

Exploring the English language teaching in bilingual private primary schools in Benin: Case of Abomey-Calavi region

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Abstract: This study examines English language teaching practices in bilingual private primary schools in the Abomey-Calavi region of Benin. The aim is to identify the challenges teachers face in teaching English and to propose solutions to overcome them. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining three hundred (300) students' survey data with ten (10) English teachers' semi-structured interview data and classroom observation. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for the survey results. The results show several challenges: limited English exposure, bad teaching strategies and lack of resources. The study concludes that teacher training, resource availability and student engagement are key to effective English teaching in bilingual schools. The practical implication of this study is that policymakers and educators should focus on teacher development and better teaching materials to improve outcomes in a bilingual context.

Keywords: Benin, Bilingual, English Language teaching, Private schools.

1. Introduction

The global significance of the English language is universally recognised, as it permeates every sector of human activity today. In response to this, numerous French-speaking nations have introduced learning of the English language at the primary level, aiming to familiarise learners with the language from an early age. However, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially to young learners, is a formidable task. It necessitates proficient English teachers, adequate media, and textbooks to enhance communication skills (Cahyati & Madya, 2019) ^[1]. Furthermore, learners' exposure to the target language is pivotal for effective communication (Teba, 2020) ^[2], alongside the crucial element of motivation to keep them engaged in the process of learning English.

According to Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, and Pincas (2003) ^[3], the appropriate moment for young learners to learn a language is from 6-12 years old. Thus, as a French-speaking country, Benin has started preparing its learners at the primary level by encouraging the creation of Bilingual Private Primary Schools (BPPSs) which have been facing a lot of problems.

This paper seeks to check whether English is truly taught in BPPSs in the Abomey-Calavi area and to find solutions to put English language teaching at BPPSs on the right path. In other words, the present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1- what is the current state of teaching the English language in Benin bilingual private primary schools?
- 2- How to improve the current state of teaching primary pupils the English language?

This paper has around six sections. Following the introduction is the literature review which is the report of some researchers and documents we resort to for this study. The third section is about the target population, the sampling, the research instruments, the data collection procedures and the method of data analysis. The fourth section is about the presentation and interpretation of the results, the fifth one deals with the discussions and suggestions and the last section is the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

This part of the study seeks to highlight the importance of teaching English to young learners. Moreover, it aims to review the available literature on the challenges related to the effective teaching of English in primary schools. This can be valuable as it can show the current state of the evidence which can be used later in the discussion to compare the findings of the current research to other relevant studies, pointing out the potential similarities and differences and deepening understanding of the barriers to effective EFL teaching.

2.1. Importance of Teaching English to Young Learners

Teaching English to children at an early age is a good thing. It helps them to easily acquire the language and use it more efficiently. For this reason, Chuang (2001)^[4] states that the best period of time when learners can better master a language is when they are still young between three and six (06) years old. In the same view, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) supports that there is a biological timetable for foreign language acquisition that can be done optimally. That is, the younger the learners are, the easier it is for them to learn how to speak a language. In the same vein, it is also believed that learners having more than 14 years of age or adults find it harder to learn English than those under 14 (Singleton, 2003)^[5]. This shows clearly the reason why more and more countries are promoting English Language Teaching at the primary level.

2.2. Advantages of Teaching English in Primary School

Teaching learners the English language, especially the youngest ones, has many benefits (Singleton, 2003^[5]; Moon, 2005^[6]). According to Arthur (as cited in Cahyati & Madya 2019^[1]), teaching the English Language in Primary schools is grounded on two purposes categorised as follows: interaction and socialization. As for the interaction, it allows learners to acquire and use the following information: how to spell, how to acquire other physical skills such as cutting, handwriting, and how to acquire complex skills like reading. Socialisation has to do with how to get learners to live in a wider society; how to interplay and work with other peers. Examples of activities to promote socialisation are: working in pairs, playing games, singing, and the like. In the same perspective, Pinter (2006)^[7] asserts that young learners like to acquire knowledge through funny games such as storytelling, role-playing, singing, and playing games.

