

INTEGRATED TEACHING OF GRAMMAR AND READING COMPREHENSION IN ADVANCED EFL CLASSES IN BENIN

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Abstract: Integrated teaching is always preferable to the teaching of skills in isolation. The primary concern of this study is to investigate the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes in Benin. More specifically, this research work is intended to determine the strategies used by EFL teachers to integrate teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes and to find out the challenges related to integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes. The study uses a mixed methods approach and the convenience as well as snowball sampling strategies. The findings reveal that the integration of grammar and reading comprehension teaching depend on the teacher and the grammatical structures at stake. In addition, the teaching of grammar is mainly mainstreamed into the teaching of reading comprehension at pre-reading and while-reading stages by drawing learners' attention to the use of the structures in real life situations. The major challenges to the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension include lack of texts related to the structures to be taught and lack of adequate teaching materials. Time constraint was also indicated as one of the stumbling blocks identified.

Keywords: EFL; grammar; reading comprehension; integrated teaching; secondary education

ENSEIGNEMENT INTÉGRÉ DE LA GRAMMAIRE ET DE LA COMPRÉHENSION ÉCRITE DANS LES CLASSES AVANCÉES D'ALE AU BÉNIN

Résumé : L'enseignement intégré est toujours préférable à l'enseignement des compétences de manière isolée. La principale préoccupation de cette étude est d'étudier l'enseignement intégré de la grammaire et de la compréhension écrite dans les classes avancées d'ALE au Bénin. Plus précisément, ce travail de recherche vise à déterminer les stratégies utilisées par les enseignants d'ALE pour intégrer l'enseignement de la grammaire et de la compréhension écrite dans les classes avancées d'ALE et à identifier les défis liés à l'enseignement intégré de la grammaire et de la compréhension écrite dans les classes avancées de l'ALE. L'étude utilise la méthodes mixte et les stratégies d'échantillonnage boule de neige et de convenance. Les résultats révèlent que l'intégration de l'enseignement de la grammaire et de la compréhension écrite dépend de l'enseignant et des structures grammaticales en jeu. En outre, l'enseignement de la grammaire est principalement intégré dans l'enseignement de la compréhension écrite aux étapes de pré-lecture et de lecture en attirant l'attention des apprenants sur l'utilisation des structures dans des situations réelles. Les principaux défis liés à l'enseignement intégré de la grammaire et de la compréhension écrite sont le manque de textes liés aux structures à enseigner et le manque de matériel didactique adéquat. La contrainte de temps a également été indiquée comme l'un des obstacles identifiés.

Mots-clés : ALE ; grammaire ; compréhension écrite ; enseignement intégré ; enseignement secondaire

Introduction

In most EFL contexts, learners are confronted with many difficulties in reading comprehension. Several scholars noticed that learners are quite weak in English language in general and in reading comprehension in particular. According to Ma'ani (2007), "there are two main reasons which stand behind students' poor comprehension skills. Firstly, when teaching reading, most of the EFL teachers concentrate on assessing students' comprehension at the word and sentence levels rather than concentrating on teaching reading comprehension skills." (p. 24). This means that the difficulties which learners are confronted with in reading comprehension are due, to some extent, to inadequate teaching of the skill by their teachers. Moreover, learners do not have the prescribed student's textbooks to follow the reading comprehension lessons. So, they chat and make noise with their mates during reading comprehension lessons, which may demotivate the other students and even disturb the teacher in his/her lessons. Inadequate teacher training may also account for problems encountered by both teachers and learners in reading comprehension and grammar.

Furthermore, it can be said that tests in secondary schools and national examinations in English focus on reading comprehension and grammar for the most part. Therefore, reading comprehension plays an important role in learners' success as well as grammar. In addition, this research lays emphasis on the challenges related to the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension and makes suggestions to overcome those challenges. It is also worth mentioning that this study is likely to contribute to EFL teachers' education in Benin. This is all the truer since these difficulties can be built into teachers' professional development. According to Gebhard (2017), the only way for students to improve their reading processing skill is through reading. In other words, the more they read, the better they become at processing what they read because as students go through texts, they build stronger vocabulary and their knowledge of the various text types. This implies that reading comprehension plays an important role in the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and other skills. Therefore, EFL teachers need to have learners read a variety of texts. Thus, by contributing to the improvement of the teaching of reading comprehension, this study also contributes indirectly to the improvement of the teaching of other skills as well as vocabulary. The significance of this study also lies in the fact that grammar and reading comprehension mutually reinforce each other.

