

## EXPLORING THE MANAGEMENT OF ANXIETY IN ADVANCED EFL CLASSES THROUGH ENGLISH CLUBS PROVISION FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION IMPROVEMENT SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BENIN

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**ABSTRACT:** *One of the major challenges that EFL students have to face in francophone countries is their inability to speak the English language due to many causes among which the linguistic environment and the fear of making mistakes while speaking. To solve the problem, some Beninese students refer to English Clubs (ECs) activities that provide them with a flexible learning environment. To shed light on the effectiveness of these EC programs, the present study has attempted to explore the management of language anxiety and the development of speaking ability through student participation in these programs. The findings have shown that ECs can offer a pedagogical environment where participants progressively get rid of hindrances like anxiety, stress, fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed while they develop self-esteem and oral communication and gain flexibility and fluency. Based on these findings, the study has addressed the pedagogical value of ECs programs and recommended the support of educational authorities if the battle for the oral communication of Beninese students is to be won.*

**KEYWORDS:** English Clubs, Language Anxiety, Extracurricular Activities, Speaking Ability

**RESUME :** *L'une des principales causes des difficultés que rencontrent les apprenants des pays francophones dans l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise demeure la peur de faire des erreurs au cours du parler. Pour pallier ce problème, certains apprenants font recours à des activités périscolaires telles que les clubs d'Anglais qui peuvent procurer des conditions d'apprentissage flexibles et exemptes de tous facteurs de stress et d'angoisse.*

*Afin de faire la lumière sur l'efficacité de ces programmes, la présente étude se donne pour ambition d'examiner la gestion langagière des apprenants Béninois. Les résultats ont montré que les clubs d'Anglais offrent des cadres pédagogiques où les erreurs ne sont pas jugées, où les apprenants développent l'estime de soi, des aptitudes en communication orale, capables de changer la situation. Sur la base de ces résultats, la présente étude reconnaît la valeur éducative de cette activité périscolaire que représentent les clubs d'Anglais et recommande que les autorités éducatives y apportent leur soutien si le combat de nos apprenants pour la communication orale en Anglais veut être gagné.*

**MOTS CLES:** Clubs D'anglais; Anxiete Langagiere; Activites Periscolaires ; Aptitude D'art Oratoire

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## INTRODUCTION

Learning English in a non- English speaking environment is both cognitively and emotionally demanding. One of the major causes that hinder its learning among learners remains the fear

of making mistakes while speaking which stems from the anxiety and stress inherent to such a situation.

In Benin, bad learning conditions and atmosphere compounded by lack of appropriate training have finally made English language a school subject rather than a tool for communication in real life situations. Recently, an attempt to solve the problem has been to refer to English clubs (ECS) which seem to offer a flexible learning environment. Light needs to be shed on the effectiveness of these programs for three main reasons. First, though many learners complete their studies at secondary school level without being able to express themselves orally, many are still reluctant to join these programs. They hide behind many excuses such as lack of time, study workload, parents' reluctance, etc. The second reason deals with the lack of real oral communication classes due the incongruity of the current textbooks with communicative language teaching and the inadequacy of Competency-Based Approach in the country educational curriculum. This is a detrimental factor if we know as many researchers contend that the major factor that impacts on the learning of the English language is the environment where this learning occurs. This is exemplified by Spolsky, (1989:166) when he argued that *"the outcome of language learning depends to some extent on the amount and kind of the exposure to the target language"*. The third reason is that very little research has been carried out with respect to the anxiety shown by these learners when speaking in and outside the classroom.

The present study investigates the perceptions and the beliefs of the Beninese students as well as the ones of their EFL instructors towards the value and effectiveness of these EC programs. Then, it has attempted to examine how through EC participation, anxiety and stress in Beninese EFL classes can be managed and minimized so that this can be used for students' benefit in order to improve their speaking abilities.

To evaluate the causes of language anxiety among EFL learners, a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire developed by Horwitz et al, (1986) was reformulated and adapted for the circumstance.

So, quantitative and qualitative data were collected through questionnaires and English Club sessions observation and were analyzed, and interpreted through descriptive statistics.

The main objective of this study is then to explore the management of Beninese advanced learners' anxiety through their participation in ECs. It aims to investigate the perceptions and the beliefs of EFL learners (those who are members of ECS and those who are not members), as well as their instructors' views so as to examine the development of oral communication through student exposure to ECs activities.

Generating from the twofold purposes aforementioned, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1°) What are the causes of English language anxiety among Beninese advanced learners?
- 2°) To what extent can English clubs activities impact on these learners' anxiety so as to be an innovative way to promote the development of their oral communication performance?

Let us first shed light on the background to the study.

## Background to the Study

The trend of globalization has made English language today more than ever a binding language to master even in a country like Benin. So, the promotion of the language has the paramount goal of facilitating the communication between the country and its Anglophone neighbors (Nigeria and Ghana) and serves as a tool for the improvement of their socio-economic and diplomatic relationships. It is therefore a must for Beninese students to be well-equipped with a solid education including the ability to communicate fluently in English. For this to be possible, Beninese authorities have adopted English in the educational programs from the first grade to the university which has recently been made bilingual. But, though this language has been made mandatory at all levels, very few students even some university students of English can really hold some minutes' conversation in English. They literally dread speaking the language in public for they feel vulnerable probably because of nervousness and anxiety which constitute a mental barrier to their language performance.

To meet the country's linguistic needs, many educational reforms were implemented and many methods and approaches developed among which the teacher-centered approach supported by the Competency- Based Approach (CBA). Inspired by the weaknesses of the traditional teaching approaches and guided by the economic and social problems in the country in the nineties, this new approach has set the noble ambition to make learners not only knowledgeable of the concepts related to the subjects included in the school curricula, but also and above all to develop in them the capacities, skills, attitudes and awareness that would enable them to face the challenges of a changing world.