Therefore, deciding to teach young learners how to speak English is vital and worth doing. Aware of this reality, many people, for quite some years now have been creating BPPSs in Benin to help learners at primary schools communicate fluently and accurately in English. This attitude is encouraging as it yields many advantages which are categorised as awareness, language aptitude, time, and confidence (Cahyati and Madya, 2019)^[1]. These advantages are detailed as follows.

Considering the awareness, learners at the primary level will be more aware of the linguistic units or patterns of their first language when they are learning a foreign language. For instance, Beninese primary learners will have to refer to their first or second language as a foundation to learn English which is a foreign language.

As for language aptitude, it is easier and more beneficial to train young learners in good pronunciation and fluency (Read, 2003)^[8]. As for Read, this moment they are going through is the most appropriate to better learn pronunciation for fluency.

Another benefit not to overlook is confidence. While learning English, learners show self-confidence without which they cannot perform well in this foreign language (Cahyati & Madya, 2019)^[1]. Self-confidence is a motivational tool to boost learners' English proficiency because these learners are still young and are acquiring their first language which can also facilitate the learning of other languages (Chuang, 2001)^[4].

2.3. Challenges in Teaching English in Primary Schools

Teaching English in Private Primary schools is not as easy as one may think (Cahyati & Madya, 2019)^[1]. Young learners are very flexible and learn very easily; but at the same time, if some conditions are not gathered, the teaching and learning can turn to be something else. Among these conditions, we

have unique learners' characteristics which are egocentric, imaginative and active, self-centred, bored easily, and find difficulties in differentiating concrete things from abstract things. They also have a low concentration level, prefer to do their task by themselves, and love to learn new things (Harmer, 2012^[9]; Scott, 2004^[10]; Suyanto, 2015^[11]). Besides, they like learning by doing and are demotivated if there is no variety in the teaching.

Consequently, EFL teachers can face some challenges making the job very delicate (Khamari, 2014^[12]; Wei-pei, 2008^[13]; Copland, Garton and Burns 2014^[14]). These challenges are related to two factors: internal and external factors. The internal factors deal with the pedagogy, motivation, and identity. Meanwhile, the external factors concern textbooks, learning resources, teachers' level of English and their experiences in teaching, and the size of the class (Cahyati & Madya, 2019)^[1]. Pedagogy as part of the first factor has to do with the selection and the use of suitable learning and teaching strategies (Cahyati & Madya, 2019)^[1].

It is true that many teaching approaches do exist: Communicative Language Teaching (CCL), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Competency-Based Approach (CBA) (Cahyati & Madya, 2019)^[1]. However, for Cahyati and Madya (2019)^[1], the problem is how they can use those approaches, especially, when they have huge numbers of learners in the classroom. This depicts pretty well the situation of Benin Republic where school facilities and materials are not available everywhere in the country. This situation is one of the serious challenges Beninese EFL teachers are facing.

As for motivation, it is very difficult to motivate learners for they do not have the same motivations or interests (Copland et al., 2014)^[14]. This is true because some learners are motivated when they are encouraged through claps, gentle corrections, songs and funny games; while others find their motivations only when they are truly involved in the learning process. As for Copland et al. (2014)^[14], parents' support is also vital for the learners to be motivated. That is, when parents help them with their exercises or hire a teacher, they are delighted and eager to learn more. This can be by singing along with them or helping them better pronounce the word. However, it is worth noting that this can become more complicated when parents are illiterate unless they hire somebody to help them.

Another challenge not to overlook is identity. As put by Cahyati & Madya (2019)^[1], it is very challenging to teach English to young learners in a cultural Intermingling era. Besides, textbooks as mentioned above are another challenge to take into account. In many countries worldwide books are not available for the learners. The Republic of Benin does not remain on the sideline regarding this problem. Very few schools at the primary level have books to really teach English to learners in BPPSs.

Regarding the learning resources, learners need to be put in contact with demonstrations and realia (Cahyati & Madya (2019)^[1]). Young learners, as said above love concrete things; they learn better when they see and touch the objects being taught.

