in promoting students' willingness to communicate. Their results reveal that the experimental group whose teacher used games in the language lessons and classes showed significant improvement in their willingness to communicate. According to them*:*

> "*These findings reveal that games are very good at promoting students' attitude towards learning English. They also reveal that by using games, learners learn the target language appropriately and enthusiastically. In addition, it increases their willingness to communicate when the topic of the lesson is interesting. Moreover, the results reveal that*

games are not just for fun, but also allow students to ask the teacher questions in class."
(Liu et al, 2021, p.9)

2.3 Importance of Motivational Activities

Motivational activities make students more active in the learning process and at the same time make their learning more meaningful and fun for them (Kayi, 2006). Otano et al. (2016) add that motivational activities "*have an important role in the development of the speaking skill…if the students do not feel motivated or encouraged to talk in class, they will never practice or lose the fear to talk*" (p.1). Motivational activities such as games can be "*exploited as follow-ups of the presented teaching material for practicing and reinforcing the required skills or knowledge; or for revising and recycling already acquired skills or knowledge; or as a testing mechanism in order to discover students' weaknesses in their language proficiency*" (Klimova, 2015, p.1159).

In conclusion, the various authors cited above have a positive view of motivational activities, and their impact not only improves learners' communicative skills but builds up language skills as well.

3. Research Method

As mentioned earlier, this study investigates the usefulness of motivational activities in the development of EFL learners' oral competence. Therefore, it seeks to discover the various methods EFL teachers use in their classrooms to motivate their learners and to find out the extent to which these methods positively impact EFL students' communicative performance. The research method is based on both quantitative and qualitative research (mixed method). A mixed research method enables a systematic integration or "mixing" of qualitative and quantitative data within a single investigation or inquiry (Wisdom & Cresswell, 2013).

3.1 Participants and Instruments

This study is conducted in five (public and private) secondary schools in the Littoral region in Benin. 205 intermediate students in their fourth year of secondary school have participated in this research. Seven (7) EFL intermediate class teachers have also participated in this research. The average age of the participating students is 15 years. Their experience with the English language or their experience of learning English is three (3) years on average.

Questionnaires and classroom observation were used to collect data for this study. One questionnaire was used with EFL teachers and the other one was used with students. The purpose of these questionnaires was to find out, first of all, learners' level of interest in EFL, their motivation and perception of the English language and, secondly, teachers' views about how to integrate motivational activities into the teaching practices. In addition, a classroom observation was carried out to investigate the extent to which EFL teachers motivate their learners. The types of activities or methods that they use to raise

their learners' interest and EFL students' reactions to those activities were also matters of concern to us.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The data were collected by means of some questionnaires and classroom observation. The investigation lasted seven weeks in the selected schools. In order to carry out the investigation in these schools, a permission was obtained from the schools' administration. Once in the field, the participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that every piece of information that they were to provide would remain confidential and anonymous. The participants were also at liberty to participate or not. The questionnaires were filled in and collected on the spot. The classroom observation also provides a clear picture of the difficulties teachers and students face in EFL classrooms regarding motivation. The data gathered from the questionnaires have been analysed and presented in tables or figures, and the notes taken during the classroom observation have been documented.

4. Presentation of the Results

The data presented in this section are the findings related to the questionnaires addressed to EFL teachers and students as well as the findings from the classroom observations.

4.1 Data Related to the Questionnaires

Here are data related to the questionnaire addressed to students. It basically reveals that most students do not find the English class interesting. In the table above, only 31% of the students claimed that they like oral activities. While some students said that their teachers do not motivate them to speak, others stated that their teachers motivate them verbally. Also, many students claimed that their teachers do not use any motivational activities in the classroom. Only 37% of the students claimed that they (teachers) do. Most students agree that motivational activities will improve their participation in the classroom.

Table 1: Questionnaire addressed to EFL Students (1)

a. Do you enjoy your English lessons?		Frequency	Percentage
1	I do	64	31%
2	Not really	82	40%
3	I do not	59	29%
	Total	205	100%
b. Do you like oral activities?		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	I do	64	31%
2	Not really	74	36%
3	I do not	67	33%
	Total	205	100%
c. Does your teacher motivate you to speak?		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Rarely	43	21%
2	Sometimes	71	35%

3	Most times	62	30%
4	Not at all	29	14%
	Total	205	100%
d. How does your teacher motivate you to speak?		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Through words of mouth	118	58%
2	Through activities carried out in the classroom	41	20%
3	Through gifts	19	9%
4	None of the above	27	13%
	Total	205	100%

