

**AN APPRAISAL OF THE PLACE OF AFRICAN CULTURES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULAR REFORMS FROM INDEPENDENCE TO DEMOCRACY IN BENIN REPUBLIC**

**Flavien Dossou Lanmantchion**

University Institute of Technology Lokossa, UNSTIM Abomey, Benin.

Email: flavienlam81@yahoo.fr. BP 133 Lokossa

**Abstract:**

*This paper examines the value granted to African cultures by different curricular reforms in Benin Republic from the early Independence EFL curricula to those of the period of democracy. Using a documentation review, the study reveals a neglect of African cultural aesthetics in EFL curricular reforms. School, as well as home, should promote the values and norms of learners' native cultures.*

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language, curricula, African cultures, independence, democracy

**Résumé:**

Cette étude se propose d'évaluer la place accordée à la culture africaine dans les curricula de l'anglais langue étrangère depuis la période des indépendances jusqu'à l'ère démocratique en République du Bénin. Une étude documentaire a été effectuée pour faciliter la dite évaluation. Il ressort que les valeurs culturelles africaines sont quasi absentes dans les dites réformes sur toutes les périodes de l'étude. L'école et la maison devraient promouvoir les valeurs et normes endogènes dans les curricula.

**Mots Clés:** Anglais Langue Etrangère, programmes d'études, cultures africaines, indépendance, démocratie

**1. Introduction**

Curriculum is central to any educational system. It represents the alpha and the omega of any single activity conducted in schools. Curriculum is to education what constitution represents for a country, its institutions and their functioning (Idiong 1994). Teaching, pedagogy, teacher training, teaching materials, teaching approach, etc would not exist without a curriculum (Glatthorn 1994). A curriculum wherever and whenever it is designed must fulfill a number of requirements as Dewey (1990) put it about curriculum planning in his book titled, "*The Definition of Curriculum*":

The definition of curriculum focuses on the short term needs of individuals and society. Subjects under study are those most useful for securing employment or addressing immediate community problems in the labor force, in economies, in society and so forth. Schools are encouraged to accommodate themselves to society as it exists rather than change society. Thus, the curriculum should turn out a well-trained work force (p.89).

This definition ignores such questions as these: what is “useful” knowledge or “gainful” employment? If we focus only on short-term needs, technical preparation and job skills, what happens to long-term vision, intellectual development and individual creativity? Is living in the world simply a matter of functional expediency, or should other aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, psychological and political issues guide curriculum and schooling for the long term benefit of individuals and society? In reality, a curriculum should include everything students learn under the guidance of school, planned or not: Personal questions, extracurricular activities, spiritual activities, team sporting events, creative insights, library research, peer-group interaction, ethnic and cultural heritage and playground relationship. All of these provide important sources for learning. Garvey (1925) defines education as the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization, and the advancement and glory of their own race. Morison (1984) added that education is the base of social progress, the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today. Education is not only for the acquisition of bookish knowledge. Education opens one’s eyes and mostly enhances values and only through curriculum that this can be realized. Since the 1960s, many educational researchers have shown interest in the importance of the culture in foreign language learning, with some language specialists being among those who have considered ways of integrating culture into language teaching (Gross 1998). As Nekpo (1999) observed, linguistic competence is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language; they also need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways of addressing people, of greeting, of expressing needs, agreement or disagreement. Therefore, culture started receiving increased attention in the language classroom. In foreign language learning, it is considered as the fifth skill; the one that enables foreign language learners to become familiar with the history and life of the target language community. However, the way it has been dealt with in EFL classes differs from one period to another. In the pre-communicative language teaching period, the aim of culture teaching was confined to translating literary texts. It was through reading that students learned the target language civilization. In the heyday of the audiolingual era in language teaching, the importance of culture was emphasized not for the study of literature but for language learning (Agbayahoun et al, 2017)

This, however, does not imply that EFL learners will simply shake off their own culture and step into another. As social beings, learners are themselves part of a culture which defines their own identity (Adaskou et al, (1990). The curriculum needs to include relevant cultural information from a variety of African cultures. Learners also need to be able to talk about their own culture and cultural values in English. Local contexts familiar and relevant to students' lives should be used rather than unfamiliar and irrelevant contexts from the English speaking world (Alptekin 1984). Given the crucial role curriculum plays in education, this study takes us through various curricular reforms in a French speaking country, Benin from the neocolonial era to the period of democracy and look at their implications on the learners as regards the specific field of TEFL. This study is not suggesting to go back to the past but to go forward by taking into account the positive values of the past. The paper appraises the extent to which different curricular reforms have valued the development of African cultures in Benin Republic from the early Independence EFL Curricula to the period of democracy.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

This study examines the value granted to African cultures by different curricular reforms in Benin Republic from the early Independence EFL Curricula to those of the period of democracy. To reach this purpose, the following research question has been considered:

- How **are** African cultures valued in the different curricular reforms from the early Independence EFL Curricula to the period of democracy?