The next factor is teachers' English proficiency, which plays a key role in the learning and teaching process. When the teachers' English proficiency is low, this can affect their teaching (Cahyati and Madya (2019)^[1].

3. Research Methods

Qualitative and quantitative methods are used to collect data. This part of the research paper presents the target population and sampling, the instruments, the data collection procedures and the method of analysis.

3.1. Target Population and Sampling

This research paper focuses on a sample of ten (10) teachers and three hundred (300) students.

Of the ten (10) selected schools, seven have only one teacher who teaches English from nursery to primary 6 and in the remaining three schools, there are six teachers per school (one teacher per class). On the other side, all the primary 6 students of three of the selected schools have been taken into account which gives a total of three hundred (300) students.

Table 1.
Sampling.

Schools	Number of teachers	Number of learners in primary 6
CS La Bergerie de Dieu	01	35
CS La Forge des Elites	01	32
CS New Formula	01	14
CS St Vincent Guérin	01	42
CS Green Leaf	01	18
CS St Etienne	01	44
CS La Grâce Divine	01	20
CS La Passion De Jésus	01	46
CS Le Créateur	01	26
CS Le Laurier	01	23
TOTAL	10	300

Source: Data collected from the research field. (2024). Unpublished raw data.

3.1.1. Teachers

Teachers' vital role in the learning and teaching process is not to be overlooked. For this reason, ten (10) teachers have been chosen for the investigation. The objective is to collect reliable data through questionnaires, class observation, and interviews about how they teach English as well as the daily challenges they face during their teaching practices.

3.1.2. Learners

Without learners there is no teacher, so learners' reactions are also considered. The questionnaires which were addressed to them allow us to confirm all the information collected from teachers, class observation and interview.

3.2. Research Instruments

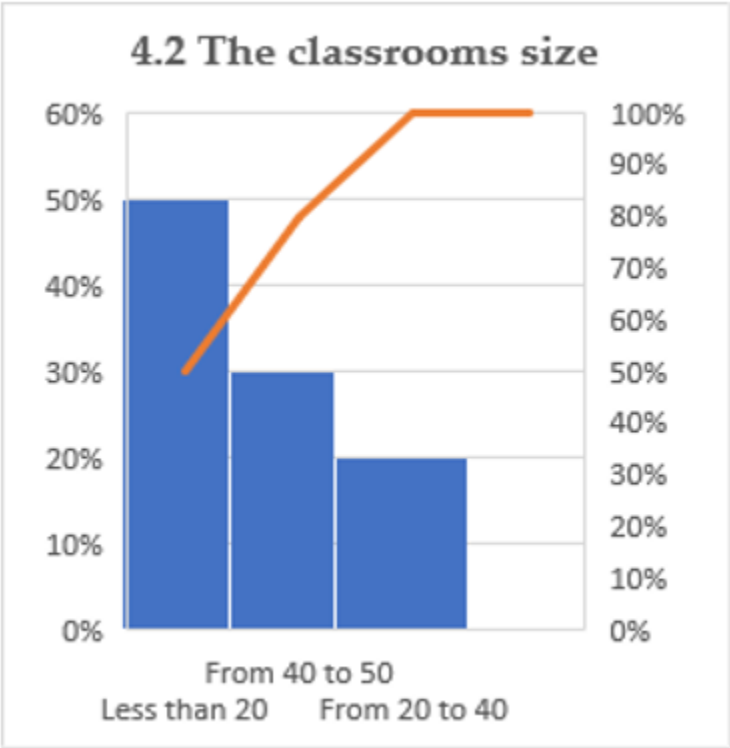
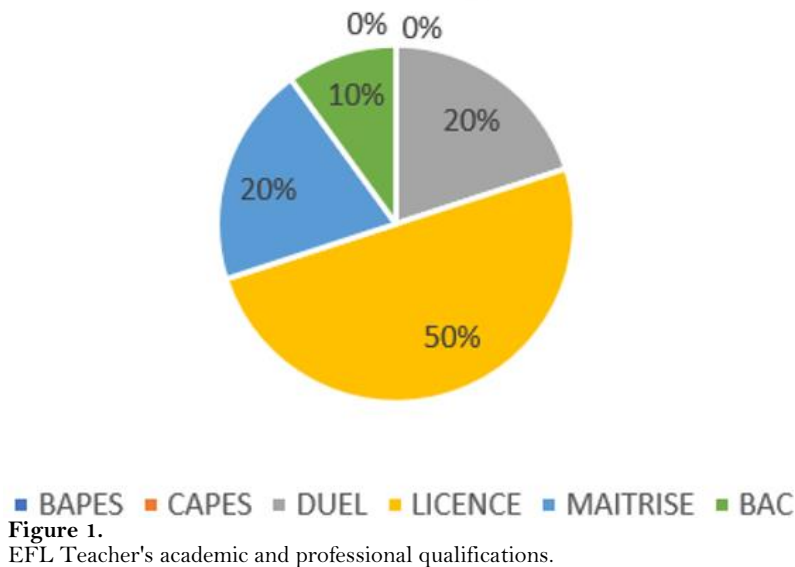
This research instruments are questionnaires, classroom observation and interviews. The questionnaires are intended for both EFL teachers and learners. The teachers' questionnaire is made of ten (10) questions on the English teaching process and the challenges that these teachers encounter in their jobs.