If it is true that the goal of this approach is to train learners for competence and performance in some practical projects, the stark reality is that its ambition to promote fluent oral communication outside classroom and fight down the Beninese EFL students' anxiety to speak English in front of an audience remains a real challenge. Many school stakeholders believe that there is a decrease in the level of student achievement mainly in English since the generalization of the CBA. Many constraints stand in the way of making this approach a success among which lack of appropriate teacher training provision and sustainable financial back-up, compounded by the lack of a strong political will to promote this language.

In fact, English language speaking has always been an anxiety-provoking factor among Beninese students. Many approaches and strategies have been used in vain to get rid of the problem. One thing remains certain today. Beninese EFL learners' needs to learn English in order to be able to interact effectively in oral communication within any social context with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds cannot be met through the CBA alone. As pointed out by Kouicem, (2010:2) *"it is very important for learners who are studying English in a non- English speaking setting to experience real communication situation in which they will learn how to express their own views and opinions, and develop their oral fluency and accuracy(proficiency)"*. Many stakeholders blame the situation and evoke the incompetence of teachers of English while others address the political powers for their failure to make available adequate means that can care for the requirement of the approach, and make it a success. Rather than crying over the spilt milk, let ways and means be found so that as rightly argued by some writers like Fujita, (2016:2) *"the way they (learners) choose to spend their free time can affect their academic performance; it is not simply traditional in-class instruction that impacts academic achievement."* In other words, advantage should be taken from the time learners spend out of school to develop flexible pedagogical programs in which

they could be involved to practice what they have learned in the classroom. Therefore, let the review of literature address the key areas this study should highlight.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### (i) Overview of some Previous Studies

Learning a second or foreign language is both cognitively and emotionally demanding and a substantial amount of research has been conducted in this area and suggests that anxiety is an important factor that requires a close attention.

Spielberger (1966) found that there are three perspectives from which research studies on anxiety can be conducted. They are: trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a motive or an acquired behavioral disposition that predisposes an individual to perceive a wide range of objectively non-dangerous circumstances as threatening and to respond to them with anxiety state reactions disproportionate in intensity to the magnitude of the objective danger. State anxiety is an apprehension experienced at particular moment in time, for example prior to taking exams. This anxiety can be provoked in the confrontation of the perceived threat (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b). However, it is temporary and altered in time. Unlike trait and state perspectives, situation-specific anxiety requires the respondents to ascribe their anxiety to particular sources. Specific situations can offer more understanding to particular anxiety in diverse situations.

MacIntyre & Gardner, (1994:284) in their definition of language anxiety assume “*that language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning*”. However, the literature suggests that the speaking skill is extremely anxiety-provoking in many language students and it is generally seen to arouse more anxiety than the other skills. Indeed, Daly, (1991:3, cited in Von Worde, 2003) reported that in some individuals: “*fear of giving a speech in public exceeded such phobias as fear of snakes, elevators, and heights*”. Young, (1991: 430) went further to mention that the anxiety suffered by many language students when asked to speak in the classroom includes “*distortion of sounds, inability to reproduce the intonation and rhythm of the language, ‘freezing up’ when called on to perform, and forgetting words and phrases just learned or simply refusing to speak and remaining silent*”. Obviously, the effects of anxiety are daunting on students. Additionally, in the field of foreign language learning, it is claimed that a vicious cycle is formed when high anxiety levels lead to poor performance and poor performance leads back to higher anxiety levels. MacIntyre & Gardner, (1994:278) raised this controversial issue when they pointed out that “*highly anxious students do not perceive their competence to be as high as a more objective analysis reveals it to be. The arousal of anxiety probably makes some students more reluctant to speak. If language learners do not choose to communicate, they cannot reassess their competence. Thus begins a vicious cycle*”. This vicious cycle needs to be broken so that as Tallon, (2013:5) contends “*more exposure to the target language, outside of the classroom, may help anxious students become more comfortable with the language, and thus help reduce the anxiety*”.

Tseng (2012) carried out a survey about the factors that cause language anxiety. As many researchers suggested in the past to use a different form of strategies and methods to examine the issue, he has tried to scrutinize the elements which make ESL/EFL learners dread learning by advising some types of techniques which help overcome the problem. He has also shed light

on some main anxiety-provoking sources among learners, addressed aspects of speech delivering in the classroom and gave some strategies used by learners and language teachers to minimize speaking anxiety.

Chan & Wu, (2004:290) had a similar study on the issue. Their findings have pointed out the following:

1. There is similarity with previous studies, in which there was a significant negative correlation between foreign language anxiety level and English learning achievement.
2. Six variables of English learning experience are likely to affect learners' anxiety level:
  - a. Low proficiency (the major source of their language anxiety);
  - b. Fear of negative evaluation;
  - c. Competition of games;
  - d. Anxious personality;
  - e. Pressure from students themselves and their parents;
  - f. The limitation of English teaching time. ;
3. There are five categories of anxiety-provoking situations:
  - i. Tests
  - ii. Speaking in front of others;
  - iii. Spelling;
  - iv. Incomprehensible input;
  - v. Speaking to native English speakers.
4. It is believed by both instructors and learners that the balance of instructional languages can help lower foreign language anxiety.

The same writers Chan & Wu, (2004:314-315) made the following suggestions:

- ❖ Encourage teachers to enrich their awareness of foreign language anxiety;
- ❖ Encourage students to share their anxiety experience;
- ❖ Encourage parents' involvement in their children English learning;
- ❖ Deal with anxiety-provoking situations carefully (teachers should carefully design teaching activities);
- ❖ Give more comprehensible input to their students (e.g. teachers can slow down their speaking speed in class).

