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## Interaction Challenges Faced by Primary School Pupils in an EFL Classroom at Bunia in the Democratic Republic of the Congo



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### Abstract

**Purpose:** It aimed to detect the challenges that prevent EFL classroom interaction in primary school. It also targeted to encounter the effects of interaction challenges on learners and to propose solutions to palliate those challenges.

**Methodology:** The study was conducted using the exploratory design. For data collection, the main concern was fieldwork method whereby observation served as technique. Data on teachers' educational level and experience in ELT were retrieved owing to documentary technique. From the collected data, we proceeded with some statistical analyses to describe the trends of the observation. Specifically, we used frequency counting, for the closed aspects with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

**Results:** The results demonstrated that the interaction challenges prevent learners to develop their linguistic competences.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** The results of this study invites teachers of English at the primary school to reconsider their pedagogy because interaction in a language classroom is capital. In order to palliate those challenges, the researchers recommend that teachers of EFL should use didactics that is tailored for primary school. They should create a positive and inclusive classroom environment, use icebreaker activities, provide clear instructions and expectations, utilize cooperative learning strategies, encourage active participation, provide scaffolding and support, and foster effective communication skills.

**Keywords:** *Interaction, Communication, Teaching, Challenge, Young Learner*

## INTRODUCTION

Young learners' classroom interaction refers to the ways in which students engage with each other and with the teacher in a classroom setting designed for young learners, typically between the ages of 6 and 12. It encompasses various forms of communication, collaboration, and participation that take place during instructional activities. In a young learners' classroom, interaction plays a crucial role in facilitating language development, social skills, and cognitive growth. Key aspects of classroom interaction for young learners are mainly Teacher-Student Interaction, Student-Student Interaction, and Whole-Class Interaction.

In a foreign language Classroom, language can be effectively taught and learnt if there is a set of good guidance. Teacher's exposition itself is not sufficient to establish better learning achievement since learners learn language through four basic skills namely listening skill; speaking skill; reading skill and writing skill. These skills have to be fully enhanced in a FL classroom; that is why interaction plays important role in teaching English as second language. It enables pupils' development of communicative competence by rendering lessons more comprehensible and making them remember it for long. That is why communicative language is necessary for a natural rich input thanks to success of classroom interaction.

Krashen (2003) was influential in supporting the role of input and interaction that helped us better to understand how different kinds of interactions may contribute to providing usable input for the learner. For Peng Hong Li (2011) classroom teaching, in essence, is an activity of communication between the teacher and students by means of information transmission. Thus, communication is mainly done between teacher and pupils or sender and receiver using good channel of communication. Interaction is, therefore, the heart of the communication. The common goal to all communication is to convey the message, and the latter is achieved only when there is a clear understanding between learners and teachers. Howarth (2013) argued that interaction does not only promote language development but it also fosters the development of social skills (e.g. politeness, respect for others) that people need to operate successfully in any culture. This theory emphasizes that interaction is an important tool used by pupils and teachers to enhance learning process and it helps the latter to communicate effectively when teaching English as foreign language.

The role of Zone of Proximal Development (Vigotsky, 1962) is also important in the classroom interaction. It refers to the tasks a child is unable to complete alone but is able to complete with the assistance of an adult. It is true that learners first need the help of teachers in order to go to the next stages in which interaction plays a primordial role, not as a source of input, but as a shaper of development of learning a language as second language. From this concept it is seen that interaction does not only help people to communicate but also to foster learning process. In school context, it helps learners to be assisted by teachers who most of time intervene to provide them assistance in learning English as foreign language. During interaction teachers are considered as a ladder by helping learners to gain not only communicative competence but also impacting positively their behavior. For Petty (2004), an ideal student has the ability and the desire to master all those skills, and to use the new information as a tool of self-development on their way to becoming a full-fledged valuable member of society. Brown (2000), there is general agreement that classroom language acquisition is based on developing learners' communicative competence, which is realized through a set of classroom principles. Language

is seen as a social tool which speakers use to make meaning; speakers communicate about something to someone for some purpose, either orally or in writing. Communication is, therefore, a form of social interaction. For Gass and Selinker, (2001) argue that the intensive interaction between learners and teacher may result in better second language acquisition in that learners are sufficiently exposed to the target language.