For the learners, ten (10) questions are addressed to them to know the way they are being taught English. The second instrument is class observation. This instrument is important as it allows us to collect relevant data by witnessing some EFL teachers in classroom situations. They are used to confirm what has been collected from questionnaires. In addition, the interview is also used to obtain relevant data from the teachers. The Data collected have been examined and displayed through tables, and figures followed by analysis and comments.

4. Findings

Findings are displayed according to the questionnaires addressed to both teachers and learners and the class observations.

4.1 Teacher's highest Academic and Professional qualifications



4.1. Findings from Questionnaires

The results in Figure 1 show that fifty percent (50%) of the considered teachers have LICENCE, while twenty percent (20%) have DUEL and twenty percent (20%) have MAITRISE; none of the teachers have been doing the job with BAPES and CAPES.

As far as Figure 2 is concerned, the results show that twenty percent (20%) of the selected schools have from 20 to 40 classroom sizes, thirty percent (30%) have from 40 to 50 sizes and fifty (50%) have less than 20.



Figure 3.
Strategies for motivating learners.

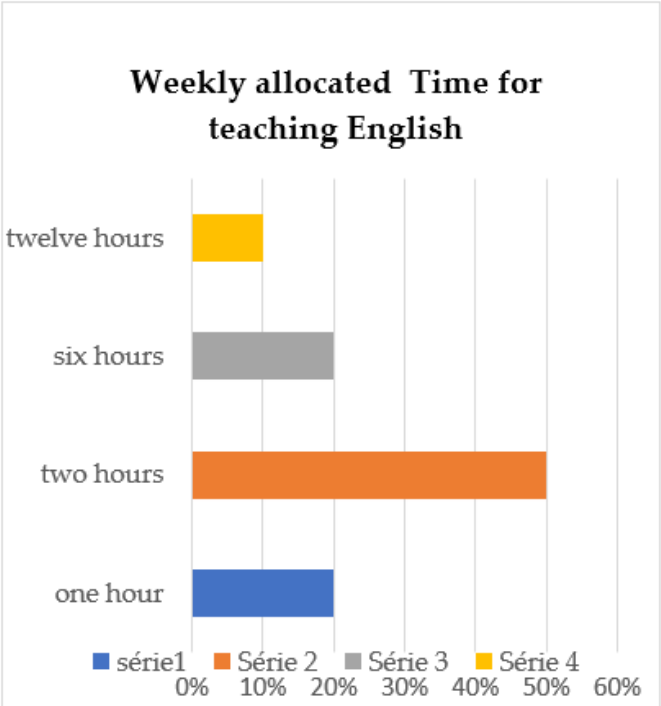


Figure 4.
Weekly allocated Time for EFL teaching English.