The primary concern of this study is to investigate the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes in Benin. More specifically, this research work is intended: to determine the strategies used by EFL teachers to integrate teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes; to find out the challenges related to the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes. Moreover, this research work is an endeavor to answer the following questions: how do teachers integrate the teaching of grammar and reading comprehension lessons in advanced secondary school classes? What are the challenges related to the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced secondary school classes? To sum up, this study is purposed to investigate the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension at the sixth form (1^{ère}) and the seventh form (Tle) in Benin. The research work does not take into account the whole country but rather the southern part, specifically some secondary schools in the Abomey-Calavi district.

1. Literature Review

1.1 *Teaching Reading Comprehension*

Reading comprehension is defined in various ways by scholars. For example, according to Ur (2012), "In the context of language learning, reading means reading and understanding" (p. 133). This means that we read for comprehension. Reading is further defined as "the ability of an individual to recognize a visual form, associate the form with a sound and / or meaning he/she has learned in the past, and on the basis of past experience, understand and interpret its meaning" (Kennedy, 1974, p. 3). In addition, there are two main ways of reading: scanning and skimming. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), "Skimming in reading is a type of reading strategy which is used when the reader wants to locate a particular piece of information without necessarily understanding the rest of a text or passage" (p. 508). This means that the reader reads as rapidly as possible in order to find out information through the text being read. The same authors indicated that "Scanning is a type of reading strategy in which the reader samples segments of a text in order to achieve a general understanding of its meaning. Scanning involves the use of strategies for guessing where important information might be in a text until a general idea of its meaning is reached" (p. 532). In other words, to scan a text is to read it thoroughly in order to locate information likely to help to understand it deeply. Furthermore, according to Gebhard (2017), "The aim of reading comprehension is to teach students to read for meaning" (pp. 201-202), which implies that students should not just read for the sake of reading but while reading they should look for comprehension of what they are reading. Teachers should encourage students to practice intensive reading because it focuses on full comprehension because the dictionary can be used to understand the meaning of unknown words. Teachers can also motivate their learners through extensive reading because it involves reading a lot with the goal of getting the gist of ideas and not full comprehension. It is now clear that intensive reading and extensive reading are closely related to scanning and skimming.

From the foregoing, it appears clearly that the type of reading activities teachers chooses to perform in their classes depends on the objectives they want to achieve. Teachers can ask students to skim a text, which means that the students will read the text quickly to locate specific information without necessarily knowing all the words in the text. On the contrary, when students are requested to scan a text, they are to read it thoroughly and take cognizance of the details in it (Brown, 2007). However, for the same text, teachers can ask students to scan it first to have a general idea of its content by way of introducing their lessons and then get the students to perform activities that require the scanning of the text.

Apart from the two reading strategies outlined above, reading does not have to be under the teachers' guidance. Students can be encouraged to read for their own interest or for a specific purpose (Gebhard, 2017; Nunam, 2015). Furthermore, Gebhard (2017) distinguishes critical reading in addition to intensive and extensive readings discussed earlier. For him, critical reading consists in the reader evaluating what is read and determine whether s/he shares the author's view or the argument developed is cogent and convincing. Activities involving critical reading are more suitable for advanced classes than for beginners with limited knowledge of the language.

1.2 *Teaching Grammar*

The grammar of a language describes the structure of that language and the ways in which words or phrases combine together to make sentences (Richards and Schmidt, 2010). This shows the critical role grammar plays in learning to express ideas in a given language

without ambiguity (Crystal, 2004). Scholars distinguish various types of grammar such as formal grammar, informal grammar, and structural grammar to mention but a few (Abkari, 2014). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these various types grammar. Furthermore, despite the unending hot debate on whether grammar should be taught or not and the type of grammar to be taught, it appears clearly that the teaching of grammar should be part and parcel of language education. As such, the literature abounds in strategies that can be used to teach grammar. The deductive method of teaching grammar consists in presenting the rule and asking learners to produce language based on the rule presented. This approach focuses on instruction before practice because it provides the teachers with the opportunity to give learners an in-depth explanation of a grammatical concept before they encounter the same grammatical concept in their own reading comprehension activity or before they are requested to practice it (Abkari, 2014). Deductive grammar teaching approaches are preferred by the advocates of grammar teaching in language education as it may facilitate not only the understanding of grammatical rules but also the understanding of texts in which the rules taught are used (Richards and Schmidt, 2010).