According to Debassish (2015), Classroom interaction plays a focal role not only for the students but also for the teachers which is commonly recognized to all. It can promote students' language development and communicative competence. The practicing of any language's opportunity can be developed by the significant part of classroom interaction. As a result, many researchers have dedicated their life working over the language learning and teaching and they engrossed their studies on classroom interaction. Mackey (2013) also asserts that "Through processes of repetition, segmentation and rewording, interaction can serve to draw learners' attention to form-meaning relationship and provide them with additional time to focus on encoding meaning" which might be also the right definition of interaction and it is something people can do mutually. Obviously, in the classroom it is considered as important for the teacher as well as students to manage who should talk, to whom, on what topic, in what language and so on which focuses on the learners' cooperation. It is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings and/or ideas between two or more people resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other. Consequently, we can say that classroom interaction has the way of communication among teachers, learners and vice versa that generates effective learning and teaching.

The topic falls within the context of the didactics of English. Indeed, teaching English in primary school is a worldwide phenomenon. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there is a Ministerial decree N° MINESPSP/CABMIN/I80/2018 of 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2018, allowing the introduction of the teaching of English language in primary school. But unfortunately, this decree is not accompanied by special didactics relating thereto. English is taught without proper methodology. Therefore, there is lack of classroom interaction among young learners which leads to several problems that can hinder their educational development and overall learning experience such as: limited social skills, reduced engagement, limited language development, limited emotional and psychological support, lack of peer learning, reduced feedback and assessment opportunities.

This article centers the following main question: What are challenges affecting EFL classroom interaction in primary school? The subsidiary questions are the followings: What are the effects of interaction challenges on young learners? How can we palliate classroom interaction challenges?

The main objective of the study is to detect the challenges that prevent EFL classroom interaction in primary school. The study also aims to encounter the effects of interaction challenges on learners and to propose solutions to palliate those challenges.

The hypotheses to be verified throughout the present study are the followings: The interaction challenges prevent learners develop their linguistic competence. To palliate those challenges teachers should be specifically trained and use appropriate didactics for EFL in primary schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

## Research Design

Exploratory mixed designs were used in conducting the research. The exploratory survey dimension sought to get more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. The research field comprised classrooms where features were closely examined.

## Target Population

The study targeted as population, all teachers of English from Bunia Primary schools. Primary school. Urban Educational Subdivision of Bunia City comprises 173 primary schools. However, English is only taught in 20 schools (all, from accredited private school network) which count a total of 49 teachers. Considering this small number, I resolved to work with all these 49 teachers. This is therefore, an exhaustive sampling.

## Instrument

On the one hand, data collection relied on fieldwork method where observation was used as technique. Indeed, the active observation of one lesson per teacher allowed us to really appreciate their pedagogical practices in their classrooms. The observation relied on *Likert scale type observation tally sheet* using three scale levels namely, *To consolidate, Satisfactory and Excellent* (see appendix). However, trends on teachers' Educational Level and their Experience in ELT were got owing to documentary technique. For this, we consulted administrative documents found in the Head Office of each school. On the other hand, From the collected data, we proceeded with some statistical analyses to describe the trends of the observation. Specifically, we used frequency counting, for the closed aspects with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

## RESULTS

The main concern of this subject was to know whether there existed some classroom interaction challenges that the pupils face and identify the causes. To answer the above questions, the present point essentially dealt with data presentation and interpretation that were supported and justified thanks to the realities encountered when investigating.

### 3.1 General information on the teacher

**Table 1: Educational Level**

Level	f	%
Certificated in English Centre	7	14,3
State diploma	27	55,1
Undergraduate	9	18,4
Graduate	6	12,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100,0</b>

The above table and chart inform that most of teachers of English, 27 (55.1%) out of 50 questioned possess simply the State Diploma in Pedagogy, 9 (18.4%) are undergraduate, those who **earn a certificate** in English from a language center represent 7(14.3%), and 6 (12.2%) are graduate.

