ESL through the lenses of EFL: Constructing the experiences of ESL Students in an EFL Program

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ABSTRACT

This is empirical research which draws on the Kachruvian perspectives to provides insights on reasons that bring citizens of outer circle countries to an expanding circle country to learn English. Data were collected using unstructured interviews from eight citizens of Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia studying English in a Nigerien university. Findings suggest that most of the participants embraced English studies out of constraint, mainly due to the lack of proficiency in French. Their majority moved to Niger due to family reasons but could not undertake studies in their preferred subjects because courses are taught in French. Participants also reported difficulties they experienced as part of their journey within the English language program.

KEYWORDS : English a second/foreign language, world Englishes, Kachruvian concentric circles.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Discussions of issues in World Englishes have tended to define learners and/or speakers of English in relation to the geographical spaces where they live. Kachru's (1992) concentric circles have been foundational to the distinction of these spaces, mainly between native speakers (NS) and learners of English as a second (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). However, there are considerable gaps in those distinctions. There have been expressions of need among academics (Clyne & Sharifian, 2008; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Yano, 2009) for a redefinition that considers the mobility of learners and speakers of English across geographical and cultural boundaries. This is a situation generally linked to globalization, which is believed to diversely affect the life of individuals, mainly those learning English as an additional language (ESL and EFL).

The issue of mobility is central to this research, which owes its interest to an observed situation at a Nigerien university English language program, where a various individuals study English as a foreign language. Among those individuals are some who originated from ESL contexts, such as Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia, and strive to become EFL practitioners in their future lives. This situation has raised the interest to find answers to the following questions: What are the reasons for the ESL learners to move to Niger and register to the English language program? What kind of difficulties do they experience at the English language program? How do they overcome those difficulties? In other words, why those foreigners moved to Niger to study English and how they mediate, overcome and learn from multiple difficulties constitute the central questions to this study. Answers to these questions are presented after a conceptual analysis around the Kachruvian concentric circles and the importance of the English language in a globalizing world.

ESL? EFL? What Difference?

To better understand the focus of this research, there is a great need to differentiate and delineate the concepts of ESL and EFL. Even though these two concepts tend to be used interchangeably in certain literatures, they in fact carry different ideological backgrounds. They originated from Kachru's work (1992) in which he categorizes learners and speakers of English into three concentric circles based on geographical entities: Inner Circle (IC), Outer Circle (OC) and Expanding Circle (EC). The IC consists of countries where English is "used as the primary language" (Clyne & Sharifian, 2008). It mainly includes five countries: USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. According to Kachru (1992), IC countries offer to English its cultural and linguistic bases (p. 356). Citizens from these countries are, therefore, considered as native speakers of English and are expected by certain scholars and policy makers to serve as models to other contexts (Sharifian, 2009).

The OC – also called Extended Circle by Crystal (2003) – refers to the category of countries where English remains a colonial heritage. In other words, these countries received English as a consequence of colonization by either the US or the UK. They are non-native settings "where the language has become part of a country's chief institutions, and plays an important 'second language' role in a multilingual setting" (Crystal, 2003: 60). The use of the language by speakers in these settings is, therefore, supported by governmental policies (Alsagoff, 2012). Within these contexts, the English language carries the characteristics of ESL: It is used for interaction between coworkers in public offices, in courts and remains the language of instruction in schools. Furthermore, there can be observed within these settings a linguistic phenomenon known as *nativization* (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) through which local varieties of English are developed (Alsagoff, 2012). In OC countries, such as Nigeria, India, Kenya, Malaysia, people tend to talk about Nigerian English, Inglish, Kenyan English and so forth.

Concerning the EC, it refers to countries where English varieties have no "official status and are typically restricted in their uses" (Kachru, 1992: 357). It is generally considered as the biggest circle, involving more than 750 million of "what are traditionally called English as a foreign language (EFL) speakers" (McKay, 2012: 28-9). As Graddol (2006) has indicated, the number of learners of English within such countries is ever-increasing (p. 110). This phenomenon is relevant to countries, such as China, Niger, Indonesia, Brazil, Russia…, where the importance of English as an international language is duly acknowledged (Crystal, 2003). Worth mentioning is also the fact that EC countries are believed to be norm-dependent, as their ELT curricula and practices are generally nourished by standards of correctness from the American or the British variety of English (Alsagoff, 2012).