## **3. Methodology**

This study has used documentation to review EFL curricular reforms in Benin Republic. The documentation includes both primary sources and secondary sources. It is real that written and official EFL curricula in the Benin context are non-existent, making instruction material-oriented. Like teachers, the current research has resorted to didactic materials instead of written curricula. A global syllabi review of secondary school from the neocolonial time to the democratic area was done to analyze the basic driving-wheels supporting language teaching in the country.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 The Early Independence EFL Curricula**

The neocolonial school materials focus completely on western culture and only include a very small focus on African civilization (Dovonou 2008). One of the books used in Benin republic for instance was *Say What You Mean* which deals solely with American culture and civilization. English curricula whether content, objective or learner-centered have had a strong desire and a manifest ambition of balancing both written and oral

communications even though these are only represented by tasks set in French. The reality shows that there is a genuine dichotomy between the written curriculum and the supported, the taught, the learnt and the evaluated curricula. It means that in theory, learners' needs are taken into account. All effort is focused on writing as shown by the different tests administered in class or on national standardized examinations on the continent and materials. As a consequence, learners do not realize how important it is to learn the language.

From the colonial period to the 60s, books like *Anglais Vivant* and *Anglais par Illustration* were materials that supported EFL curricula in French speaking countries. They prioritized English as a language that is living and spoken. Another feature of these materials was that learners learnt from what they could see by describing and interpreting them. That approach gave opportunities to learners to think and produce, thus making them active and innovative in teaching and learning situations.

From the 60s to the 70s, materials written by authors like Wendy Hall accompanied by audio support were used in EFL teaching in Benin revealing no change in curricula as English was still taught mostly by white teachers, including native speakers and a few black Africans. It was an era during which special attention was granted to oral skills development and material based on western cultures a prior goal in TEFL. The policy sustaining the curricula was clear that speaking should not be seen as an ultimate objective as expressed through the mode of organizing Brevet d'Etude du Premier Cycle BEPC and Baccalaureat in Benin. Indeed, a prerequisite for taking these examinations was passing an English oral examination. Such a policy reinforces the idea that "from the beginning was the speech" as failing English oral tests made it impossible for the candidates to sit for their written examinations.

Behind this educational decision were a number of measures to facilitate its application namely the reading of novels. The objective of that decision was to get learners used to extensive reading that would prepare them for oral communication, assuming that: books studied gave learners the necessary backgrounds to do so. The second reason for such a change was to learn through novels, African culture, civilization and traditions as regards the three great historic periods known by the black continent namely as the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras in terms of victories and tribulations. Therefore, novels like, *A Woman in her Prime* by Asare Konadu took over as the new material to be studied, *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe was brought in the program, *Mine Boy* by Peter Abrahams was introduced. The various books were sequenced in chapters and presented by different groups or individuals under the instructor's supervision. At the end of the presentation, a debate was engaged as both the audience and teacher were required to participate and to make the class the most

interactive possible with the teacher as a helping hand. For this purpose, teachers focused on both the form and content of the presentation. They worked on learners' pronunciation and lexical items as well. The plan of the presentation might be corrected before the whole class took the final examinations greed upon notes for their learning. The teacher might also choose to give further details about the chapter in question sum it up for the learners to facilitate their learning and revision pains before sitting for various tests.

#### **4.2 The Nineteen Eighties EFL Curricula**

From the 80s where régimes in Africa started showing financial hardships to face new challenges of education rose. Text-books did not favor oral activities as novels and novellas were removed from the curricula with the introduction of books like *Say what You Mean* and *English for Africa* as teaching materials. It was a period where many EFL African teachers would teach with no preparation or materials. Most of the time, they would tell their life stories in French and conclude with a few grammar points. National standardized examinations on BEPC, and Baccalauréat were reformed with oral tests at the bottom of the list. Zodéhougan and Tomalin were other authors and stakeholders that provided TEFL with materials, works that supported French speaking countries curricula were: Chinua Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*; Asare Konadu's. *A woman in her Prime*; Peter Abraham's *A Wreath for Udomo*; Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* Kwame Nkruma's *Africa Must Unite*.

Further reforms occurred with the introduction of *I Want to Speak English* series by David Mills et al. covering JS. The objectives of this new series were to initiate the learners to the English phonology and to make them acquire the minimum vocabulary and practical and basic structures to practice reading comprehension.

*English for French Speaking Africa* by the same Mills David et al. (1984) came as ameliorated version of *I Want to Speak English*. In fact the latter lays too much emphasis on grammar and forcing students to do mechanical grammar exercises whereas language needs to be practiced naturally on a daily basis. *English for French speaking Africa* divided into thirty units lays more emphasis on places and proper names with typically African references like 'Bouaké', 'Yamoussokro', 'Porto-Novo', Mr. Okedan, Mr. Baloubi, Mrs. Assogba, etc. that are all names of Africans and African cities. There are as well many food items like kola, fried yam, pepper soup, etc. everything that favors learning, learners being close and familiar with contents. It appears however that the syllabus is too cumbersome and cannot be completed within the required amount of time or that there is too much to be done in a very short period of time.

A critical appraisal revealed that TEFL was failing in goal and that it was urgent to remedy any mismatch. The only one way to attain such goals was going to reforms.

