

# LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ON SPEAKING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS IN IVORIAN JUNIOR HIGH CURRICULUM: A CASE STUDY

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## Résumé

*L'objectif de cette étude menée auprès de 60 élèves de 5<sup>ème</sup> au Collège Moderne de Cocody, en Côte d'Ivoire, était d'évaluer la dimension communicative de l'ouvrage « English For All 5<sup>em</sup> », sur la base des perceptions des apprenants. Il s'agissait de savoir si les activités contenues dans l'ouvrage permettent aux apprenants de communiquer oralement en Anglais. À partir d'une méthode quantitative de collecte de données et d'analyse, il ressort que l'ouvrage contient à la fois des forces et des faiblesses quant à sa capacité à permettre aux apprenants de s'exprimer oralement en anglais. Au titre des faiblesses, il est à noter que la majorité des apprenants éprouvent des difficultés à comprendre les activités d'expression orale contenues dans le livre. Aussi, ces activités ne reflètent pas toujours le quotidien des apprenants. Par ailleurs, la capacité de l'ouvrage à développer l'expression orale chez les apprenants réside dans le fait que les images sont bien illustrées et collent généralement aux vécus des apprenants. Cela les motive davantage. À partir de ces forces et faiblesses relevées, les concepteurs du manuel sont encouragés à rendre les activités d'expression orale beaucoup plus communicatives afin qu'elles aident à développer l'expression orale des apprenants en anglais.*

**Mots clés :** *communicative, English For All, expression orale, activité d'expression orale, matériel.*

## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to evaluate the degree of communicativeness of speaking tasks in the Ivorian textbook EFA 5<sup>e</sup> to see if they can help improve learners' English-speaking skills. A quantitative method has been employed with a sample of 60 students at Collège Moderne Cocody to collect the data. After a frequency analysis of the data collected, some weaknesses and strengths of the speaking tasks of EFA, as regard their communicative dimension, were established. About the weaknesses, it was found that many students experience difficulties to understand the speaking tasks. Also, the suggested activities do not always reflect the actual daily life of learners. As for the strengths, it can be said that the pictures used in the textbook are actually illustrative given that they are colored drawings. This actually highlights their aesthetic function in attracting learners' attention. The pictures also reflect learners' daily life and do acquaint with their age. With regard to the above mentioned, EFA designers can be encouraged to make the speaking tasks much more communicative for the textbook to echo the principles of CLT as much as possible.*

**Key words:** *communicative, English for All, speaking skill, speaking tasks, material.*

## 1. Introduction

In French spoken Africa, material adequacy in every ELT curriculum is a major public concern. It is of paramount importance for learners, teachers and teacher-advisors. It affects deeply language instructional dimensions in many regards. Recent data from educational surveys provide insights into the extent of this issue with details on material relevance, authenticity, communicativeness.

Despite a downward trend in every programs and schools, rates remain at the limit of critical threshold. Surveys also reveal that the most textbooks recently used for speaking instruction in Côte Ivoire depict foreign topics. As a consequence, their communicability is below the required level. This situation remains fragile and also requires, according to Kouassi (2010) increased surveillance in the process of material writing. The authors of *Go for English* (ed 4<sup>th</sup>) have illustrated that their main concern when writing a textbook is its meaningfulness. Its represents to their mind 80% of learning endeavor.

In order to provide an adequate response to this issue, local authorities, material writers, teacher-advisors, teachers with the support of developmental partners have opted for more freedom in material writing and encourage the edition of new textbooks treating topics with close links to learner's social environment. As a consequence to that, the area has witnessed a multiplication of class materials in every subject.

Due to such a situation, textbook evaluation has become particularly unavoidable because of the plethora of consumable commercial course books on the international as well as the local markets so as to make the right choice for a classroom activity. In addition, the textbooks in use need to be evaluated so as a convenient decision might be made with regards to their future use, perfection or total rejection.

As to improve the underlying methodologies of the course books or to try new teaching methodologies, sometimes materials are submitted to re-editions. Since the late history of English teaching in Côte d'Ivoire is a perpetual didactic renewal, the formerly used textbook, *English for French Speaking Africa (EFSA)*, *African Ways (AW)* in the 80s have been replaced by *English for Success (EFS)*, *Let's Keep in Touch* and *English for All (EFA)* in the years 2000. This study puts to assess the communicativeness of the speaking tasks in EFA 5è. As

such, it is guided by the following question: do the speaking tasks suggested in the textbook EFA 5è illustrate well the principles of communicative tasks?