**Table 2. Experience**

Experience	f	%
One year	7	14,3
Two years	16	32,7
Three years	9	18,4
Four years	4	8,2
Five years	5	10,2
Six years	2	4,1
Seven years	3	6,1
Above eight years	3	6,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100,0</b>

It results from the table above that 16 teachers (32.7%) have two years of experience in ELT, 9 (18.4%) three years, 7 (14.3%) one year, 5 (10.2%) five years, 4 (8.2%) four years, 3 (6.1%) seven and above eight years and 2 (4.1%) six years.

### 3.2 Trends Observed in the Classroom

**Table N°3. Rate of EFL classroom interaction**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	39	79.6%
Satisfactory	8	16.32%
Excellent	2	4.08%
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: Primary data*

This table presents that in 39 (79.6%) classrooms the interaction is unsatisfactory; whereas in 8 (16.32%) classroom the interaction is satisfactory. In only 2 (4.08%) classrooms the interaction is rated excellently.

**Table N°4. Teacher encourages the interaction between the pupils during teamwork**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	40	81.64%
Satisfactory	9	18.36%
Excellent	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: Primary data*

The data in the table number 1 is related to whether teachers encourages pupils to interact during the teamwork and the results have shown that in 40 teachers' classroom (81.64%), this process is unsatisfactory whereas in the two remaining classrooms the fact of encouraging learners' interaction is satisfactory.

**Table N°5: Pupils prove a rich lexical background**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	41	83.67%
Satisfactory	7	14.29%
Excellent	1	2.04%
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: Primary data*

The data in the table above dealt with investigation on the pupils' lexical background. So, in 1 classroom out of 5 classrooms the pupils' lexical background was satisfactory poor and in five classrooms their lexical background was excellently poor.

**Table N°6: Pupils' use of grammatical structures in the target language.**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	41	83.6%
Satisfactory	7	14.29%
Excellent	1	2.04%
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

*Source: Primary data*

The data show that the use of grammatical structures in the target language was unsatisfactory in 41 (83.6%) teachers' classroom, satisfactory in 7(14.29%), and excellent in only 1 (2.04%) teachers' classrooms.

**Table N° 7: The teacher cultivates turn-taking behavior during interaction**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	46	93.88%
Satisfactory	3	6.12%
Excellent	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: Primary data*

In the above table, 46 (93.88%) teachers unsatisfactorily cultivate turn-taking behavior during interaction, whereas in 3 (6.12%) teacher's classrooms the turn-taking behavior proves satisfactory.

**Table 8: Centering much of speaking around learners**

Expertise level	f	%
Unsatisfactory	37	75,5
Satisfactory	8	16,3
Excellent	4	8,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100,0</b>

*Source: Primary data*

It is results from the above table and chart that 37 (75.5%) teachers have to consolidate the aspect of centring much of speaking around learners in their teaching, 8 (16.3%) of them are satisfactory in it and 4 (8.2%) teachers are excellent in doing so.

**Table 9: Constructing, creating and animating teaching-learning situations considering the diversity of pupils**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	41	83,7
Satisfactory	5	10,2
Excellent	3	6,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100,0</b>

*Source: Primary data*

So far as constructing, creating and animating teaching-learning situations taking into account the diversity of pupils is concerned, the above table and chart inform that 41 (83.7%) have to



consolidate these aspects, 5 (10.2%) are satisfactory and 3 (6.1%) teachers are excellent in these areas.

**Table 10: Pupils' pair work organization**

Expertise level	f	%
To Consolidate	43	87,8
Satisfactory	6	12,2
Total	49	100,0

*Primary data*

The above table shows that 43 (87.8%) teachers have to consolidate pupils' pair work in their teaching whereas 6 (12.2%) are satisfactory in them.

**Table 11: Pupils' group work organization**

Expertise level	f	%
To consolidate	49	100,0

*Primary data*

It results from the above table that 49 (100%) teachers have to consolidate group work in their teaching. They actually do not organize group works.