In addition they have mentioned that:



*The experience of taking extra-course contributed to lower anxiety. Also, the more frequently the learners talked to native English speakers, the less anxious they were. Therefore, we encourage students to participate in any well-designed extra English activities that can promote students' familiarity with and proficiency in English(2004:315)*

Since the foreign language class only by itself cannot equip EFL learners to be fluent users, it is undoubtedly wise to use extracurricular activities as a supplementary program and a pedagogical approach that can help manage students' anxiety.

#### **(ii) Extracurricular Activities: the case of English Clubs (ECs)**

Many studies have shown that taking part in extracurricular activities and mainly in English clubs has a positive impact on learners' academic performance (Fujita, 2006) because they help them develop important skills, such as leadership skills, socializing, character training and others. Extracurricular activities, stated by Reva, (2012: 12) "*are generally voluntary as opposed to mandatory that can be organized at any time convenient for students and instructors*". She further mentioned that "*This freedom of choice provides students with an excellent opportunity to find their own path in life, to understand what they really want to do, open their talents and abilities*". She also added that, "*students can choose the activity they think most interesting and useful for their particular group. They can choose topics to discuss, videos to watch, books to read and holidays to celebrate*". Other characteristics pointed by the same author show that "*they are not only available for every kind of students but also most of the time free of charge.*"

Holloway, (2002:80-81) through a review of research, has identified the following characteristics of extracurricular activities including ECs:

- ❖ They appeal to students interests and can connect them to school;
- ❖ They build student-adult relationship;
- ❖ They encourage peer interaction;
- ❖ They promote cooperation;
- ❖ They provide structure and challenge;
- ❖ They draw students – especially minorities and women – to science.

In sum, extracurricular activities have a very broad number of characteristics and it is important that educators and parents get the right information that would give them good reasons to allow learners get involved in such activities.

Many researchers such as Sabald, Broth and Guest, & Schneider, (2010, 2002 and 2003 cited in Reva, 2012) have all confessed through their experience or knowledge that extracurricular

activities impact positively on the students' academic performance. Reva, (2012) reported that "*Sebald, (2010) set out to measure the level of students participation in ECAs, adolescent development, and academic achievement*" and that the results of this have shown "*significant differences between students who participate in ECAs and those who did not*".

Another study recorded by Bahdy, (2004:4) citing Stephen and Schaben, (2002) mentioned that a survey carried out by the US Department of Education has shown that "*students who participate in co-curricular activities are three times more likely to have a grade point average of 3.1 or better on a 4.0 scale than those who failed to participate in these activities*". They further contended that "*analyses revealed that regardless of students' background and prior achievement, various parenting volunteering, and home learning activities positively influenced students' grades.*"

ECs in Beninese secondary schools in the seventies used to play an active role in providing students with opportunities to learn English outside the formal classroom settings. Nearly all the high schools have their own EC that thrives with weekly meetings made up of many activities such as topic presentations, discussions/debates, language games, conferences, trips to English speaking countries, etc. They were all activities which are not planned in the academic program and as a result, fall outside the normal curriculum.

They are not standardized but are mostly based on the decision of the club leadership or club members. Nonetheless, they supplement the regular courses of classroom instruction. Students were given opportunities to participate and select the activity they prefer. Though the Ministry of Education did not give any specific guideline about how to manage them, each school has the responsibility to give different kinds of support; for instance by providing for the room and some materials, by signing in some teachers to be club advisors or mentors and making membership open to all the students of the school. Many adult English practitioners today claim to have succeeded in improving their speaking skills and as a result, have a good command of the language because of their participation in ECs.

However, it is noteworthy mentioning that some parents do not have supporting views about these activities, so as a result, they restrict their offspring's involvement by considering ECs as recreational, time-consuming and therefore detrimental to academic achievement. In other words, their worries were that their children active involvement may affect their academic performance. In fact, the exam-oriented educational system in Benin seems to support their views. So, with time and many other socio-economic problems, these clubs have ceased to exist for many years. It was not until recently that ECs have been rejuvenated and have started flourishing in many schools in the country.

The rationale of the current study is then simple. This research work was inspired first by the fact very little research is available on the issue and has addressed the effectiveness or the pedagogical value of this program or has tried to see the positive or negative impact of these ECs activities may have on English learning in Benin, particularly as far as the improvement of oral communication is concerned. Secondly, the researcher's own experiences and observations as an EFL teacher, a teacher trainer, a lecturer and an English learning circles promoter have always made this issue a burden to alleviate or at least a challenge to overcome.

## **METHOD**

To achieve its objective, the study has adopted a mixed methods research paradigm that requires the data to be collected using quantitative and qualitative approaches. Their combination in a single study provides a better understanding of a research problem than either an approach alone. [Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007:5), cited in Miller & Cameron, (2011)].

### **(i)The Sample**

The data were collected from three types of population: EFL instructors mentoring English clubs, advanced level students who are exposed to ECs and those who are not exposed at all. A sample of ten (10) instructors and twenty (20) advanced level learners (ten of them members of ECs and ten who are not members) are purposively selected in some general secondary schools in the southern part of the country. Those who are members of ECs are considered as the focus group whereas the second group includes those who are not participants in any extra-curricular activities and they may be labeled as the control group. To gain more insight into how students manage their anxiety to be able to participate actively in ECs activities two schools were randomly chosen for ECs session observation.

### **(ii) Instrumentation**

To succeed in evaluating the causes of language anxiety among learners, an investigation based on closed-ended questions adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test (FLCAT) designed by Horwitz et. al (1986) which has been widely used by many researchers to carry out a broad range regarding factors that deal with foreign language perceptions and language awareness was used. To design the anxiety test used in the present study, the 33 items originally devised by Horwitz et al (1986) were reformulated and reduced to ten (10) items to fit the local realities and were answered by the two categories of students. Each test was followed by a questionnaire (ten questions for those exposed to EC activities and five for those who are not members), designed to elicit the opinions of all these learners. Another ten-item questionnaire for EFL instructors, mentors of ECs was designed. They are all types of self-completion questionnaires which are made up of structured questions. They intend to elicit the opinions and beliefs of these respondents as far as the EFL learners' management of anxiety through participation in ECs is concerned.