The results in Figure 3 show that fifty percent of the considered teachers motivate their learners with English songs while ten percent (10%) resort to storytelling. Twenty percent (20%) use games, and twenty percent (20%) use songs and games but none of them use French songs.

Also, in Figure 4, the results show that only ten percent (10) of the selected schools teach English for twelve (12) hours and twenty percent (20%) of them teach English for six (6) hours. Twenty percent of the schools teach English for one (1) hour while up to fifty percent spend two (2) hours teaching English for nursery to primary 6.

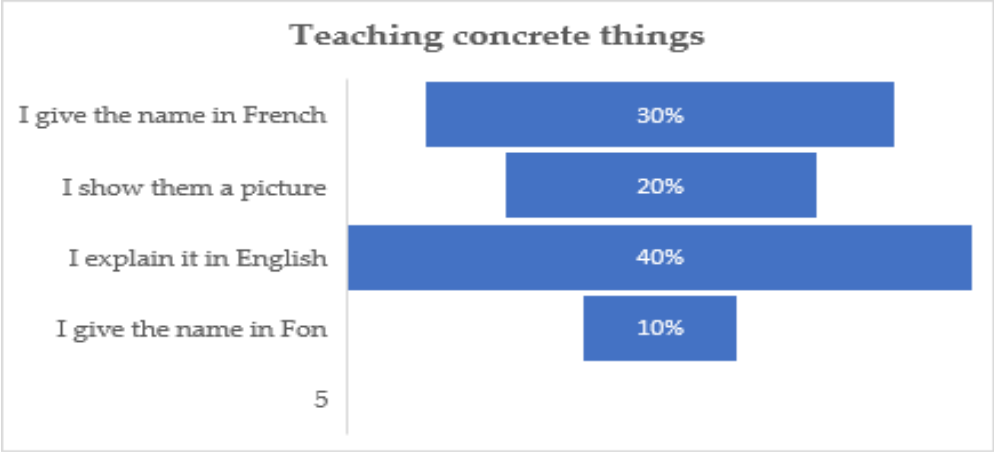


Figure 5.
Teaching concrete things.

The findings in Figure 5 show that teachers' orientation towards the teaching of concrete in bilingual primary classrooms is not similar. 30% of the teachers introduce concrete objects by giving

their French names. There is the dominant use of French as an official language of instruction in Benin. Such an approach is most probably meant to enable students to learn the standardized French vocabulary which is important in formal systems of education. Conversely, some 20% of educators always employ pictures among other images to enable the learners to identify and appreciate the given objects. This technique of employing pictures to students is appropriate especially for young students since it helps the students to build word-object relationships and therefore enhance their ability to acquire new words.

Also, four out of ten (40%) teachers provide verbal explanations in French or describe the objects, giving further insight to their students by helping them understand not only the objects personally but also where and how they are used. Such an approach in description is also helpful in developing an understanding of languages and getting knowledge through the context. Only 10 percent (10%) of the teachers' respondents gave the answers in Fongbé, one of the local dialects practised in southern and central parts of Benin. The use of Fongbé is rather uncommon but may be advantageous for students who are more fluent in their native language and help in plugging the gaps of culture and language in the process of learning.