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The challenges affecting interaction in EFL classroom in Bunia primary schools are mainly the teachers' educational level and their poor experience in ELT; pupils' weak lexical and grammatical background. As far as teachers' educational level is concerned, it is noticed that most of the teachers of English in Primary School, possess only State Diploma in Pedagogy. This is due to the fact that in lots of schools they do not necessarily employ a teacher who has attended a specific training in ELT, but each Primary School teacher teaches automatically in her/his class on the basis of the notion she/he got in secondary school. Our investigation has revealed that most of the School Promoters opt for this system because they find it less costly. For them employing a specific teacher for ELT becomes too demanding and costly. Those teachers then, being afraid of losing their job, are obliged to teach English despite their lack of training in ELT. It is noticed that teachers' experiences in ELT vary mainly from two to five years. This results from the fact that English has been recently introduced in some primary schools in Bunia. These years correspond to the introduction of the teaching of English in some primary schools in Bunia. It should be noted that in most schools English is taught by the class-teacher. Those who have more years of experience are the teachers who have taught in secondary schools for long, and are asked to teach English in school complexes which are currently organizing ELT at Primary level. Nevertheless, a short duration of experience does not mean that such a teacher cannot receive any specific training in ELT for primary level. For a good interaction in an EFL classroom the teacher of English should be regularly trained and

recycled. Interaction, in fact, is a must for a successful teaching- learning process. Brown (2015), accordingly, argues that interaction between teacher and students and students and students are needed in the classroom activities, it maintains communication to happen in the classroom. It helps the teaching and learning process to run smoothly.

It was also revealed that the majority, 83.6% of pupils do lack either words or correct grammatical structure that is why they are unable to engage themselves in class. So, when they try to interact in the classroom they feel threatened by the fact that other classmates will disqualify them. Yet primary school is the right period when children have to prove their fluency. In terms of language skills and fluency, pre-teens and early teens are usually quite alert and confident. They can communicate well in their own language; they are familiar with the basics of such diverse subjects as literature, history and mathematics; they are also beginning to study science as a subject, and to realize that it is a field of knowledge unlike any other. An ideal student, according to any national standards of education, has the ability and the desire to master all those skills, and to use the new information as a tool of self-development on their way to becoming a full-fledged valuable member of society (Petty, 2004).

Vygotsky (1962) explained the crucial role of social interaction for learners' psychological development through his theory of Zone of Proximal Development, that was previously explained in the chapter two. He said that this theory, which centers on the development of learners' independence in solving problems, has an important pedagogical implication for language learning and teaching. In addition, interacting with people at higher level of English proficiency could foster the development of learners' ability in English performance. Interaction can promote students' language development and communicative competence. (Debassish, 2015; Mackey, 2013)

During classroom feature observation Children's interaction was mostly rated unsatisfactory (79.6%). I assume that the reason is the ignorance of the right methods for kids because teachers did not receive a specific training in ELT for primary level. Indeed, Primary school children would interact and learn best through activities which follow a similar pattern. They are generally very enthusiastic about songs, especially if they can sing along, and be involved in active games. Knowing which children are stronger or weaker in any given activity will help plan appropriate activities for the sake of individualization of teaching, not for an exam orientation. Many of the children would start off slowly, but later on develop rapidly. Face to this undeniable reality, teachers of English should avoid judging one child as slower than the others or unable to learn! The fact is that although teaching is global, learning is individual. Each child is unique and learns according to individual pace and potential. The attitude of the teacher has a role in this process. Teachers should therefore be patient and give more time and attention to those who need it. Aware of this feature, teachers are requested to provide lots of encouragement and positive feedback in order to create a safe and stress-free environment that everyone can enjoy learning in. Unfortunately, our investigation has revealed that some teachers do not encourage children during the lesson, particularly when they make mistakes either because they run after the timing or because they ignore the right way of correcting learners' errors. For Krashen (2003), *the errors that the student makes are a natural part of the learning*

*process*. He implies that there is very little that we can do other than encouraging the learner to form his own hypotheses and to continue along the 'natural pathway' to mastery - or at least to the level of master which satisfies him. However, other observers have noted that classroom teaching may help the learner go through each stage in the process rather more quickly, even if it cannot enable him to beat the system.

To make children learn better, affective filter hypothesis theory would be taken into account (Krashen, Op.Cit). An affective relation between the teacher and his/her learners creates a favorable atmosphere interaction and communication. Peng Hong Li (2011) qualifies, in the same way, classroom interaction as heart of communication; therefore, a success for a good teaching-learning process.