## **2. research methodology**

This study is a case study about a population of 200 male and female students of 5è. According to Louis Cohen et al. (2004), the number of thirty (30) is valid to guarantee reliability to a measurement in education. Accordingly, the data of this study were collected on a sample of sixty (60) male and female learners by the means of a Likert five scales. It was used in this study to collect data on conscious and unconscious perceptions of learners about the degree of communicativeness of speaking tasks suggested in EFA 5è.

The data collected were analyzed from a quantitative perspective. The analysis of the data was carried out on the basis of the criteria defined by Kouassi (2010:87) as regard the evaluation of teaching materials. The present reflection is enrooted in the theories of communicative competence and socio-constructivism.

## **3. Results**

### ***3.1. demographic identification of the respondents***

The demographic identification of the student respondents is mainly concerned with the participants' gender and age. These variables have not been given prominent importance in the treatment of the data. They display in the table below.

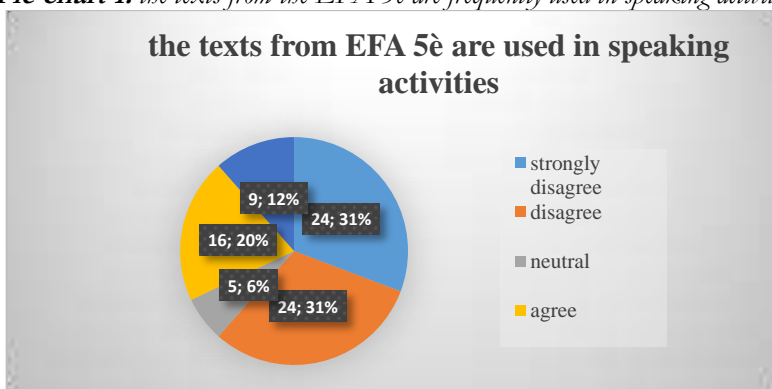
*Table 1: learners' distribution according to their age and sex*

AGES		Absolute value	Relative value
	11 to 12	39	65%
	13 to 14	20	33.33%
	15 to 16	01	1.66%
	TOTAL	60	100%
SEX		Absolute value	Relative value
	Male	20	33.3%
	Female	40	66.7%
	TOTAL	60	100%

Table 1 shows the repartition of respondents according to their age and sex. The study included 60 participants between 12 and 15 years old. Among them, 34 people representing the majority are 12. As for the sex variable, the table shows 20 male and 40 female respondents who participated in the study.

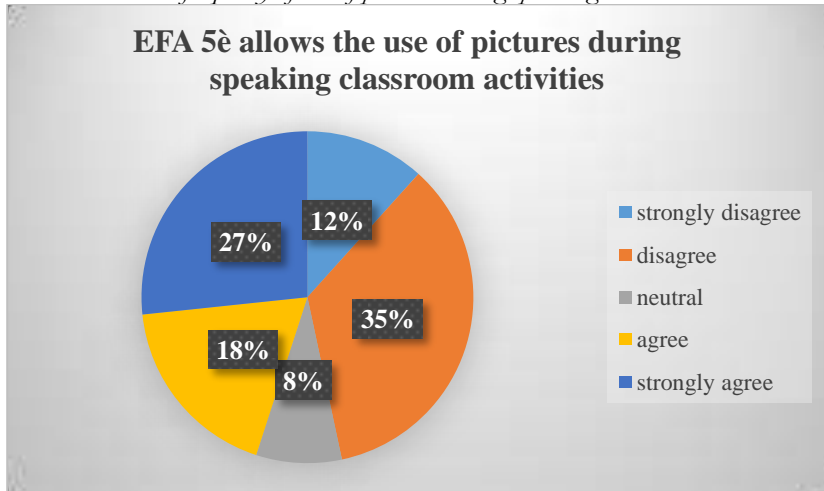
**3.2. Learners' opinion as regard the communicative dimension of the speaking tasks.**

*Pie chart 1: the texts from the EFA 5è are frequently used in speaking activities*



