

Teaching Oral Comprehension to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners: Perceptions of Ivorian Secondary School Teachers

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to identify and to analyze teachers' perceptions of the constraints on improving learners' oral comprehension skills in Ivorian secondary schools. A Likert-type questionnaire was administered to 23 teachers with differing characteristics. The data gathered was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results indicated that for most teachers, oral comprehension is essential in learning English as a foreign language. But oral comprehension instruction is made laborious by teachers' insufficient competences, the need to cover the curriculum, and the lack of resources. Also, teachers believed that anxiety, lack of interest, and lack of strategies are the major student-related constraints. Against all expectations, however, no curriculum-related constraint was found.*

Keywords: perceptions, oral comprehension, listening, curriculum, constraints, skills, learning, teaching

1. Introduction

Oral comprehension or 'listening comprehension' is based on three major processes. Listening, speaking, and understanding. While 'listening' relates to what is heard, 'speaking' refers to what is said. As to 'understanding', it implies a cognitive treatment of what was heard by a listener. So, linking these three terms leads to a first clarification what oral comprehension is: listening to an oral message or discourse and reacting so as to show understanding of that message or discourse. This exercise involves not only careful listening, but also showing evidence that one has grasped the meaning of what he/she has just listened to [1]. It is thus, a complex problem-solving activity that involves different sub-skills [2] such as the abilities to construct and represent the meaning of what is said, to negotiate the meaning with the interlocutor, to answer, to create meaning [3], and the ability to identify what other people say with their accent or pronunciation, the grammar and vocabulary they use [4]. In other words, not only does the listener receive the sounds of the speaker, but he also uses them to build an interpretation of the message, taking into account the context, his present knowledge, and using strategic resources [5]. Consequently, the teaching of oral comprehension is of paramount importance if teachers' goal is to improve learners' communicative competence.

On a daily basis, we listen twice as much as we talk, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write [6]. Similarly, listening accounts for 45% of our activities, while speaking accounts for 30%, reading for 16%, and writing for 9% [7]). Studies also show that students spend up to 50% or even 75% of the time in class listening to teachers, to their peers or to oral presentations [8].

Notwithstanding the above, oral comprehension was incorporated into new pedagogical frameworks that emphasize functional language and communicative approaches, only in the 1980s. Later, with the competency-based approach in the 1990s, it was given increased attention in language teaching programs. In Côte d'Ivoire, it was then

taught simultaneously with writing, speaking and reading. Today again, the official document entitled '*Les Objectifs de l'Enseignement de l'Anglais en Côte d'Ivoire*' rightly mentions the need to put students in the conditions that allow them to listen to any audio document issued in English, to grasp the meaning of the message it conveys, and to give evidence of understanding either by writing or by speaking. However, in secondary schools in Côte d'Ivoire, as Brown [9] also observed elsewhere, oral comprehension remains the least important or the 'Cinderella' skill in English as foreign language classes [8]. Teachers and students do not seem to give oral comprehension all the attention it deserves. So much so that any teacher trainer or advisor visiting classrooms soon observes the primacy of reading, writing, and speaking, over listening.

This research was conducted to understand the nature of the constraints of teaching oral comprehension in EFL classes in Côte d'Ivoire from English teachers' perspective, and try to explain them. It therefore sets out to investigate the following questions:

How do teachers perceive the constraints of teaching oral comprehension skills in EFL classes in the Ivorian context?

This main question will be answered through four operational questions:

- 1) How do teachers perceive the importance of oral comprehension skills?
- 2) Which teacher-related factors do they perceive as constraints to teaching oral comprehension skills?
- 3) Which student-related factors do they perceive as constraints to teaching oral comprehension skills?
- 4) Which curriculum-related constraints do they perceive as constraints to teaching oral comprehension skills?

2. Method

The study involved a total of 23 high and middle school teachers from different secondary schools in Côte d'Ivoire. It

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was a convenience sample made up of 15 middle school teachers and 8 high school teachers. They were all selected based on their availability and according to our research schedule.

The study was conducted from a four-section Likert-type questionnaire, following an instrument developed by Ule özkan-akan [10]. The first section relates to the teachers' general perception of the importance of oral comprehension, the second to their perceptions of teacher-related constraints, the third to their perceptions of learner-related constraints, and the fourth to their perceptions of curriculum-related constraints. The participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the propositions in the different sections of the questionnaire, on a five-point scale: 0- Undecided (U), 1-Strongly disagree (SD), 2-Disagree (D), 3 Agree (A), 4-Strongly agree (SA). Then, the quantitative data collected were analyzed using the software SPSS16.

3. Results

The data collected and submitted to descriptive statistics yielded quantitative results. Tables 1- 4 refer to results related to the teachers' perceptions of the constraints of teaching and improving learners' oral comprehension skills.