### **The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test**

The implementation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test as an instrument to evaluate the level and the causes of foreign language anxiety among EFL learners has been done through questionnaire method design. Through the ten-item test, students were asked to indicate by 'Yes' or 'No' their feelings and what they have experienced as language learners in their classes and before an audience. The same test was applied to the experimental and the control group as well.

### **Questionnaire to Students, Members of English Clubs**

The self- completion structured questionnaire designed for learners, members of English clubs are made up of ten items. This type of questionnaire is usually used to collect quantitative data to minimize mistakes and offer more coherence in answers. The questionnaire is structured into two sections: (1) reasons for learning English; language skills most needed; frequency of oral communication; (2) reasons for being a regular member of English club; activities of English



clubs that can meet learners' needs; participation in EC and oral communication; participation in EC and anxiety- reduction.

### **Questionnaire to Students, not Members of English Clubs**

Students not members of ECs were administered their own self- completion structured questionnaire of five (05) items. It includes: (1) reasons for learning English; language skills most needed; frequency of oral communication; (2) speaking problems; ways and means to overcome their speaking problems.

### **Questionnaire to EFL Instructors mentoring English Clubs**

The questions used in the self-completion questionnaire administered to EFL instructors are made of ten structured items: background information; frequency of communication opportunities given to learners; students' speaking problems; awareness of anxiety and stress in language class; organization of ECs activities; challenges in mentoring EC programs; and suggestions for an effective management of these clubs.

### **English Club sessions observation**

In addition to the questionnaires, the researcher prepared an observation checklist. Two English club sessions were visited and closely observed in two different schools. These are the items focused on:

- ❖ Punctuality of club members;
- ❖ Attendance;
- ❖ Leadership role;
- ❖ Oral communication;
- ❖ Role-sharing;
- ❖ Instructor's role.

### **Validation and Reliability of instruments**

To ensure the content validity and the reliability of the instruments used, the researcher discussed the issue at stake with some experienced E.F.L instructors who have had experience with English clubs and some colleagues, lecturers in the English Department and proficient in this field. They were asked to judge the appropriateness of each instrument item for the overall purpose of the study. This led to the reformulation of some items for clarity sake.

### **Data collection and analysis procedures**

The data were collected through a foreign language anxiety test and three different questionnaires using multiple-choice and yes/no questions. They were administered to students in a face-to-face environment with the hope of maximizing return rates. For the sampling procedure, three secondary school English instructors were called to help. Two of them are English club mentors and one is not. The purpose of the study was explained to them and they were willing to help at every stage of the data collection.

The observation of the two English clubs sessions was made possible through the negotiation with this team and the sampled schools with the two clubs leadership's members.

The data collected were entered on and analyzed with the help of a computer software program: the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Data were analyzed with the help of frequencies and cross-tabulation. To analyze the data of this survey, the inductive analysis strategy was used through description, analysis and interpretation. All the data have highlighted the two main research questions.

## Presentation and Discussion of Results

This current study is carried out to answer the two following research questions:

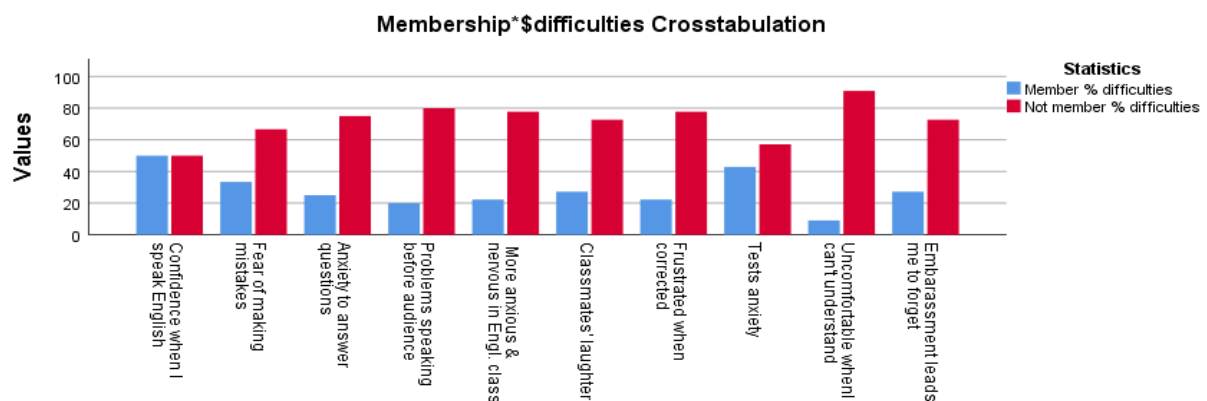
- 1) What are the causes of English language anxiety among Beninese advanced learners?
- 2) To what extent can English clubs activities impact positively on the learners' anxiety so as to be an innovative way to promote the development of oral communication?

Therefore, apart from the FLCAT, the respondents were asked to answer close-ended questions through self-completion questionnaire. The results are presented, analyzed and interpreted.

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS.

### Students'FLCAT Results

The first phase of the study is the FLCAT with students who are members of EC and those who are not. The results are displayed in the following table and figure.