Table 2: Questionnaire addressed to EFL Students (2)

a. Does your teacher use activities such as role-play, songs and playing language games in the classroom?		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Yes, he does	76	37%
2	No, he doesn't	129	63%
	Total	205	100%
b. If yes, how often does your teacher employ these activities in the classroom?		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Rarely	13	17%
2	Sometimes	34	45%
3	Most times	17	22%
4	All the time	12	16%
	Total	76	100%
c. Do you agree that employing these activities can develop your speaking fluency and participation in the classroom activities?		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Agree	78	7.8%
2	Strongly agree	108	38.5%
3	Disagree	11	30.7%
4	Strongly disagree	8	23.0%
	Total	205	100.0%

4.3 Results Related to the Classroom Observation

The classroom observations conducted during various teaching situations revealed the following points:

- No teacher, except a private school teacher who used role-play at a point in his lesson, employs motivational activities in their classroom;
- Teachers are not trained to motivate their students by using materials such as flashcards or activities like role-play or games;
- Teachers focus on the recommended English textbook and fail to bring in authentic materials likely to provide students with a better learning experience:
- Teachers are more concerned with teaching grammar rules and finishing up the syllabus in time;
- In most of the classes visited, French was mostly used by the teachers because students complained that they did not understand the lesson when the teachers used English;
- Some students were bored, did not show any interest and, therefore, did not participate in the various activities.

5. Discussion of the Results

The purpose of this study is to find out the various methods employed by teachers to motivate their learners and to study the impact of motivational activities on learners' communicative competence. It emerges from the findings that most Beninese EFL teachers do not use any method or activity to encourage their learners to speak. Moreover, they do not know how to integrate motivational activities in their EFL classes. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness or ignorance among teachers of the positive impact of motivational activities. Teachers' poor professional background is also a matter of concern.

It has been asserted that employing motivational activities in the classroom can, indeed, improve learners' oral skills. Two main types of motivational activities that can foster the learners' communicative competence are discussed in this section. They are language games and drama.

5.1 Language Games

Rooyackers (2002) states that language is "*immensely powerful, but it can also be loads of fun. In fact, a sense of fun can make the language more powerful … Language and play complement and enrich each other. A fusion of the two produces language games*" (as cited in Klimova, 2015, p.1157). Games are activities with rules, a goal and an element of fun (Hadfield, 1996). Therefore, language games are activities used to provide a fun and more relaxed atmosphere, especially in classes for students to acquire a second or foreign language (Carlson, as cited in Savitri, 2013). Savitri (2013) is of the opinion that games do not only provide "*supportive activities and practices that can motivate the students to interact and communicate, but games can create opportunities for students to acquire the language in a meaningful way*" (p.17).

Furthermore, Powell (2020) believes that language games can enable multiple people to learn foreign words and phrases all at the same time without using those boring books and mind-numbing texts that typical classes come with. Games are student-centred in that students are active in playing the games. It can often be organised such that students have the leading roles, with teachers as facilitators (Jacobs, n.d.). There are two categories of language games as suggested by Hadfield (1999): linguistic games and communicative games. Jacobs (n.d.) offers a definition for the two terms stating that "*linguistic games focus on accuracy, such as supplying the correct antonym…communicative games focus on successful exchange of information and ideas, such as two people identifying the differences between their two pictures which are similar to one another but not exactly alike*" (p.3).

However, in terms of communicative competence, more emphasis is laid on communicative games. Dewi, Kultsum and Armadi (2016, p.64) state that a communicative game is a "*set of well fun-design activities that can stimulate students' interaction in the classroom. These games such as board games, information - gap games require them to take part actively in the classroom by speaking and writing in order to express their own points of view or give information*". Communicative games can help boost students' confidence and eagerness to practice the language. They help students involve in real

communication, where the achievement of their communicative task is more important than the accuracy of the language they are using (Dewi, Kultsum & Armadi, 2016).

In addition, Simpson (2015) and Fithriani (2019) outline some advantages of games in EFL teaching:

- Games create a context for meaningful communication because learners need to process how to play the game as well as communicate about the game before, during, and after. This meaningful communication serves as a basis for comprehensible input because the comprehensible input is, basically, what learners understand as they listen and read; it is interaction to enhance comprehensibility, such as asking for repetition or giving examples.
- Games add interest to what learners find boring and can be used with all language skills.
- Games are learner-centred and foster cooperative learning
- Games give students the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way focusing on both the message and the language.

To conclude this discussion, Lee (1975) holds that "*most language games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms… games should be treated as central not peripheral to the foreign language teaching programme*" (as cited in Simpson, 2015 p.5). It is important to note that not all games are suitable for learners. Teachers need to design and adapt games based on the lesson content and students' specific needs.