Notwithstanding, Kachru's categorization of learners or speakers of English based on geographical entities remains contentious. The concentric circles fail to recognize the effect of economic globalization on the spread of the English language (Yano, 2009). Because of globalization, people have been moving across borders and consequently contributing to the spread of English and the linguistic changes in certain contexts (Graddol, 2006; Yano, 2009). According to Kumaravadivelu, 2012), "our world is marked by a near-collapsing of space, time, and borders, resulting in a run away flow of peoples, goods, and ideas across the world" (p. 11). This phenomenon has led to the emergence of multilingual settings. Even though Kachru himself has acknowledged the complexity of certain countries, such as South Africa and Jamaica (1992: 362), and has recently argued that the IC is better seen as a "group of highly proficient speakers of English – those who have 'functional nativeness' regardless of how they learned or use the language" (Graddol, 2006: 110), more weaknesses of his model remain to be discussed.

Clyne and Sharifian (2008), in their analysis of English as an international language, have challenged the stability of the concentric circles and pointed out that the varieties of English have moved across borders and found themselves in other circles (p. 5). In other words, there is an influx of people – immigrants, businessmen, students, researchers and engineers – from the IC contexts living in OC or EC countries. There are also lots of speakers from OC countries living in EC countries or vice versa. As Clyne and Sharifian added, there exists an ongoing change in some OC countries where "English is becoming a first language for a sizable number of speakers" (p. 5). As such, the concept of 'native speaker of English' is no longer a property of IC countries alone. This argument is extended by Yano (2009) who used Crystal's (2003: 6) example of the industrialist couple in the Emirates to demonstrate the fact that native speakers can also originate from EC contexts.

Put together, the above arguments point to the idea that learners and speakers of English around the world can no longer be defined based on the geographical areas where they live but rather on their proficiency (Yano, 2009). This is further complicated by Crystal (2003) who warned against differentiating ESL from EFL based on fluency and ability or based on the Kachruvian ideology. As he argued,

> *The distinction between 'second language' (L2) and 'foreign language' use has less contemporary relevance than it formerly had. There is much more use of English nowadays in some countries of the expanding circle, where it is 'only' a foreign language (as in Scandinavia and The Netherlands), than in some of the outer circle where it has traditionally held a special place (p. 67).*

This situation invalidates the notion of official status known to ESL, since there are many countries around the world where English is a foreign language but progressively replacing other colonial languages at school and within public administrations. This is the case of Rwanda, where English has recently become the official language.

It derives from the above analysis that the only differentiating factor between ESL and EFL is colonial. ESL learners inherited English from the British or American colonizer, while EFL learners adopted it for exchange purposes and reasons relevant to globalization. The next section deals with these reasons, even though the literature on issues of World Englishes does not say much about why ESL learners move to EFL contexts to learn English. Reasons to this gap could be explained by the fact that, traditionally, English speaking countries (IC and OC) have tended to attract more international students than other countries (Graddol, 2006).

Globalization and the Importance of English

The importance of the English language or the reasons why huge numbers of citizens – mainly from EFL contexts – attribute great attention to learning this language cannot be justified without putting globalization at the center. In fact, English is considered today as an international language (Sharifian, 2009) due to the economic and technological globalization. According to Warschauer (2000), the English language has become global the same way trade and information technology have spread all over the world (p. 513). English has become the most used language for exchange purposes by people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This role has been conceptualized by researchers as the *lingua franca English* (Roberts & Canagarajah, 2009). In other words,

> *more and more people learn English within the Outer and Expanding Circles to use among themselves. English becomes the main vehicle for interaction among the non-native speakers with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds, such as Koreans with Japanese, Chinese with Vietnamese, Germans with Danish and so on. (Xiaoqiong & Xianxing, 2011: 222)*

This assertion supports Kachru's arguments in his attempt to deconstruct the fallacy which assumes that "in the Outer and Expanding Circles, English is essentially learned to interact with native speakers of the language" (1992: 357). As he posits, there are three key reasons why people learn English. First, it is due to the fact that the English language possesses a large literary heritage; it is "employed for every conceivable literary genre" (Coulmas, 2005 quoted in McKay, 2012: 31).

Second, English provides a higher social status to its speakers. Even though this has been approached by Park (2011) as a fallacy, it remains a common belief among citizens in many EFL contexts. Due to globalization, a large number of British and American companies – and also many other transnational companies – have established their subsidiaries across the world (Graddol, 2006: 34). These international companies, in general, use English as their language of communication (Warschauer, 2000), regardless of the dominant medium of communication within the context. At Chrysler in Germany, for example, employees are required to master English, while no one requires English speakers to learn German (McKay, 2012).