**Figure 1: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test**

**Table 1: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test (FLCAT) of both types of respondents**

		Confidence when I speak English	Fear of making mistakes	Anxiety to answer questions	Problems speaking before audience	More anxious & nervous in Engl. Class	Class mates' laughter	Frustrated when corrected	Test anxiety	Uncomfortable when I can't understand	Embarrassment leads me to forget
<b>Member</b>	Count	7	3	3	2	2	3	2	6	1	3
	% of Total	35.0%	15.0%	15.0%	10.0%	10.0%	15.0%	10.0%	30.0%	5.0%	15.0%
<b>Not member</b>	Count	7	6	9	8	7	8	7	8	10	8
	% of Total	35.0%	30.0%	45.0%	40.0%	35.0%	40.0%	35.0%	40.0%	50.0%	40.0%
<b>Total</b>	Count	14	9	12	10	9	11	9	14	11	11
	% of Total	70.0%	45.0%	60.0%	50.0%	45.0%	55.0%	45.0%	70.0%	55.0%	55.0%

Figure1 and table1 above show that apart from the first item about the lack of confidence in speaking English which has struck the same rate of 35%, students not members of EC rated high in the remaining nine items designed to assess the cause of anxiety. “Uncomfortable when I can’t understand” is (50%) followed by “anxiety to answer questions” (45%) which also rated very high among students not exposed to EC. ‘Test anxiety’ is the only main difficulty of students members of EC. On the basis of this information, it can be safely mentioned that the issue of foreign language anxiety is a real problem among Beninese EFL learners and ECs may have an anxiety-reducing effect on those who are involved in it.

Apart from the FLCAT, a questionnaire related to the learners’ opinions and perceptions about their EFL learning experience was administered to each category of them.

### **Both Categories of Students’ Responses to the Questionnaires.**

The results of the questionnaires designed to elicit the opinions of both categories of students show the following. To the question, ‘Which of the following describes best your reasons for learning English?’, ‘Future study travel’ ranked very high (100%), followed by ‘Oral communication’ (80%) ‘Job Prospects’ (80%) and ‘Academic requirement’ (70%) for learners not members of EC. As for those exposed to EC, ‘Job Prospects’ is the main reason for their learning of English (100%), followed by ‘Future study travel’ (90%). ‘Oral communication’ ranked low (44.4%). Maybe this last category of students thinks that the battle for oral communication is already won or being won.

Both types of learners (members and not members) that is 100% chose ‘Speaking’ to be the main language skill they need to develop most to satisfy their reasons for learning English.

To the question ‘How often do you communicate orally in and outside the class?’, those who are exposed to EC mentioned ‘Always’ (60%) and ‘Once in a while’ (40%) while the second group declared ‘Once in a while’ 80%, ‘Always’ 10% and ‘Never’ 10%. This information shows that this last category of students (not members of EC) seems not to make oral

communication their priority, and they pointed out their main speaking problems to be pronunciation problems (100%).

All the respondents, members of EC confessed that the main reason why they are regular members is their quest for leadership and communicative skills (100%) and the improvement of their oral proficiency (80%). Those who are not members of EC found that pronunciation (100%) is their main challenge followed by vocabulary problems (90%). Obviously, this category of students seems to minimize anxiety issues (30%).

The following table reveals the various ways these respondents choose to overcome their speaking problems.

**Table 2: Overcoming speaking problems**

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Participation class activities	5	11.6%	62.5%
Coping with anxiety and fear	6	14.0%	75.0%
Participation extra curricular activities	6	14.0%	75.0%
Linguistic exposure, trips	7	16.3%	87.5%
Training in leadership and communicative skills	6	14.0%	75.0%
Viewing/listening to TV or radio programs	5	11.6%	62.5%
Reading texts, short stories and books	8	18.6%	100.0%
Total	43	100.0%	537.5%

Unexpectedly enough, reading texts, short stories and books ranked very high in this list (100%), followed by ‘linguistic exposure’ (87.5%); ‘participation in extracurricular activities and ‘training in leadership and communicative skills’ come third (75%). Obviously, this type of learners seems not to be aware of the battle for oral communication that any English practitioners should strive to win in a francophone country.

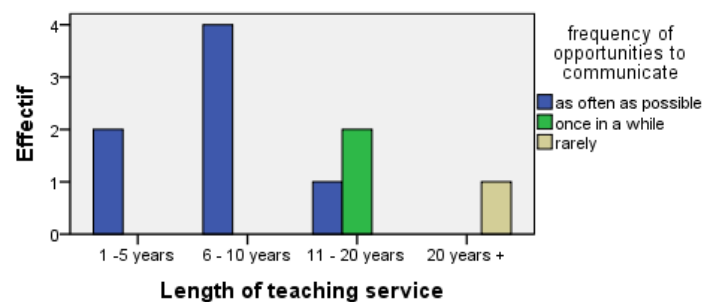
As for those exposed to EC activities, their reasons for joining an EC list as follows: ‘love and passion for the language’ (100%), ‘Need to have a good command of English’ (90%), ‘Need for an interactive environment to broaden knowledge in English’ (87.5%). This suggests that effective language learners are those with long-term goals or achievements with a real passion for the language. In addition, they mentioned that ‘leadership and communicative skills’ and ‘improvement of oral proficiency’ (100%; 80%) are their main goals for being regular members of ECS. All of them admitted that the activities in EC sessions have been meeting their needs and their participation has been positively affecting their oral communication performance. The activities that have really helped are: discussions and debates (100%), presentation of topical issues and linguistic trips (70%) simulations and role play (60%). Nevertheless, all of them still complain about anxiety and shyness to be the main handicaps to their expectations to perform well in English. However, vocabulary (100%) speaking (77.8%) and listening

(77.5%) are the main language element and skills that this category of learners confessed they have been improving due to their participation in ECs.

### Language Instructors' Results

The ten language instructors involved in this study are all EFL teachers in secondary school in Benin. The questionnaire made up of ten questions was administered to them to elicit their experience as language teachers and as instructors and mentors of EC.