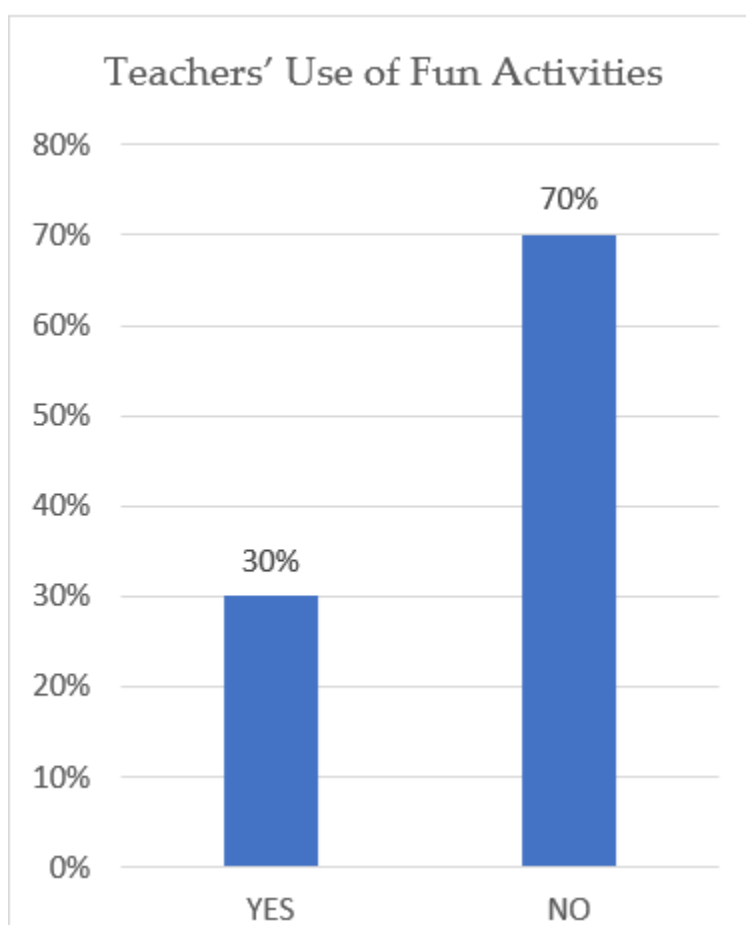


Figure 6.
Teachers' use of fun activities.

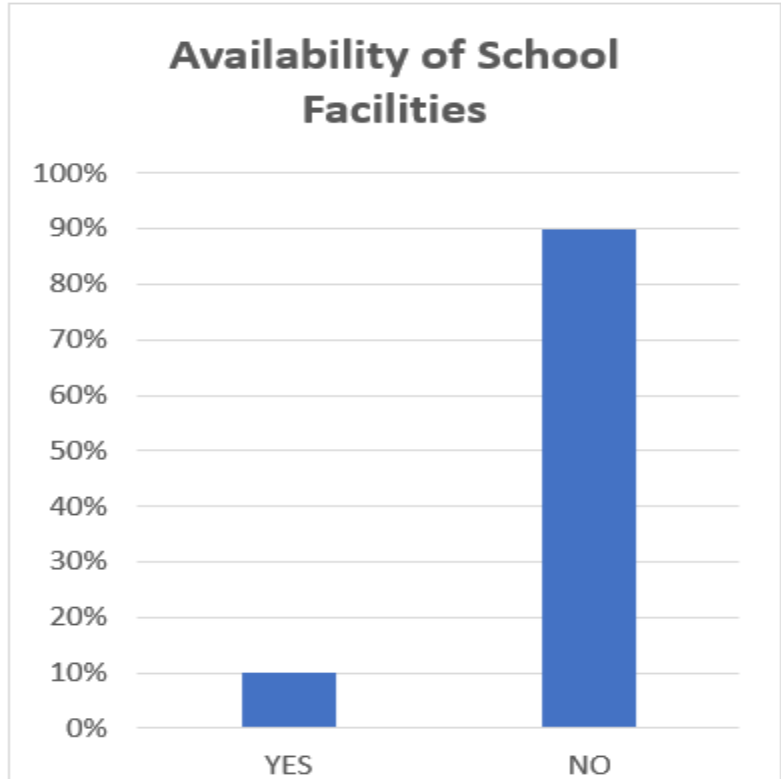


Figure 7.
Availability of school facilities.

From Figure 6, seventy percent (70%) of the teachers do fun activities with the learners and thirty percent (30%) do not. Also, in Figure 7, it can be noticed that ninety percent (90%) of the teachers’ state that they do not have the right school facilities while only ten percent (10%) declare that they do.