This is also the case of Toyota in Japan, where for promotion purposes employees are expected to demonstrate a high level proficiency in English (Egan, 2004). This language constitutes therefore a competitive advantage at workplace and for recruitment purposes. Because "it is believed that having good competence in English will facilitate social success and aid in furthering one's career in the highly volatile job market" (Park, 2011: 447), lots of countries around the world are investing huge amounts of money for the acquisition of English proficiency (Egan, 2004). South Korea, for example, is known to spend money in EFL courses more than any other countries around the world (Egan, 2004). The English language industry in this country is estimated to $3.300 million or more (McKay, 2012). As confirmed by Park (2011), there is a massive number of white collar workers in Korea registering to English classes, because in that context "English language proficiency means opportunity, better jobs, higher salaries" (Egan, 2004: 56).

The last reason why people learn English, according to Kachru (1992), is the fact that it opens doors to the world of technology, science, business and diplomacy. This is supported by Crystal (2003) who argued that the economic globalization mentioned earlier was aided by the new communication technologies, which led to more industrial and business competition and high level interest in research, which in turn "gave scholarship and further education a high profile" (p. 10). More importantly in this situation is the fact that those technological developments were originating from Britain and the US. In other words, other countries willing to obtain knowledge about those technologies had to acquire the ability to use English. This constituted one of the reasons for many countries to include the English language in their curricula. Another global phenomenon is the need to have diplomats who can speak English (Goumandakoye, 1992). This is in line with the emergence of international and regional organizations through which decisions are made to solve problems around the world. Most of these organizations use English as a lingua franca (Graddol, 2006). This is exemplified by Crystal (2003) who indicated that the role of English at the United Nations today is very critical. As he justified,

> *The UN now consists of over fifty distinct organs, programmes, and specialized agencies, as well as many regional and functional commissions, standing committees, expert bodies, and other organizations. English is one of the official languages within all of these structures. The language plays an official or working role in the proceedings of most other major international political gatherings, in all parts of the world (p. 87).*

In other words, countries sending people to those institutions or partner countries have to ensure their representatives' communication skills in English are adequate.

Considering the above reasons underlined by Kachru, people around the world learn English for instrumental reasons (Park, 2011). This argument is supported by an important number of studies focused on learner attitude and motivation. Marosan and Markovic (2019), for example, gathered survey data from medical students in Serbia in relation to their integrative and instrumental motivation. Results revealed a high level of instrumental motivation (98.2%) – building better career and learning job related vocabulary – even though many among the respondents also expressed interest in learning English for communication with native speakers. Similar results were obtained by Goktepe (2014) from Turkey, Shehadeh (2019) from Palestine, Shirbagi (2010) from Iran, and Al-Gamal (2017) from Yemen. Participants to these studies saw the importance of learning English in terms career development, finding better jobs, or making money to acquire a better social status.

However, there is also the need to consider the integrative reason for which some people learn English. For Clyne and Sharifian (2008), lots of people are attracted to the English language due to "the economic and political power of the English-speaking countries, especially the U.S." (p. 10). In addition, there is a considerable number of people learning the American English due to its predominance in pop culture (p. 11). This kind of motivation has been expressed by participants to research mentioned earlier but minimally and generally alongside instrumental reasons. Regardless their secondary position compared to instrumental reasons, integrative reasons are important factors that could justify the presence of OC citizens in an EC English language program. Notwithstanding, most of the existing research tended to focus on EFL learners of English in their own (EC) or other (OC and IC) contexts. It could easily be stated that research on the English language education of ESL learners in EFL settings is almost non-existent, mainly in the African continent. This current research attempts to fill this knowledge gap and enrich debates on the internationality of the English language. As underlined at the beginning of this review, this research assumes the need to differentiate ESL from EFL learners and therefore look into reasons of learning and challenges faced by individuals when they move from ESL to EFL contexts.

English Language in Niger

In Niger, English is a foreign language that has been taught in secondary schools since the 1950s (Goumandakoye, 1992). It remains the most important foreign language of the country and continues to attract citizens though various ESP (English for specific purpose) programs, mainly the American English Language Program (AELP). Most importantly, Niger has three university-based English programs which welcome students of diverse backgrounds. While one of these programs is entirely dedicated to training EFL teachers, the two others offer a training in English studies based on courses that include TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language), Grammar, translation, literature (African, American and British) and other fields of linguistics. All the three

programs offer degrees that range from a Bachelor to a Doctorate, but in accordance with what is known as the LMD System. The latter is a replication of the francophone version of the 'Bologna Process', which was an "agreement signed originally in 1999, now involving 45 countries, aimed at harmonising university education within Europe along the lines of the British model, using a common approach to levels and length of courses" (Graddol, 2006: 74). As such, the three programs are likely to be similar with other programs within the francophone African countries. They are expected to allow mobility of students (Goudiaby, 2009).