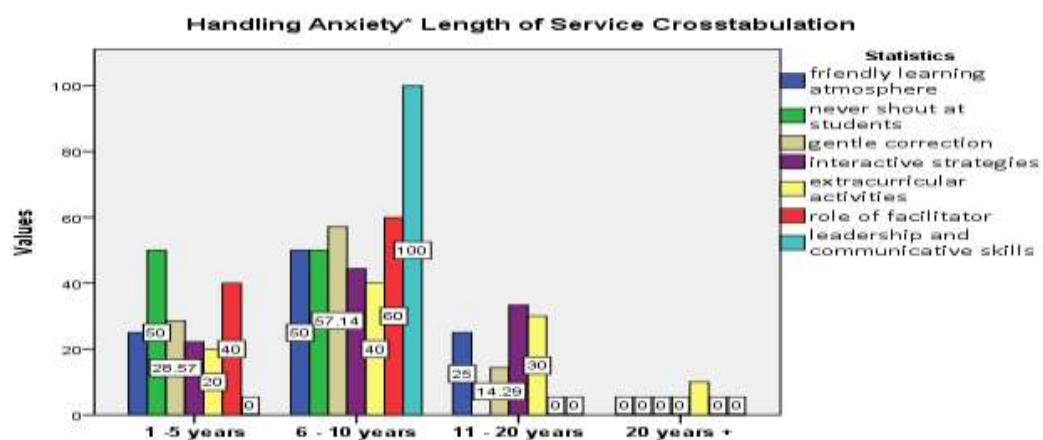
The information provided from the crossing of their length of service and the frequency of the opportunities they give their students to communicate is displayed in figure 2.



**Figure 2: cross tabulation of length of teaching service and opportunities teachers give students to communicate.**

The results in the figure 2 show that instructors teaching between 1 to 5 and 6 to 10 years mentioned they give their students the opportunities to communicate as often as possible. The more experienced teachers, more than twenty years give these opportunities 'rarely'. This is unexpected for the matured teachers are supposed to care more about their students' oral proficiency.

To probe a bit further into these instructors' practice, a cross tabulation study was conducted between their years of service and the way they handle anxiety in their classes. The following figure shows the outcome.



**Figure:3 Cross tabulation of length of service and anxiety handling**



The outcome of the figure above is quite informative about the various opportunities available to these instructors to manage anxiety in their classes. Most of them (from 1- 5 and 6- 10 years) seem to make full use of these opportunities by playing different roles. 'Training Students in Leadership and Communicative Skills' ranked very high (100%) for instructors ranging from 6 to 10 years of service followed by 'Interactive Strategies' (57.14%), 'Encouraging Participation in Extra-curricular Activities' (40%), and finally 'Friendly Learning Atmosphere' (50%). Obviously, younger teachers seem to avail themselves more than experienced ones of the various opportunities available to manage anxiety and stress in an EFL classroom. The responses provided by the instructors to the question to know the activities that have large audience in their EC sessions are presented in table 4.

**Table 4. Activities with large audience activities with large audience Frequencies**

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
discussion and debate	10	35.7%	100.0%
presentation of topical issues	5	17.9%	50.0%
simulations and role play	2	7.1%	20.0%
Entertainment activities	9	32.1%	90.0%
Competitive educational games	2	7.1%	20.0%
Total	28	100.0%	280.0%

The results of Table 4 from the ranking reveal the activities with large audience that instructors identified: 'Discussions and Debates' (100%), 'Entertainment Activities' (90%) and 'Presentation of Topical Issues' (50%). These results confirm the respondent students' results for all of them claimed that 'Discussions and Debates' are the activities that have helped most to cope with their speaking problems.

Mentoring an EC in the difficult circumstances in which English is taught in Benin cannot be an easy task and opportunity was given to these instructors to list their challenges. All the respondents (100%) mentioned that 'Poor or Irregular Attendance' was their main challenge. 'Lack of School Authorities Support' ranked also very high (88.9%), followed by 'Problems in Role-Sharing' (44. 6%). Suggestions for improvement were offered by these respondents. All of them (100%) focused on their own personal needs and those of their students by mentioning that 'Building Leadership and Communicative Skills in Students' and 'Refining Role as Effective Mentor' are their main goals. This is followed by 'Finding Appropriate Forms of EC Leadership' (80%) and 'Training of EC executive board members' (60%). This proves that these instructors are aware of the real challenges EFL teaching/learning is facing in the country and as a result, are ready to be agents of this change.

### **Report of English Club (EC) observation**

Two ECs were observed in the southern part of the country. The researcher labeled them EC-A and EC-B. The participants were 18 in EC-A with two instructors and 27 in EC-B with only one mentor in schools of more than two thousand of students. Two student leaders are always

appointed to conduct each session under the supervision of the instructors playing the role of referees.

Most of the participants were on time but the attendance was not proportional to the population of the schools. Each EC has an executive board made up of four members who play leadership roles. They also share and give roles to other club members.

The session activities can be listed as: guessing games, poem presentation, songs presentation, debates/discussions, pronunciation and spelling games and duo acapella songs with dance. All these activities were organized in a friendly, warm and stress-free atmosphere that stands the chance to be conducive to effective learning. The only accepted language is English and the law seems to be 'No one should participate if he cannot speak English'.

Most of the participants in these two ECs are articulate and fluent speakers of English. EC-A motto is 'Practice Makes Perfect!' and for EC-B 'English, the Best of Language!' which they shout as often and joyfully as possible. Obviously, participants in these two ECs seem to enjoy using this language as an authentic tool for communication in real life situations.

## DISCUSSION

The present section hinge around the two main questions this study is supposed to answer: what are the root causes of English language anxiety among Beninese advanced learners? And how far can ECs activities impact positively on the learners' anxiety management so as to be an innovative way to promote the development of oral communication performance?

The discussion of the different responses provided by the participants in the study is carried out in two stages: the FLCAT administered to the two different categories of learners (members and not members of ECs), and their perceptions and beliefs as well as those of their English language instructors.

### **The Root Causes of English Language Anxiety among Beninese Advanced Learners**

In Benin the English language learning difficulties experienced by learners are mainly related to their anxiety to communicate orally before people. To identify the main causes of this foreign language anxiety, the results of the FLCAT of the experimental and control group of the students regarding their anxiety level and oral communication were taken into account. The two results were compared. This procedure helped to examine which of both categories experienced more the odds of anxiety.