5.2 Drama

Drama is a kind of motivational activity that refers to an activity "*involving people in a social context. It requires the oral communication and other forms of communication, such as use of gesture, body movement and intonation*" (Chukwueggu, 2012, p.2). Dramatic activities "*enables learners to have confidence in performing their roles and develop their communication more fluently and efficiently*" (Iamsaard & Kerdpol, 2015, p.72). Dramatic activities include various tasks such as role-play, simulation, improvisation, etc.

The most common dramatic activity is the role-play. Cook (2001) states that role-play is one of the methods that "*enables learners to improve a range of real-life spoken language in the classroom*" (as cited in Derakshan, Khalili & Beheshti, 2016, p.179). Kayi (2006) states that role-play enables students to pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. Teachers serve as a guide to assume their different roles). Moreover, Ampatuan and Jose's (2016) study encourages the use of role-playing to assist learners in developing their communicative competence. Harmer, (2007) indicates that role-play boosts the self-confidence of shy students because, in role-play, they have a different role and do not speak for themselves. Also, role-play as a communicative activity is vital in helping students have a "*meaningful and comprehensive interaction and provide an opportunity to practice fluency and accuracy using the English language*" (Ampatuan & San-Jose, (2016, p.22). Chukwueggu (2012, p.10) in her study, concludes that drama is an indispensable tool in language teaching.

Furthermore, it has been observed that most teachers only focus on grammar while teaching the English language as can be seen from the findings of the classroom observation. Although grammar is an important aspect of communicative competence, there is also a need for learners to be encouraged to be more fluent in their oral production. Fluency goes hand in hand with vocabulary. That is, without adequate vocabulary, learners cannot be fluent. However, Harmer (2001) informs that, in encouraging students to speak, teachers need to use the communicative approach that concentrates less on grammar and vocabulary but emphasises the significance of language function. Therefore, teachers must adjust their teaching methods or approaches to create a relaxed and more interesting atmosphere where students are interested in practicing the language.

Besides, students have stated that some of their teachers only encourage them to speak and pay lip service to the practice of English. More deplorable is the fact that many teachers still use French during their lessons or while communicating with their learners in the classroom. This attitude can neither help students to speak English nor motivate them to do so.

6. Recommendation

Given the findings of this study, there is a need for a change in the teaching or learning process. Below are some recommendations to various stakeholders to improve learners' oral production.

6.1 Government

The government is urged to organise training sessions for EFL teachers to teach them how to integrate motivational activities in their classroom. By so doing, the EFL teachers will learn the necessary tools and strategies to motivate their learners. Aside from the training sessions, the government should build enough adequate classrooms in order to reduce the huge number of students per classroom. The EFL teachers will perform better with the motivational activities if the number of learners per classroom is reduced and manageable.

6.2 EFL Teachers

EFL teachers are advised to provide students with opportunities to speak the target language and to encourage them to speak in and outside the classroom. This can happen if they integrate motivational activities in their classrooms no matter the limited time allocated to them. To ensure tangible results, the EFL teacher has to prepare their lessons by using authentic materials and ensure that every single student participates in the classroom. It is also the EFL teacher's duty to set a specific time to perform a task so that learners do not get bored. S/he should encourage interaction among students during the English language lessons and should ensure that the goals and the rules of activity are clearly explained to students.

7. Conclusion

This study has investigated the use of motivational activities to improve EFL learners' communicative competence. The purpose has been not only to find out the various methods that teachers use in the classrooms to motivate their learners but also to find out the impact that motivational activities have on learners' oral production. To achieve this goal, a qualitative and a quantitative research methods were used; a classroom observation was conducted, and questionnaires were addressed to EFL intermediate class students. The findings reveal that teachers do not often use motivational activities in their classrooms. Students think that the English language is boring; therefore, they do not participate in classroom activities. The classroom observation also reveals that by using French in the classroom, teachers do not help students develop their oral skills in the target language. This study stresses the need for teachers to be adequately trained to use motivational activities such as role-play and language games to help students develop their communicative skills. An experimental study may be conducted to evaluate the effect that motivational activities have on EFL students' oral proficiency in Benin.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
Dr. Ulrich O. S. Hindeme, Research Scholar, lecturing EFL skills, Education and Business Administration for more than 15 years. He has more than 30 contributions in the form research papers/articles in journals and papers presented in seminars/conferences from national to international levels to his credits. Currently, he is the Head of English Department. He is interested in methods and strategies for improving Teacher Education and Educational Management, in general and Curriculum Development and Educational Psychology in particular in the classroom and in the country.

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