4.2. *Class Observation Report*

Three schools have been selected for the class observation. This reveals many issues some of which have been identified through questionnaires. To start with, teachers do not have school facilities to teach effectively. Though graphics and pictures are known as the best teaching tools for learners to easily remember vocabulary and grammar, some schools are still ignoring them. For example, in the three classrooms considered, only one teacher tried to teach some notions using pictures while others resorted to wordy explanations in French and English. Learners, in this condition, can be bored and disengaged. The other problem noticed is that, BPPSs in Benin are not exposed to the English language as they should. In over the three (3) classes observed, only one teacher spends one (1) hour a week. Moreover, some have a very low level in English speaking; which explains why learners have difficulties to communicate in English even at the secondary level. There is no variation in the motivation strategy. In the classrooms visited only songs are used by the teachers to motivate learners which can prove to be boring for the young learners who are very prone to flexibility and variety.

5. **Discussion**

This study investigated the challenges faced by teachers in primary EFL classrooms in Abomey-Calavi area, Benin. Previous studies have identified various challenges like limited time and resources available for lessons, overcrowded classrooms, lack of students’ motivation, and suboptimal teacher presentation skills. Not only are these situations unique to the Benin context but are rather also experienced worldwide. In comparison with these previous studies on EFL instruction at primary schools, this current paper provides valuable insight into how best EFL teaching and learning can be

improved at the primary level. The findings have suggested that some specific challenges experienced by teachers in the Beninese EFL classrooms include inadequate training opportunities for professional development related to the effective pedagogical practices regarding EFL teaching, insufficient access or the lack of teaching materials and related resources, the lack of support from the administrative boards as well as parents in the promotion of EFL teaching and the limited opportunities offered to the learners to practice the language outside the Classroom.

Through the analysis of the collected data, it is noticed that fifty percent (50%) of the teachers use English songs as a motivation strategy while twenty percent (20%) use games and twenty percent (20%) use songs and games. Ten percent (10%) resort to story-telling. This means that the great majority of the teachers stick to English songs to motivate their learners which can prove to be boring to them. These results are in contrast to what some researchers stated regarding EFL young learners teaching. For example, Harmer (2015)^[9] noted that young learners have a special way of learning which is quite different from adults. For Harmer, they can learn both directly and indirectly; which means that they learn from everything they are in contact with. Based on this, it can be said that varying motivational strategies can also be a source of learning for young learners. But sadly, in BPPSs in Benin, learning can be slowed down and boring as most teachers just stick to songs during their teaching.

Yet, the results show that thirty percent (30%) of the teachers teach concrete things by giving their French names while twenty percent (20%) of them show learners the picture of the objects. Forty percent (40%) of the teachers explain or describe the objects in French whereas only ten percent (10%) give the name in Fonngbé. This illustrates that very few of them use pictures in their teaching which does not allow the young learners to better understand and keep for long what they are learning. These findings are not in line with the findings of Copland (2014)^[14] who supports that when considering educational materials, it is crucial to elucidate concepts for children by employing practical demonstrations and real-life illustrations. This suggests that children should benefit from hands-on, real-world experiences instead of depending solely on theoretical explanations. In this regard, the best alternative is to show them the picture or the concrete object, which is not the case in BPPSs in Benin with the majority of EFL teachers involved in this investigation. Surprisingly, the results reveal that ten percent (10%) of the teachers do use pictures during their teaching which can have two interpretations. Firstly, those teachers have attended some workshops where the importance of that strategy has been displayed. Secondly, they might have learned such a strategy by themselves during their own research to improve their teaching as to help their schools to show better performance and gain good impressions from their learners' parents, and therefore, fearing that their schools may face some aftermath problems.

Moreover, this study shows that fifty percent (50%) have less than twenty (20) students, while twenty (20%) percent of the selected schools have from 20 to 40 students in the classrooms and thirty percent (30%) have from 40 to 50. This result explains that in many BPPSs in Benin, classrooms are not so crowded compared to the huge numbers of secondary learners; this means that there are not too many large classrooms in the BPPSs, which can be considered as an asset for effective learning and teaching; a good opportunity for teachers to get the learners engaged and motivated during their learning.