The descriptive statistics show that learners who are not exposed to EC identified more difficulties than those who are members of EC. The anxiety-producing factors identified are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, fear of learning constraints and lack of confidence,

Both groups admitted that they still lack confidence in speaking the language. For members of EC it might be that despite the fact they feel confident when they speak English, they are still in need of a lot of practice and techniques that could help them hone their oral communication skills. Apart from the factors retrieved from the analysis of the quantitative data gathered from these participants through the test and the questionnaires, some other factors, sources of anxiety

seem not to be ignored: lack of motivation, social status, age, gender, cultural factors, taboos, time management etc.

Most of the language instructors in the survey pointed out the following to be the most prominent factors: lack of motivation and practice, the unfavorable learning environment, linguistic barriers, lack of background knowledge in English, students' perceptions of the importance of learning English, lack of learning interest and the strategies adopted by the teachers are part of the inability of Beninese students in general to confidently speak English. Furthermore, for them the potential solutions that could be used to manage students' anxiety are: creating a friendly learning atmosphere in the class, using gentle correction, never shouting at students, using interactive strategies to help students communicate, encouraging student participation in extracurricular activities like ECs, playing the role of facilitator and training students in leadership and communicative skills. This last item ranked very high in these instructors' list probably because they do believe that in instilling in them the thirst for leadership and communicative skills these learners stand the chance to shrug off the odds and develop various public speaking abilities. Some of these are speech presentation, the use of facial expression and eye contact, the use of body language, time management and the use of vocal variety [(Garcia-Lopez, L.J. (2013))].

But the outcome of their own data (Figure 3) shows unexpectedly that the more experienced they become, the less opportunities they give their students to communicate in English. They do not give them enough time to practice and as a result, less opportunity to learn about the culture of the target language, less support and less valuable feedback regarding their interaction performance and language difficulties. In fact, what these students need most is to be provided with a supportive and casual environment where they receive constructive feedbacks on their interaction which would enable them develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Building these qualities in them should be the first focus before helping them improve any other skills. This could help them and instead of lacking learning interest in English, it would rather help them be more motivated to be involved in any kind of English learning activities. Otherwise, the fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by their peers and the teacher, so dreaded by them will constantly remain a stumbling block.

In fact, to minimize the problems of anxiety, learners should be made aware of their progress, their strength and shortcomings and need to be reassured that there are solutions to their problems; that they can improve their deficiencies and have a reasonable command of the language just by building self-confidence in themselves. No wonder that the same proportion (35 %) of both type of students (those who are exposed to EC and those who are not exposed) mentioned lack of confidence to be one of the main root factors of their inability to speak the language. Moreover, foreign language learning is a process that requires time and lots of practice to gain mastery of the language and reach the goal of fluency. For this to happen, opportunities should be given to learners to manipulate the language in real life situations and in environment that approximates the native or near-native speakers. In other words, for a good language acquisition that can lead to communicative competence, as rightly pointed by Cannale and Swain (1980) cited in Takako (2006), learners should be exposed to "*knowledge of linguistics characteristics, knowledge of discourse rules, knowledge of language functions, knowledge of sociolinguistic factors and knowledge of appropriateness*"

However, it is important to know that anxiety is not always a bad thing. It is normal and natural that learners experience some anxiety when facing any learning situation. As suggested by Na (2007) cited in Pong (2010:81), "*Teachers should take measures to reduce anxiety but not*

*completely eliminate it.*” Pong himself argues about the issue by pointing out that “*Na (2007) believes that the adequate anxiety plays a facilitative role and can motivate students to maintain their effort on learning. Therefore, the teachers’ real job is to help students keep adequate anxiety, neither too high nor too low*”. It simply means that one of the most effective ways to remedy this problem of anxiety is to keep the right balance of anxiety and the adoption of strategies that can help learners develop more self-confidence and motivation to learn. Furthermore, by taking the risk of facing one’s fears or deficiencies it becomes easier to manage them and to succeed in keeping them away. In other words, by making learners learn from their failure and success they become more confident. By taking roles and presenting speeches before public, they succeed in better managing their anxiety.

Overall, all the respondents confessed that the effects of anxiety are detrimental to their language learning and impact negatively on their motivation to be fluent speakers. But there is a way-out. Joining a community of learners or a learning circle such an EC may stand the chance of narrowing the odds of most Beninese students’ inability to communicate orally in English.

### **English Clubs: An Innovative Way to Promote the Development of Oral Communication.**

The analysis of the learners’ responses to the two questionnaires is really revealing. Though both categories of students did not rank high oral communication to be their main reasons for learning English, they however chose ‘Speaking’ to be the main language skill they need to develop most to satisfy their reasons for learning the language. As for students members of ECs they mentioned leadership and communicative skills and oral proficiency improvement to be one of their best ways to overcome their speaking problems. Furthermore, these students have long-term goals because of their reasons for joining an EC. The truth is that students with long-term goals are strongly motivated and easy to teach. This might be the reasons why this category of students has realized that attending English classes alone cannot be a sufficient condition to acquire good language performance. All of them acknowledged that extracurricular activities such as ECs have a significant impact on their motivation and have been helping them control their language anxiety, broadening their knowledge in English and improving their level of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. In fact, in Benin the idea of ECs has emerged from the realization that it is very difficult to learn a foreign language alone. This is compounded by the fact that the educational system is very exam-oriented and English is more considered as a subject to be taught for grades, to pass national exams and tests than a tool for communication. Even the oral examination in national exams is nothing but a mere formality. Nevertheless, today, more and more students are aware that they do need English and more importantly oral communication to be able to fare better in their professional life. Referring to the observation made by the researcher, the participants of ECs visited are learners of all categories: high school students, students majoring in English or other academic subjects who gather to hone their speaking abilities. These ECs prove to be learning circles where groups of friends gather on regular basis to have one-to-one or group discussions without experiencing too much anxiety. No wonder that a hundred percent (100%) of respondent instructors mentioned that discussions/debates are the main activities with large audience (Table 4). This is confirmed by hundred percent (100%) of students members of ECs who argued that this single activity has been of great help to them to overcome their speaking problems. In fact, club debates and discussions seem to be the most popular type of EC activities. English is used in a more natural way than in a classroom and this helps students

learn new vocabulary words. These items are effective ways to keep participants interested and motivated for they create excitement.