II. METHODS

This is an interpretative research "which aims at a holistic understanding" (Tracy, 2013: 42) of realities lived by individuals. In such endeavor, reality is seen as a subjective construction of the world by participants (Grix, 2010). In this research, insights were constructed from the experiences of five Nigerians (Delu, Emanuel, Adam, Idi, and Musa), two Ghanaians (Minas and Gado) and one Gambian (Ali) studying English at a university in Niger. Most of them were starting their second year when this study was conducted. Two of them were first requested to participate to the study. They, afterwards, helped the researcher to get in touch with other participants who are also citizens of OC countries registered to the English language program. This process is what Cohen et al. (2011) calls snowball sampling.

Considering the epistemological orientation of this research, methods used for data collection and analysis fall under the qualitative framework. Data were mainly collected through unstructured interview, which is a process where the researcher interacts with participants using nondirective strategies (Barlow, 2010). Questions asked were not predefined but tightly linked to the central research questions below:

- What are the reasons for the ESL learners to move to Niger and register to the English language program?

- What kind of difficulties do they experience at the English language program, and how do they overcome these?

The conversations were captured with a voice-recorder and transcribed for the purpose of coding. The coded data were afterwards subjected to a constant comparison which enabled the presentation of key insights thematically (Miles et al., 2014). Tying this process to the research questions above, two major themes were considered: 1) Reasons for learning English in Niger and 2) Challenges of studying in Niger.

Reasons for Learning English in Niger

The analysis of the data has revealed several reasons that push OC citizens to study English in an EC context. The most salient reason is tied to the fact that most of those

participants have come to Niger for a sort of 'rebirth'. Their parents are Niger citizens living in OC countries; they were sent to Niger as a way to get familiar with the cultural practices and lifestyle. This was succinctly expressed by Minas:

> *I have my grandparents and parents in Ghana. I studied in Ghana… I attended school there, but I was asked to come to Niger, at least have an education here, know the lifestyle here, and understand the people (Minas).*

This included learning the local languages for ease of communication. This situation is also similar for Delu, Idi, Musa, and Ali. They were born in Nigeria or Gambia, but their parents are originally from Niger. When they came to Niger, they had to find a suitable university program where to register. Unfortunately, most of them lack the proficiency in French. Registering to the English language program was a sort of constraint to most of them, because it was the only place where they could attend classes without linguistic barriers.

> *You know, literature is not part of my study at all. I was into commerce, accounting… My parents said they want to come to Niger and stay here. So, they don't want to leave only me there (Delu).*

> *I was a science student. I did pure science: physics, chemistry and biology. When I came, what was in my mind was to continue, because that was always my aim… But I realised it was not possible. Everything was taught in French… The only choice for me was the English department (Ali).*

Considering these statements, Delu and Ali were obliged to go into English studies because it was the only option for them.

However, that constraint did not apply to Musa. He embraced English studies because it was his dream.

> *I chose English because since in Nigeria I wanted to become a communicator, someone who works with public. But that cannot be fulfilled if you don't have enough speaking skills…if you don't master the language, you can't do that. I had this ambition since I was in secondary school. (Musa)*

In other words, Musa was already interested in developing his skills in English for becoming a good communicator. The only difference is that he is learning English in a context where English is not used by people outside class.

Another reason for moving to Niger for English studies is that expressed by Gado. He was born and grew up in Ghana, but his parents are also from the south-eastern part of Niger. Similar to Musa, Gado was dreaming to study English but could not do it in Ghana for financial reasons.

> *The lack of money…really. Because my parents are poor. They don't have money to pay my school fees. They decided to send me to my grandmother's house. (Gado)*

As a matter of fact, it costs a lot of money to study at university in Ghana. On the contrary, in Niger, it is almost free. Students are only required to pay about $20 every year. With this opportunity, Gado's parents preferred to send him to their home country where they would pay little.

A major reason for moving to Niger to study English was also expressed by Adam and Emanuel. These participants are sons of missionaries living in Niger. They were educated in Nigeria up to the secondary level but decided to pursue their education in Niger. Similar to the previous cases, they were constrained to study English because of linguistic barriers. Emanuel, for example, had attended French classes while in Nigeria but thought it was not enough for attending courses taught in this language. He preferred to study English in order to go back to Nigeria and open a bilingual school.