On the other hand, inductive grammar teaching implies inferring the rules through guided discovery. The teacher presents various examples illustrating the rule to be taught and asks the learners to work out the rules themselves (Abkari, 2014). According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), in the inductive method, “learners are not taught grammatical or other types of rules directly but are left to discover or induce rules from their experience of using the language” (p. 158). In this case, the language use experience is provided by the teacher through corpora that can be generated by the teacher in the form of contrived materials or obtained from native speakers’ discourse or authentic materials. For a more optimal teaching of grammar, it is better to use authentic materials, hence the need to integrate the teaching of grammar with the teaching of reading as reading provides a good source of authentic materials.

1.3 Integrated Teaching of Reading and Grammar

Most language educators advocate that grammar should not be taught in isolation but rather in context. In keeping with this philosophy, the teaching of grammar is often combined with that of reading. According to Budak and Reeves (2019), in the course of reading, students are engaged in dialogues with the texts they read and this gives them the opportunity to learn grammatical rules indirectly. Therefore, reading in itself is a good source of grammar knowledge. Nonetheless, the authors’ study gives some hints about the combination of the teaching of grammar and reading. For them, one of the teachers who participated in the study by attending “to grammar explicitly during reading rather than implicitly to alert his students’ consciousness to the target grammar” (p. 27). As it appears, the teacher combines the teaching of reading with deductive grammar teaching for better instruction of the learners.

From a different angle, Xu and Zhang (2015) suggested the integrated teaching of reading with functional grammar through interior analysis and exterior analysis. Interior analysis which is the focus of the paper consists in decomposing the “linguistic devices employed by writers, and it involves the functions of basic linguistic units like clauses, theme-rheme structures, cohesive devices and coherence, and rhetoric devices and information structure [with a view to cultivating] language learners’ capabilities of identifying and applying grammatical units.” (p. 201). The instructional process here is the identification of the various grammatical structures used in the text under study and learning how to use such structures. Even though the study under consideration is on higher

education, the findings can be easily applied to lower levels by just changing the focus in terms of items to be identified and applied.

2. Methods and Procedures

The design of this study is mixed methods because it combined qualitative and quantitative research methods. The sampling strategies used for this study are convenience sampling and snowball sampling. According to Cohen (2018), convenience sampling consists in selecting participants who are readily available for a study. The participants in the study include EFL teachers in the Atlantique, Littoral, and Mono regions. Given that the data collection instrument used was administered online, the sample size could not be determined in advance. The data collection instrument used was the questionnaire designed through Google Forms. It included 15 items that focused on the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes, strategies used by EFL teachers to teach reading comprehension and grammar as well as to integrate the teaching of both, the challenges encountered by EFL teachers in the process of the integrated teaching of reading and grammar. After developing the questionnaire, a link was generated. The link was shared with some known English teachers to whom a message was sent in advance to inform them about the study. The assistance of those teachers was enlisted so that they can share the questionnaire link with their other colleagues. Data were collected from October 2nd, 2022 through October 21st, 2022. The data analysis included two parts. For the quantitative data, pie charts automatically generated by Google Forms were copied, pasted, and discussed. As far as the qualitative data were concerned, they were analyzed using the coding system consisting in color coding statements made by the respondents and identifying major themes that constitute the blocks of the analysis (Dörnyei, 2007).

3. Findings of the Study

3.1 Presentation of the Findings

Respondents' teaching experience

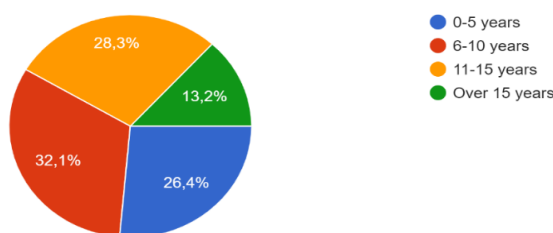


Figure 1: Teaching experiences of the respondents

Figure 1 shows that 32.1 percent of the respondents have been teaching for 6 to 10 years whereas 28.3 percent fall in the range from 11 to 15 years and 26.4 percent in the range from 0 to 5 years. Only 13.2 percent of the respondents have been teaching for more than 15 years. It appears from Figure 1 that 73.6 percent of the respondents have been teaching for more than 5 years, which means that they do have some experience in teaching.