The direct observation of the researcher of the ECs sessions also showed that these English language clubs are learning places which host a diversity of learners with the same learning purposes. Some attend to prepare for their exams, others to ensure that the English language gives them the possibility to join with other people, to open up to the world or just for the passion for the language. With such clear needs, goals and motivation, learners stand the chance of experiencing the joy of being able to interact easily and freely with other participants without being judged, in a supportive, casual and dynamic atmosphere where they could secure practical knowledge and commitment to self-development.

However, the data gathered from the instructor respondents regarding the challenges they meet show that lack of school authorities support, weak commitment of the club executive board, conflicting responsibilities, problems in role-sharing and poor or irregular attendance are their main hurdles. Poor and irregular attendance is in fact the most outstanding obstacle for a hundred percent (100%) of these EC mentors. This suggests that though participation in these programs proves to be anxiety-reducing and oral communication skills development factors, some learners are still lagging behind probably due to the fact that the learning process of all things generally takes time. So, without sustained motivation, passion, love and perseverance, many drop out even before having got the chance to experience any real progress. Thus, to keep up an effective language learning, learners need to be armed with strong determination and commitment to attain some achievable goals for example a scholarship or a business trip.

The suggestions offered by the language mentors to overcome these hurdles are listed as follows: 'Building in students more leadership and communicative skill', 'Giving more training to club executive board members', 'Finding appropriate forms of English club leadership' and finally 'Refining roles as effective mentors'. The analysis of the data shows that not only are these language instructors aware of their students' needs, but their own shortcomings are not left out. In fact, because of the daunting training problems the country has been facing (more than 70% of the teaching force are untrained), priority should be set right so as to establish an effective training policy. Therefore, as far as ECs effectiveness is concerned, language instructors should focus more *"on authentic and real-life oriented tasks rather than superficial practices that are consciously designed with the aim of teaching grammar"* (Burden, 2004:3). They should build a positive relationship with learners, show a positive attitude towards the learners by instilling in them the desire to learn the language for communication, by giving them more responsibility for their learning and helping them to have more autonomy and flexibility to deal with the language. More importantly, students should be encouraged to carry out extracurricular activities by participating in ECs for instance where they can manage their language anxiety, develop critical thinking, public speaking, leadership and communicative skills.

However, though many instructors and learners agree that ECs programs contribute to a better management of language anxiety and the improvement of oral communication, it is noteworthy to notice that these programs may have some negative impact on some of their users. The informal character of the programs, their organization, their lack of coherence during the conception of the activities, the lack of qualified instructors and the lack of support from school authorities do not always contribute to the fulfillment of ECs' original mission which is anxiety management for more fluent speaking ability, language skills development and teaching improvement.



### **Strategies for implementation**

Many studies have investigated the issue of foreign language anxiety management. However, little has been discovered about the best strategy to use to fight down learners' anxiety that affects negatively their determination to study the language and become fluent speakers. For this reason, this study has addressed a new way of shaping the teaching of English as a foreign language in Benin by using creative approaches that can supplement traditional methods. For this to happen, some strategies need to be implemented for real improvement to take place.

The organization of ECs is a very good initiative as many of the learners and language respondent instructors as well have confessed. Therefore, there is need for ECs to be set up in every school, but this requires financial and material support from school authorities and the community. Strong political will and awareness should lead the government to encourage teachers who are achieving this initiative for appropriate solutions to be found on the basis of effective regulations. Existing clubs should be rejuvenated and new ones should be created nationwide as a supplementary method to the teaching/learning of the language as a tool for communication with good resource centers or libraries with computer rooms. Language instructors should be professionals and be trained regarding the management of ECs as a tool for the promotion of English language and as part of the teaching program in Benin though not made mandatory. They have the mission of sensitizing learners' parents regarding the benefits of the participation of their children in these ECs. As for executive board elected by their peers, they need effective training on the basis of a new well-thought regulation.

School authorities should make school timetables more flexible because many teachers and students complain about the heavy workload of the current curriculum which leaves little room to extracurricular activities. Moreover, care should be taken to avoid boredom and routine.

It is however noteworthy that simply put, the implication of this research is that a new era is about to see light in the field of EFL learning in Benin through these ECs for a more holistic experience than a cognitive function it has hitherto played.

Therefore, to help generalize the findings of this study, further research with a larger number of participants could be carried out regarding the relationship that exists between ECs and learners' achievement.

### **CONCLUSION**

Foreign language learning is a difficult exercise and a long process that requires time and a sustained practice. In Benin, the battle for EFL oral communication is far from being won. This study has investigated about language anxiety as a factor that prevents learners from communicating fluently to see how extracurricular activities such as English clubs can act as a way-out. A literature review was carried out to familiarize with various research findings and has revealed that though anxiety can be a debilitating factor blocking language learning but it can also be a facilitating factor provided the right balance is struck, not too high not too low and this is what Beninese students need.

The discussion of the different results has revealed that one of the best ways to cope with the problem is to encourage students to participate in after-school programs like ECs where anxious learners take the courage to face their anxiety problems by taking various roles or

responsibilities. Moreover, the language instructors who participated in the study confirmed that EC sessions do have positive impact on the management of anxiety and the development of speaking skills of Beninese students. Some suggestions for a more effective management of these extracurricular activities are provided.

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