Authoritarian atmosphere stresses the teacher's personality, student-centred methods emphasize the student's role, competence over the content means expert knowledge of some subject, and understanding of the student's personality refers to psychological interaction, etc. In the same way, Gass and Selinker, (2001) argue that the intensive interaction between learners and teacher may result in better second language acquisition in that learners are sufficiently exposed to the target language. Moreover, the language learners who involve in conversational interaction could be said to build the building blocks of language development.

Therefore, it may be indicated that learners can proceed to the interaction stage when they are certain that they have got the language meanings or associate meanings from the interlocutor. Teachers must make use of democracy and understanding in the classroom interaction. It is crucial for an effective interaction. Each pupil must intervene regardless of their gender and cultural differences. Teachers are required to understand pupils because it can help them to fill the gaps pupils have when expressing themselves. They must sometime ask questions to the teacher and vice-versa. Work in groups and in pairs is favorable factor for classroom interaction. Pair work is easy and fast to organize. It provides opportunities for intensive listening and speaking practice. Pair work is better than group work if there are discipline problems. (Elena Stakanova & Elena Tolstikhina, 2014).

It is good to remember, each student is unique, and it is essential to approach their difficulties with patience, understanding, and flexibility. Here, the teacher should do her/his best to address a positive behavior towards the pupils (Krashen, 2003), and create a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962). By implementing these strategies, the teachers can help palliate difficulties in young learners' classroom interactions and create a positive and engaging learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

This article pinpointed the English as a foreign language classroom interaction challenges faced by Bunia primary school pupils. The study opened with an introduction followed by the sections of research methodology. The coming section presented the results of the research, which has been discussed in the last section. A conclusion put an end to the production of the article. The study aimed to detect the challenges that prevent EFL classroom interaction in

primary school. It also targeted to encounter the effects of interaction challenges on learners and to propose solutions to palliate those challenges.

The hypotheses to be verified throughout the present study are the followings: The interaction challenges prevent learners develop their linguistic competence. To palliate those challenges teachers should be specifically trained and use appropriate methodology of EFL in primary schools.

To reach the objective, the study was conducted using exploratory design. For data collection, the main concern was fieldwork method whereby observation served as technique. In the present case, observation relied on *Likert scale type observation tally sheet* using three scale levels namely, *to consolidate, satisfactory and excellent*. Trends on teachers' Educational level and Experience in ELT were retrieved owing to documentary technique. From the collected data, we proceeded to some statistical analyses to describe the trends of the observation. Specifically, we used frequency counting, for the closed aspects with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software

The hypotheses were attested, therefore the results demonstrated that the interaction challenges prevent learners to develop their linguistic competence. To palliate those challenges teachers of EFL should use didactics proper for primary school. They should create a positive and inclusive classroom environment, use icebreaker activities, provide clear instructions and expectations, utilize cooperative learning strategies, encourage active participation, provide scaffolding and support, foster effective communication skills.

Regarding the above results we suggest the followings: First, designing didactics as a teaching tool for primary school. Second, training and recycling teachers in ELT for primary school. Third, sensitizing school stakeholders about their role and implication in EFLT.

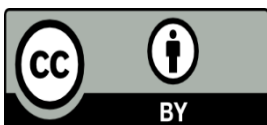
### **Recommendation**

To address these problems, it is crucial to create a classroom environment that encourages and promotes interaction among young learners. Teachers can incorporate collaborative activities, discussions, group projects, and interactive technologies to facilitate engagement and interaction. Additionally, providing opportunities. In the same context, Howarth (2013) supported that language learning takes place when interaction is well structured. Thus, this theory helps the teachers and learners to efficiently reach the second language learning goals. When it comes to palliating difficulties in young learners' classroom interactions, there are several strategies that can be helpful. These strategies include:

- Creating a positive and inclusive classroom environment
- using icebreaker activities, providing clear instructions and expectations
- utilizing cooperative learning strategies, encouraging active participation
- providing scaffolding and support,
- fostering effective communication skills

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