Gender

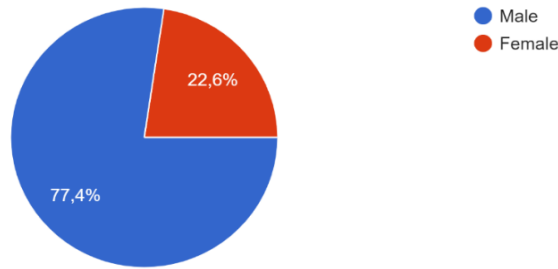


Figure 2: Gender of the respondents

The above data reveal that 77.4 percent of the respondents are males whereas only 22.6 percent are females. This implies that the teaching profession is still male-dominated.

Respondents' administrative status

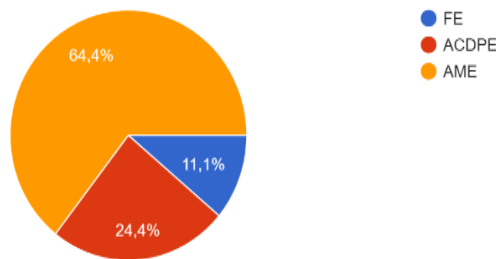


Figure 3: Status of the respondents

Figure 3 shows that 64.4 percent of the respondents are AME (aspiring teachers) and 24.4 percent are ACDPE (teachers on contract). Only 11.1 percent of the respondents are FE (civil servants). This shows that secondary education is more and more contractualized in Benin.

Grammar teaching methods

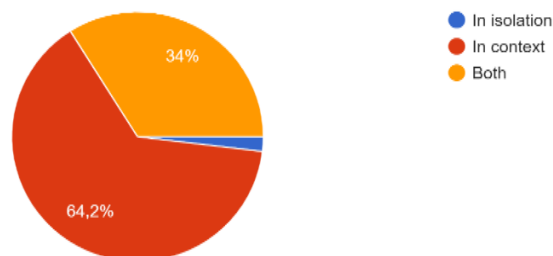


Figure 4: Grammar teaching methods

Figure 4 shows that 64.2 percent of the respondents teach grammar in context, whereas 34 percent of them teach grammar both in context and in isolation. Only 1.9 percent of the

respondents teach grammar in isolation. This is evidence that for most of the respondents, grammar should be taught mainly in context or through text, which confirms the findings presented above. Therefore, the respondents are almost unanimous on the fact that grammar teaching in isolation has to be avoided.

Pre-teaching some grammatical structures as part of reading comprehension

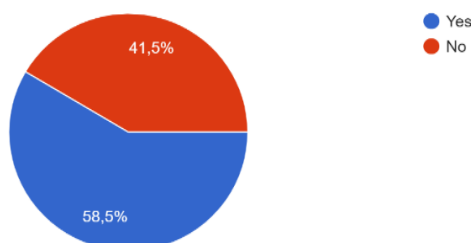


Figure 5: Pre-teaching some grammatical structures in reading comprehension

Figure 5 shows that 58.5 percent of the respondents pre-teach some grammatical structures in their reading comprehension classes whereas 41.5 percent of them do not do so. This reveals that teaching grammatical structures before reading comprehension classes can facilitate the understanding of the text to be studied. At the same time, it boosts learners' knowledge and interest.

-Steps in Teaching Reading Comprehension

The respondents mentioned numerous steps in the process of reading comprehension teaching. For some respondents, these include: "Pretending, reading and post reading"; "Pre reading , while reading, post reading"; "Pre reading, while reading, post reading"; "Pre, while and post(Reading)"; "Pre Reading while Reading post reading"; "Pre - while – post"; "Pre, while and post teaching reading"; "Pre- reading activity, while reading activity and post reading activity"; "Pre-reading, While-reading, Post-reading, assessment"; "Pr wr pr"; "Pre-reading stage, While-reading stage and Post-reading stage". As it appears from the various verbatim quotations, the three-step procedure is very pervasive among the respondents who participated in the study. This might mean that it is the procedure adopted systemwide for teaching reading comprehension or the dominant procedure. However, the respondents did not specify what is included in each step, which implies that they may not necessarily know what each step is all about.