3.1 Teachers' perceptions of the importance of oral comprehension.

Table 1 shows the results of teachers' degree of agreement with five propositions on the importance of teaching oral comprehension skills.

Table 1: Teacher's general perceptions of oral comprehension

	(4) S.A	(3) A	(2) D	(1) SD	(0) U	Mean	Mode	S.D
1. Oral Comprehension is necessary for daily communication	78,3%	21,7%	0%	0%	0%	3,78	4	0,42
2. Oral comprehension is necessary for the good conduct of the English class	47,8%	47,8%	4,3%	0%	0%	3,43	3	0,59
3. Learning content is more important than developing oral comprehension skills	0%	13,0%	47,8%	26,1%	13%	1,61	2	0,89
4. It is not necessary to spend time developing oral comprehension skills. They are learned in a natural way	0%	4,3%	43,5%	43,5%	8,7%	1,43	1	0,72

This table shows that the teachers generally agreed that oral comprehension is essential in communication. The Mode of 4 and the mean of 3.78 of proposition 1 clearly underline it. In addition, the standard deviation (0.42) of this proposition indicates a high concentration of the responses around item 4- strongly agree (78.3%). The answers to proposition 2 (4-strongly agree = 47.8%, 3-agree = 47.8%) also indicate that the teachers considered that oral comprehension allows for a smooth running of the English class. The Mode of 3 suggests here too, a high concentration of responses around item 3- Agree. This is reinforced by the standard deviation of 0.59.

The importance of oral comprehension is still acknowledged by the teachers who refute (2- disagree = 47.8%, 1- strongly disagree = 21.6%) proposition 3 about the importance of course content. They also did not accept the idea in proposition 4 (1- strongly disagree = 43.5%, 2- disagree = 43.5%) that time should not be spent on development oral comprehension skills because they are acquired in a natural way. The Mode of 1 and the standard deviation (0.72) of proposition 4 clearly underline that this perception is widely shared.

Finally, the participants considered oral comprehension as an essential skill to acquire and to develop in foreign language learning. But how do they perceive the constraints oral comprehension in the classroom?

3.2 Teachers' perceptions of teacher-related constraints

The results of teachers' perceptions of teacher-related constraints are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' perceptions of teacher-related constraints

	(4) S.A	(3) A	(2) D	(1) SD	(0) U	Mean	Mode	S.D
1. Teachers' tests do not focus on oral comprehension	26.1%	52.2%	4.3%	8.7%	8.7%	2.78	3	1.20
2. Teachers do not spend enough time on oral comprehension	30.04%	47.8%	17.4%	4.3%	0%	3.04	3	0.82
3. Pre-service training does not emphasize oral comprehension	13.0%	47.8%	21.7%	8.7%	8.7%	2.48	3	1.12
4. Teachers do not have enough information about oral skills when they start teaching	30.4%	39.1%	26.1%	0%	4.3%	2.91	3	0.99
5. Teachers believe that only some students can master oral comprehension skills	13%	26.1%	39.1%	13.0%	8.7%	2.22	2	1.12
6. Teachers do not master the teaching of oral comprehension	30.4	39.1	17.4	13.0	0	2.87	3	1.01
7. Teachers feel the need to complete the program	13%	34.8%	30.4%	13.0%	8.7%	2.30	3	1.14
8. Teachers do not have enough resources	52.2%	21.7%	13.0%	4.3%	8.7%	3.04	4	1.29
9. Teachers do not have enough time to prepare to teach oral comprehension	21.7%	39.1%	34.8%	4.3%	0%	2.78	3	0.85

Table 2 is quite revealing on several points. First, it indicates that the majority of participants agreed with the propositions regarding teacher-related constraints. As can be seen, the most recurrent modes i.e. the most recurrent responses are 3-agree and 4-totally agree. In detail, according to the responses to propositions 5 (3-Agree = 52.2%, 4-Strongly Agree = 26.1%) and 6 (3-Agree = 47.8%; 4= strongly agree = 30.04%), teachers believed they do not put enough emphasis on oral comprehension, and do not spend enough time on oral comprehension. Also, the figures (see proposition 7) indicate that they thought that pre-service training does not emphasize oral comprehension (3-agreement = 47.8%, 4-strongly agree = 13%). As a result

(see propositions 8 and 10), they do not know enough about oral skills when they start teaching (3-agree = 39.1%, 4-totally agree = 30.4%) and do not master how to teach listening skills (proposition 10) (3-agree = 39.1%, 4-strongly agree = 30.4%). Lastly, the teachers agreed that they do not have the resources (proposition 12) (3-agree = 21.7%, 4-strongly agree = 52.2%), and enough time to prepare for oral comprehension classes (proposition 13) (3-agree = 39.1%, strongly agree = 21.7%). However, the standard deviations of propositions 5, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12 are greater than 1. This indicates a relatively large dispersion of the responses around the modes of 2, 3, and 4. But, for proposition 6 (about the time spent on oral comprehension), 8 (about their knowledge about oral comprehension), and 13 (related to preparation time for oral comprehension), the standard deviations (0.82), (0.99), and (0.85), suggest a larger grouping of responses around the mode of 3-Agree.