That is how in 1987, new editions of *I Want to Speak English* were published and introduced to face appropriately inadequacies drawn from the first editions. Seven years implementation of the new text-books would no longer give the expected satisfaction, which took education authorities and specialists to rethink of reforming anew the educational System. As a matter of fact, *I Want to Speak English* just gives learners text-based topics for reading and comprehension through grammar and vocabulary study. It appears that teachers have no specific sub-elements to deal with in a formal way which causes some variations as regards the contents of what is taught and learnt, depending on the sensitiveness, aspirations and inspirations of the teacher. In fact, given the inexistence of 'set programs every teacher teaches what they think might the best for their students.

#### **4.3 From the Nineteen Nineties EFL Curricula**

From the 90s came the real collapse with the democratic era inducing reforms that are the most controversial ever. Today's African learners' performances have not improved whether on written or oral tests in English quite the contrary, judging from their various in-class evaluations output and national standardized examinations outcomes. Books like *Go for English* would gradually be introduced as supports to various curricula with no novellas, novels or over reading materials. There is void between two reforms that gives way to a variety of textbooks as has been for years now with both *Go for English* and new student materials and *keep in touch*, published and introduced in the program.

To summarise none of these syllabi has brought about any progress from the perspective of African cultures. The expectations of curriculum designers though great turned to failure as there was a big gap between the will and tangible results. Assogba's view (1999) is not contradictory when he said that the objectives sustaining the publication of *Go for English* have nothing in common with the factual realities, that is, the students' needs. It appears that *Go For English* is basically relevant to Côte d'Ivoire with some European culture and values but does not relate to the context of other African countries at all. *Go For English* however has had the merit of being well designed with very beautiful pictures. Unfortunately, the book was not available in on the market or when it was, it appeared a little expensive for many people.

To arouse students' commitment to learn, Nunan et al. (2010) suggests that TEFL should make use of the learners' environment, present language in natural chunks, use appropriate audio and visual aids, include cultural components, .... And adapt materials to local realities, conditions that *Go for English* fails to achieve. Assogba (1999) went further in that on many occasions, the material appears to be designed for SL and ESP students but not for comprehensive school students of EFL in that some texts are very hard or impossible for even teachers to grasp making the course so boring

that the learners began to resent it. When this occurs, there is no hope for interaction and acquisition per se.

As a matter of evidence, learners were unable to hear and say, read and write correctly even a single sentence in English. Some students' books like "*Document d'Accompagnement*" in Benin and *Keep in Touch* in Senegal are designed as complementary textbooks. However, they are neither available in most case for teachers nor for students. So, photocopies are used with the consequences of manuals losing their attractiveness as pictures to describe are not clear. Like in the earlier case, the document has no diversification which creates boredom for being in English class and learning situation. The student's books used in the French speaking in this period are very close to "*I Want to English*" in terms of grammar capacity development though at a very lesser degree. These books consider all the four skills needed in EFL class: listening, speaking, reading and contain more reading activities and writing than listening and speaking rising more listening and repeating activities than genuine listening and speaking. They contain only intensive reading against no extensive reading with the few activities. The listening and speaking activities are insufficient for a learner to learn English language successfully just as the materials are insufficient to get learners prepared to use English orally. Most realities in most materials are alien to the learner's context and backgrounds.

French Speaking countries like many nations around the globe have tried as much as they can to design, develop, and implement various EFL curricula. One might consider the teaching of English in French speaking countries being good however, the reality quite conflicts with such an idea. A close look and analysis of the English materials used or being used reveal huge issues: poor school outcomes, the skepticism clearly manifested at various levels concerning the efficiency of the materials, and the neglect of African cultural idiosyncrasies. The current chapter after defining curricula and raising some issues related to them has made a general overview of curricular review in French Speaking countries: from independence to the democratic era. Indeed, curricular reform always has something historical, social, economical and political. The ability to acquire, master one's culture through English learning will be a testimony of efficacy, efficiency and excellence of its educational system. School is a second family that protects learners from various counter values and bring up the younger generation up based on some specific and widely shared codes. School like home ought to promote values and norms. The next chapter shall explore some plans in order to re-awaken the authenticity of African Values, not neglecting the contributions of Western culture, especially in giving African culture a veritable value.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the value granted to African cultures by different curricular reforms in Benin Republic from the early Independence EFL Curricula to

those of the period of democracy. It resorts that EFL curriculum reforms is based on the principles and objectives of the colonial type that aimed at glorifying western culture and 'creating' Africans who would serve the interests of the masters. The use of home culture in language learning has been overlooked for far too long in EFL curricula. Just as a history class based on facts, names, dates, and places can be boring, so can English class which presents the language in a structural, impersonal, formal way. Students need awareness not only for the language itself, but also for their own culture since students are themselves part of a culture which defines their own identity. Effective education for Africans today calls for EFL teachers to provide opportunities for African students learning about global issues but learning also about their own culture. An ideal method of African pedagogy ought to be harmonized to meet the yearnings of many African students.

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