-Steps in Teaching Grammar

In response to the question to know how grammar is taught, some respondents made the following statements concerning the steps they follow in teaching grammar: "Reading, questions, bracketed verbs, writing"; "Introduce the lesson and explain, give examples then give exercises to check student's comprehension"; "Demonstrating Comprehension, Grammar Explanation and Communicative Expression." These quotations reveal that the steps followed to teach grammar depend on each teacher's teaching methods. On the whole, respondents first introduce the lesson, then give learners some practical exercises and finally assigns homework to check their understanding. It can be stated that grammar teaching follows a three-step approach as well.

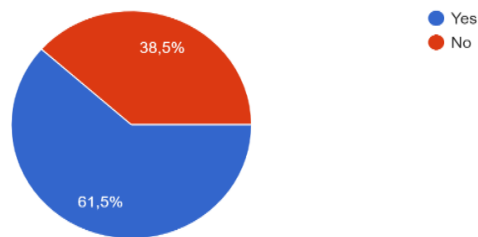
Training in integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension

Figure 6: Respondents training in integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension

Figure 6 shows that 61.5 percent of the respondents had been trained in integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension whereas 38.5 percent of them had not received any training.

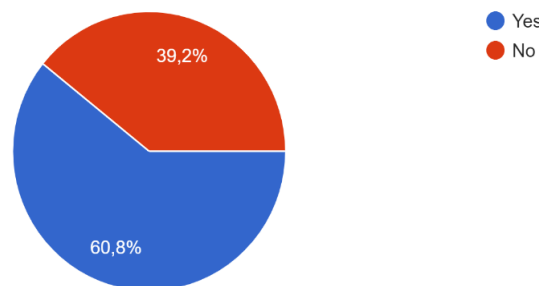
Activities that integrate the teaching of grammar and reading comprehension

Figure 7: Inclusion of activities on integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension

Figure 7 indicates that 60.8 percent of the respondents stated that the prescribed textbooks contain activities that integrate the teaching of grammar and reading comprehension lessons whereas 39.2 percent of them stated the contrary. This means that there is a contradiction between the respondents' responses because the prescribed textbooks are the same nationwide.

-Difficulties Teachers Are Confronted with in Integrated Teaching of Grammar and Reading Comprehension

There is no doubt that EFL teachers face some difficulties in the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension. Here are some of the difficulties mentioned by the respondents: "Lack of texts in relation with the structure we want to teach. It is not easy for students to understand some structures"; "Lack of documents at some learners' disposal"; "Lack of adequate materials"; "lack of textbooks with the students"; "The most frequent difficulties are related to the available texts in the students' textbooks". These statements clearly show that there is lack of adequate materials in schools and even lack of the textbooks. In some textbooks there is no adequate text related to the structures to be taught, which makes it difficult for teachers to teach what they are supposed to teach learners. Other difficulties mentioned by respondents include: "Timing"; "Time

constraints”; “Time consuming”. These indicate that teachers do not have enough time to adequately teach because integrated grammar and reading comprehension lessons are time consuming activities.

3.2 Discussion of the Findings

In terms of the demographic data, first, the teaching experience of the respondents shows that many AME did not participate in the study because all of them have been on the job for four years. However, some might have been teaching years before becoming AME. Therefore, the (26.4 %) of the respondents who have been teaching for 0 to 5 years do not include only the AME. Second, the data on the gender show that most of the respondents are males. Only a few of them are female. This reveals that the EFL teaching profession is still dominated by male teachers. As a consequence, there is no gender balance in the profession. Third, the respondents’ status reveals that more than half of the respondents are under contract. Only 11.1 % of the respondents are full-time teachers, which shows that the government prefers having teachers under contract rather than civil servants. The teachers’ employment situation is precarious and it will be easier for them to quit the job or even to neglect it.

-How Do Teachers Integrate the Teaching of Grammar and Reading Comprehension Lessons in Advanced Secondary School Classes?

Firstly, in terms of grammar strategies teachers used to integrate the teaching of reading comprehension and grammar lessons, as most of the respondents stated that they teach grammar by using a three-step approach. Others teach it in context or through texts and few of them teach it in isolation, which is not good for the students because grammar should be taught in context in order to draw students’ attention to the reality issues and even to how to use those grammatical structures in their daily lives for communication purposes. However, some teachers do not focus on a specific approach. Figure 4 on grammar teaching shows that 36.2% of the respondents teach grammar in context. Only (1.9%) of them teach it in isolation.