All in all, even if they view oral comprehension as important, the teachers perceived it as not being given special attention in their teaching because they lack the resources and time to complete school programs. They also felt that they had not been adequately trained for teaching oral skills. Now, how do they perceive student-related constraints?

3.3 Teachers' perceptions of student-related constraints

Table 3: Summarizes the results of teachers' perceptions of student-related constraints.

(4) SA	(3) A	(2) D	(1) SD	(0) U	Mean	Mode	S.D
10. Students fear oral comprehension activities					2.61	2	1.11
26.1%	26.1%	34.8%	8.7%	4.3%			
11. students prefer other activities to oral comprehension					2.74	3	0.91
21.7%	39.1%	30.4%	5.7%	0%			
12. Students do not have pre-requisites to improve their listening comprehension					3.09	3	0.73
30.4%	47.8%	21.7%	0%	0%			
13. Students lack interest in Oral Comprehension activities					2.17	3	1.19
13.0%	30.4%	26.1%	21.7%	8.7%			
14. students lack experience to improve their oral comprehension skills					3.00	3	0.60
17.4%	65.2%	17.4%	0%	0%			
15. Students are not patient in front of oral comprehension difficulties					1.96	3	1.33
8.7%	34.8%	21.7%	13.0%	21.7%			

Table 3: Teachers' perceptions of student-related constraints

The most recurrent mode in this table is 3-agree. This shows that the majority of teachers agree with most of the propositions about student-related constraints. However, it is striking that the mode of proposition 14- students do not fear oral comprehension activities, is 2-disagree. But, by adding the percentages of items 4-Strongly agree and 3-Agree (26.1% + 26.1% = 52.2%), it comes out that teachers agree that most of the teachers agree with this proposition about student's fear of oral comprehension. Now let's turn to the figures about curriculum-related constraints. The next results are about curriculum related constraints.

3.4 Teachers' perceptions of curriculum-related constraints

The details of the results concerning teachers' perception of curriculum constraints are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Teachers' perceptions of student-related constraints

(4) SA	(3) A	(2) D	(1) SD	(0) U	Mean	Mode	SD
16. The curriculum focuses on other skills					2.35	2	0.88
8.7%	34.8%	39.1%	17.4%	0%			
17. The Curriculum does not focus on listening comprehension					2.48	2	0.66
8.7%	30.4%	60.9%	0%	0%			
18. The Curriculum does not allow the development of oral comprehension					2.30	2	1.10
8.1%	0%	39.1%	39.1%	13.0%			
19. My classes are not suitable for the development of listening comprehension					2.39	2	0.89
13.0%	26.1%	47.8%	13%	0%			
20. The textbook does not contain enough activities to develop oral comprehension					2.43	2	0.99
17.4%	21.7%	52.2%	4.3%	4.3%			

It is quite interesting to note that all the results in table 4 indicate the mode of 2-disagree. So, the majority participants believed that the curriculum is not a significant constraint in the teaching and improvement of oral comprehension. Moreover, it appears that the standard deviations are generally inferior to 1, except proposition 22- the curriculum does not allow the development of the oral comprehension (SD=1.10), which indicates a dispersion of the answers around the mode of 2-disagree.

4. Discussion

To elucidate teachers' perceptions of the importance and the constraints of teaching and improving oral comprehension in secondary education, they were submitted a questionnaire.

The results first indicate that teachers perceive the development of oral comprehension among students as essential. Such a perception is consistent with the results of studies by Rost [11] and Kurita [12] who emphasized that the major difference between learners is their ability to use listening as a learning tool. In the same vein, Krashen & al. [13] and Hamouda [14] established that acquisition occurs only when learners are sufficiently exposed to the language. Krashen [15] had long before, already emphasized the prevalence of listening in learning, arguing that oral (and written) comprehension is the natural way to acquire language and to develop the ability to communicate. Other studies [16], [17], [18].found that improved listening skills have a positive effect on reading, writing and speaking