All the same, it is not all the teachers, who participated in the collection of data, that had such occasion, there are some who had more than 20. This case cannot enable teachers and learners to move freely and perform some activities mainly fun games. Learners in a classroom like to move around and perform all the class activities. Unfortunately, even with the teachers having less than 20 students, the class observation shows that up to seventy percent (70%) of the teachers do not use funny activities or games. In this condition, learning English will be very hard and boring and they will end up hating it. This demonstrates that, though the primary school period is the best one to learn a language, learners would not be as interested in English learning as it should. As a result, this will slow down the learning process. So, teachers should prepare the lessons and the classroom accordingly as indicated by (Moon, 2005^[6]; Pinter, 2006^[7]).

Additionally, the results show that fifty percent (50%) of the investigated teachers have LICENCE, while twenty (20) have DUEL and twenty percent (20) have MAITRISE; none of the teachers have been doing the job with BAPES or CAPES which are professional certificates. This means that most of

the teachers are not professionally qualified for the job. This can explain why the English language teaching in BPPSs in Benin is not a full reality yet. In fact, primary school teaching is so challenging and vital that only professional teachers can know how to handle it. In this perspective, findings converge with those of Suyanto (2010)^[11] who theorises that the quality of the teacher plays a key role in the introduction of English in primary schools.

There are other reasons explained by the teachers in this study to the fact that learning English is not showing a satisfactory performance. One of these reasons that constitute teaching challenges is found to be the unavailability of the right school facilities. BPPSs do not provide teachers with those materials, even, the content of those books is not well organized and does not reflect Benin's cultural identity. Some schools use Nigerian English textbooks outright, putting learners' English Learning at risk. All this brings about a lack of motivation. As a result, those learners come to secondary schools, being unable to hold a one-minute conversation in English. This cannot foster effective teaching and learning at BPPSs in Benin. Therefore, BPPSs are not adequately exposed to the English language, which could not help them develop effective EFL communicative skills as they are living in a French-speaking country.

There is a great part of responsibility of both teachers and administrators of those schools; because in this alarming situation, teachers have the possibility to use online resources to teach in a better way. They need to adapt themselves to the situation to reach the goal. Besides, many BPPS founders, for fear of spending too much money, recruit teachers who are not qualified and whose English proficiency is questionable. Moreover, they impose the duration of the classes per week, which penalises both teachers and young learners who will not be well exposed to the English Language.

Improving teachers' training is a key policy implication of this study. It is important to provide thorough and continuous training to teachers. By providing teachers with the required skills, knowledge and information, which can enhance their performance. The absence of technical support was regarded as a key barrier to effective English teaching highlighted by this work. Ensuring the effective presence of sufficient technological support systems in schools is of paramount importance for policymakers. This includes the provision of access to current pedagogical technology, together with support and directions for teachers in the efficient use of technology within educational settings. Increasing EFL students' motivation is also another important policy implication. Tackling student-related barriers, like insufficient motivation and lack of enthusiasm towards the English language, necessitates the implementation of a comprehensive strategy, further, policymakers should provide the required financial support to offer continuous Professional development to EFL teachers in primary schools.

6. Conclusion

This study helps to understand that it is essential to acknowledge the genuine efforts made by educators and administrators to bridge linguistic gaps and foster a bilingual learning environment in Benin primary schools. The aspirations for effective English language teaching are rooted in the recognition of the global importance of English and its impact on future opportunities for students. However, the reality on the ground underscores the need for comprehensive reforms, including increased investment in training for teachers, equitable distribution of resources, and curriculum adaptations that align with the unique needs of Benin's bilingual education context. In moving forward, school stakeholders must collaboratively address these challenges to transform the myth of English language teaching in Benin's bilingual private primary schools into a tangible reality. By fostering a holistic and inclusive approach, centered on the principles of quality education, these institutions can contribute meaningfully to the linguistic and academic development of the students, preparing them for a globally connected future. Through collective commitment, the potential for bilingual education in Benin can transcend the realm of myth, emerging as a powerful force that shapes the educational landscape for generations to come.

All in all, it is worth noting that this research focuses on Abomey-calavi primary school EFL teachers and learners' experiences; which does not give the overall picture of the English language teaching in Bilingual Private Primary Schools in Benin. Based on that, further research can be conducted to explore English language teaching in other areas in Benin.

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