Secondly, as far as the reading comprehension is concerned, some of the respondents stated that they pre-teach some grammatical structures in their reading comprehension lessons whereas some of them do not teach reading strategies to their learners and they do not integrate the teaching of reading comprehension into the teaching of other skills; they do not take advantage of their reading comprehension lessons to teach grammatical structures to the learners either. In fact, integrated teaching implies that a teacher can take advantage of the teaching of one skill to teach other skills in order to foster communication in addition to academic success (Hungyo and Kijai 2009 as cited in Elena and Lorena 2011). The respondents are aware of this and that is the reason why most of them prefer to integrate the teaching of grammar and reading comprehension.

Thirdly, other respondents stated that the integration of the teaching of grammatical structures into reading comprehension lessons depends on the lesson to be taught by the teacher. In other words, integrated teaching is not always systematic as it also depends on the teacher’s choice.

Furthermore, as far as the teaching of reading comprehension is concerned, EFL teachers use many techniques to teach reading comprehension to their learners. For example, they try to increase the student’s level in vocabulary, grammar and phonology so as to facilitate the teaching. In fact, there are three main steps to teach reading comprehension.

There are pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. It means that teachers should deal with reading comprehension through those three different steps. During the first step which is pre-reading, the teacher draws the student's attention on the text and may ask some questions in order to check their general knowledge about the main idea the text is about. As suggested by the respondents, at this stage, the teacher can also pre-teach some grammatical structures that are useful for the understanding of the text. For the second step, while-reading, the teacher asks the learners to read the text and answer the questions based on it. This step is the lesson where the teacher conducts a number of activities including grammar teaching in context. At these two stages, the teacher tries to draw learners' attention to the usefulness of grammatical structures as indicated by Sudak and Reeves (2019). The third step which is the post-reading is done at the end. The teacher asks some questions to check whether students understand the lessons or not and then how they can use what is done in class in real life situations.

-What Are the Challenges Related to the Integrated Teaching of Grammar and Reading Comprehension in Advanced EFL Secondary School Classes?

In terms of challenges related to integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension, the respondents mentioned lack of adequate teaching materials. The corollary of this is that most of the lack of texts related to grammatical structures mentioned by most of the respondents. Teaching in itself is a very difficult job in the sense that teachers have to work both at home and in school. At home, they have to plan their lessons and all teachers know that lesson planning is time consuming. Lack of materials further overburdens teachers. Teachers are not material developers and even though the Internet is available today, it takes money to get connectivity and not all teachers reside in areas covered by the network. All these imply that the lack of adequate documentation identified by Iwikotan (2017) as part of the curricula reform has not yet been addressed by relevant authorities. The lack of documentation mentioned by the respondents is in contradiction with the fact that 65.1 percent of the respondents reported that they had been trained in the use of the integrated teaching in EFL classes. During their training at the advanced teacher training colleges, the respondents should have received some hints about how to handle lack of adequate documents and as a consequence would not complain so much about it as is the case in the findings of this study. The second major challenge related to the integration of the teaching of grammar and reading comprehension is time constraint. Most of the respondents believe that combining the teaching of both grammar and reading comprehension requires much classroom time. In addition, the time constraints can equally be accounted for by the lack of appropriate documentation discussed earlier. The implication of the time constraint is that it can deter teachers from using the integrated teaching method in their classes, which is likely to affect students' performance in the language. Further, teachers may not use the method appropriately because of the fear of not being able to cover all the syllabus of their courses.

Conclusion

This study was designed to explore the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes in Benin. More specifically, this investigation was conducted to determine the strategies used by EFL teachers to integrate the teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL classes and to find out the challenges related to integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in advanced EFL

classes. The findings revealed that most of the respondents mainstream the teaching of grammar in their reading comprehension lessons at the pre-reading and while-reading stages for the purpose of drawing learners' attention to specific grammatical structures. It is also worth mentioning that the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension depends on teachers' choices that take into account the lessons to be taught. As for the challenges related to the integrated teaching of grammar and reading comprehension, they include lack of adequate teaching materials which translates into lack of texts that are related to grammatical structures to be taught. Lack of time and time constraints were also reported by some of the teachers that participated in the study. And time constraints. The aforementioned challenges call for a number of actions on the part of educational authorities in Benin. First of all, there is a need to provide teachers with a focused training on the integrated teaching of the four skills and macro skills such as grammar and vocabulary. Secondly, adequate materials that come with texts and the grammatical structures to be mainstreamed in the teaching of reading comprehension should be designed to facilitate lesson planning by EFL teachers in advanced classes in the country.

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