The second significant result of this study is that listening is not at the center of attention in classrooms due to a lack of resources, time, and adequate training of teachers. We believe that listening has not yet been accepted as a distinct skill to teach explicitly and over time. It is simply often used as a means of teaching grammar points or vocabulary. Students are made to listen to a dialogue from which lexical and grammatical items are extracted and taught explicitly or implicitly. Such an approach may allow teachers, who are

required to complete an educational program before a given date, to save time. However, with a large class, this method can be unproductive, especially if students do not know how to cope with listening exercises. As teachers responses revealed, students lack the strategies to develop their listening skills. This is all the more interesting to note as cognitive strategies such as memorization, repetition, memorization, recall and use of previous information etc. allow to process learning tasks and make acquisition easier. Also, oral comprehension is highly stress-generating, especially when it is "incomprehensible" (Krashen, in Young [19] i.e. when students are confronted with tasks that are too difficult or unfamiliar [20]. Indeed, anxiety has a negative effect on motivation and creates a negative emotional response to the foreign language [21]. This is exacerbated when they have the false impression that they must understand every word they hear during a listening activity.

Another key finding of this study is that teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach oral comprehension. This may be due to a 'technicist' vision of the profession based on the belief that what they were taught during pre-service training can help solve any teaching problem no matter the context. Yet, as Kumaravelu [22] points out: 'Such an outlook inevitably leads to the disempowerment of teachers' and is likely to affect their sense of self-efficacy and lead them to believe that they are not competent enough, or that they lack the resources to teach [23]. The doubts about their competence may lead them to disengage from the achievement of the objectives related to the teaching of oral comprehension [24], [25]).

If teachers do not understand the nature of students' difficulties with listening and have a hard time finding strategies to solve them, they may end up seeing the teaching of this skill as a difficult task for both themselves and the learners. Their perceptions of student-related constraints, as suggested by the results is symptomatic of their lack of awareness of the various factors that may negatively affect the learner's ability to listen, such as the cognitive demands of texts content (Brown, 1986 [9]), the limited vocabulary that does not allow understanding the message, the speed of the speech, the speakers' accent, the phonological characteristics, and learners' general knowledge [1], [26], [27]. To these, must be added text structure, syntax, and personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language and lack of interest and motivation.

Finally, we could not find in the teachers' perceptions, any constraint related to the curriculum. As a matter of fact, the English language course in the Ivorian program is organized around the four skills: 'reading', 'writing', 'speaking' and 'listening'. So, it is for teachers to ensure that learners can deal with situations involving the comprehension of a texts, written expression, oral communication, and listening. To help learners deal with these situations, the teacher may focus on one skill or integrate two or three skills (Reading / writing, listening / speaking / writing, etc.) In such a context, it would be implausible for teachers to argue that the focus is not on listening in the curriculum and that it is a major constraint to the development of learners' oral comprehension skills.

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted to elucidate teachers' perceptions of the constraints of teaching and improving the oral reading skills of secondary school students in English. From a questionnaire, teachers indicated their perceptions of the teaching and improving oral comprehension skills, and their perceptions of teacher, student, and curriculum related constraints. The results suggest that for most teachers, listening is essential in learning English as a foreign language. However, teaching oral comprehension is made laborious by the constraints related to teachers' competence, the need to cover the curriculum, lack of educational and didactic resources. In addition, according to teachers, apprehension, lack of interest, and strategies are the major student-related constraints. Against all odds, however, they did not mention any essential constraints related to the curriculum.

Some important implications for teaching oral comprehension emerge from this study. First, teachers should pay particular attention to the anxiety associated with the practice of oral comprehension in the classroom, and use the most effective methods to lessen or eliminate the negative effects of anxiety on developing listening skills. Then, they should strive to have a good mastery of the three phases involved in teaching oral comprehension. These are the pre-listening, the while listening and the post listening phases. They allow guiding students through active listening and according to a well structured pedagogical procedure. The pre-listening phase will address the issue of anxiety by creating interest, building trust and facilitating understanding. The listening phase will be used for processing audio texts, i.e. explaining how the listening tasks are to be performed and the cognitive and metacognitive mechanisms that these involve. Finally, the listening phase, which is also the evaluation phase, will allow teachers to determine the extent to which students have understood the activity. It is essential, however, that the tasks be designed according to lexical and grammatical level, and their interests.

As a final point, these results indicate above all, the need for a continuous training for teachers who cannot always base their classroom practices on their pre-service training which was only meant to give the first steps in the profession. So, the Ministry of National Education could ensure in-service training is conducted in such a way as to help teachers avoid 'fossilization' by being open to new approaches. It goes without saying that an effective pre-service training will be one that will give teachers the means for their autonomy and their personal development.

This study however, has an important limitation. The small sample used might not reflect a national perception, even though we have involved teachers from different parts of the country. Consequently, it would be desirable for a sample made up of a larger number of teachers to be the subject of a similar study.

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