It follows from the above insights that most of the students – except Musa and Gado – were constrained to study English. This is a meaningful piece of finding since most of the relevant studies have tended to classify reasons for learning English in terms of instrumental or integrative motivation. This confirms a recent study (Abu-Melhim, 2009) where female student-teachers reported to have registered to the English program due to family pressure. It is also worth underlining the fact that these participants are already undergoing a conversion process, since most of them are likely to remain in Niger. They are therefore giving up a status of ESL speaker and becoming complete EFL user. This is mainly true for Delu, Ali, Adam and Emanuel whose parents are already relocating to Niger.

Challenges and Opportunities of Studying English in Niger.

Challenges expressed by participants in terms of studying English in an EC country are generally linked to linguistic barriers. With the exception of Musa, who had the chance to attend private French classes when he came to Niger, all the participants reported having difficulties to attend classes where this language is used.

> *I came in a new environment, which is very, very strange. You are asked to come to class… sit in a class… attend a class… the class is in a language that you get nothing from it. Even to express yourself is something difficult… and at the end of the day, they are expecting you to validate… Actually, this is a challenge (Ali)*

While linguistic barriers have been presented earlier in relation to the participants' choice of the English language program, much needs to be underlined as this program includes courses taught in French. Courses of translation, for example, require students to demonstrate

mastery of both English and French. Such courses have made students like Idi and Ali suffer a lot.

In fact, the biggest challenge for those students comes from the foundation courses taught in the first year. There are five courses students are required to take, and most of them are in French. These courses provide a sort of introduction to the major subjects taught with the faculty of arts and humanities. Complaints expressed by participants are mainly linked to these courses. Most of them have reported to still have courses of the foundation year they did not pass.

> *There is a course I am still finding difficult to pass. That is Psychology. (Emanuel)*

For some of the participant, the challenge goes beyond the use of the French language as medium of instruction. There is also the issue of massification; classes are generally large and can involve hundreds of students in a lecture theatre.

> *I started the foundation courses. The first class was in French. The population was high. And, actually, I could not cope with it. (Ali)*

> *I asked someone "where are the first year students having class, because here it seems they are having a conference." He said that was the class. I told him that I can't see the lecturer, how can I study like this. He said that is the way they do it here. So I should face the reality. (Musa)*

This is a situation that pushed many among the participants to avoid attending classes they neither understand the language of instruction nor see or hear the lecturer.

Another interesting difficulty reported by participants concerns the English Grammar course. Being ESL speakers, some of the participants found it unacceptable to fail this course.

> *I had this English course… English Grammar … I wrote the exam, and he gave me 02/20. And that 02/20 means I don't know anything. You know… as a university student…they can't give you 0/20. But normally with the English Grammar, I am supposed to know something… In Nigeria, we did figures of speech… we did…everything about grammar (Adam)*

> *I said: 'what's the problem?' Someone who is from Nigeria cannot pass his English grammar class? (Musa)*

This situation should not be surprising knowing that the grammar taught in secondary school is generally from that of the university level. Besides, EFL contexts tend to rely on grammar more than ESL contexts.

Regardless of the above challenges experienced by participants, all of them have agreed to constitute a real opportunity for other students willing to reinforce their proficiency in English.

> *Most of the students want to come closer to me in order to get something (idi)*

> *I use Zarma to communicate with my friends, but I also use English, because sometimes when I speak Zarma to some people, they reply in English because they want to learn (Delu)*

> *Everyone wants to be your friend. Everyone was coming closer to us. That made us really famous (Musa)*

This is a situation where participants are seen by others as model speakers of English. Niger being a context where English is rarely used outside class by learners, the presence of those participants at the English language helps create a micro-context through which students interact with more knowledgeable others to improve their speaking skills.

III.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Data reported in this paper are indicative of many factors that condition the presence of OC citizens within an EC English language program. Insights rightly provide answers to the central research questions. It has appeared that most of the participants moved to Niger for family reasons and were generally constrained to register to the English program due to their lack of proficiency in French. Exception is only made for very few of them who embraced English for instrumental reasons – for becoming good communicator. Data has also shown that most of the participants had experienced difficulties attending large classes and courses taught in French. Additionally, some among appeared frustrated about some grammar courses that they could not pass, despite their status of ESL speakers seen as role models by other learners.

These findings are somehow in contrast with the Kachruvian assumptions (1992) which mainly see learning English in EFL contexts through the lenses of instrumental reasons. Even though most of the participants seemed to have constructed some objectives in learning English, only two of them really wanted to go in that field. Learning English by constraint is a non-researched focus in world Englishes but which is significant, as it requires educators to be aware and sensitive about difficulties experienced by learners. Furthermore, this study sheds light on weaknesses of the LMD system due to its failure to accommodate English speaking foreigners.

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