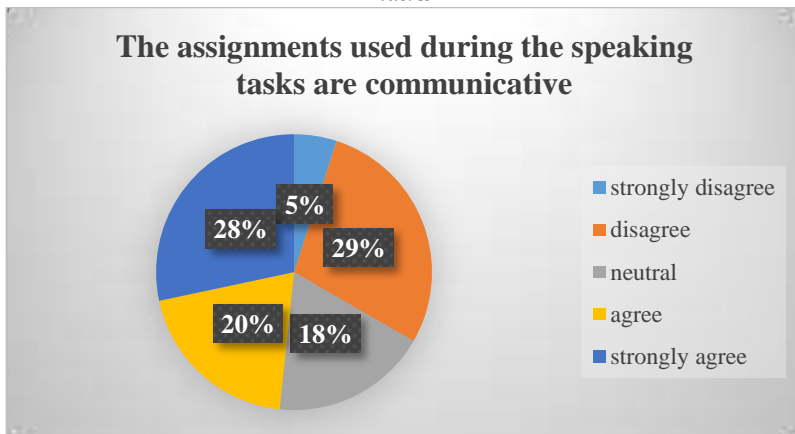
This Pie chart shows the frequencies of texts-based instruction during speaking activities. 41.7% of the participants agree that the texts used during speaking activities in the classroom are often instructed from EFA. 50% of them representing the majority of a respondent comment that they rarely complete texts-based activities during the speaking tasks.

***Pie chart 2:** frequency of use of pictures during speaking classroom activities*



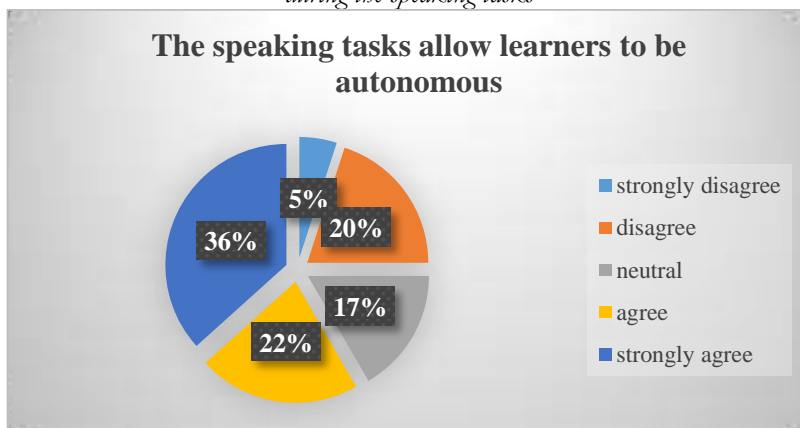
The pie chart indicates the frequency of the use of pictures during speaking activities. 45% of them think that the pictures are often used during speaking activities in classroom. 46,7% of them representing the majority certify that the pictures are used during the speaking tasks in the classroom. Here also, the difference is trivial.

*Pie chart 3: communicativeness of the assignments used during the speaking tasks*



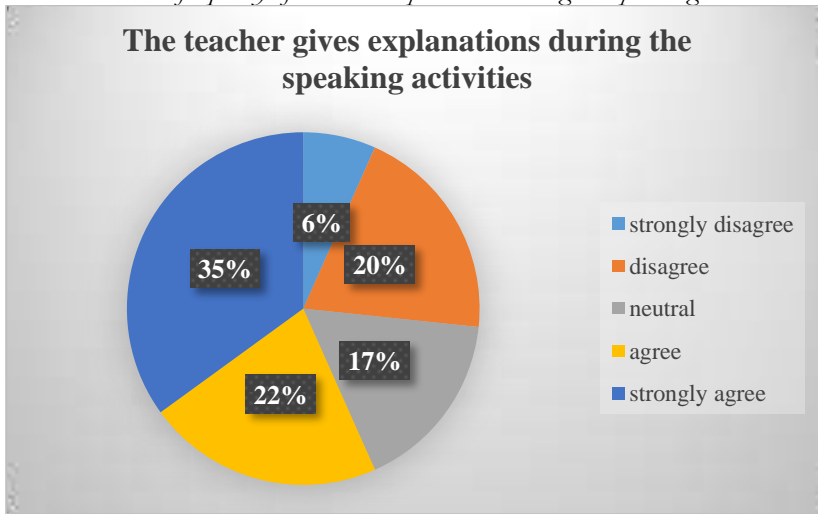
This pie chart displays data related to the communicativeness of the assignments used during the speaking tasks in the material. It can be seen that 32,3% of the participants agree that the assignments used in the textbook EFA 5è during the speaking tasks are communicative. 48,3%, the majority of the learners attest that the assignments are not communicative as such.

*Pie chart 4: learners' autonomy with regards of the use of English language during the speaking tasks*



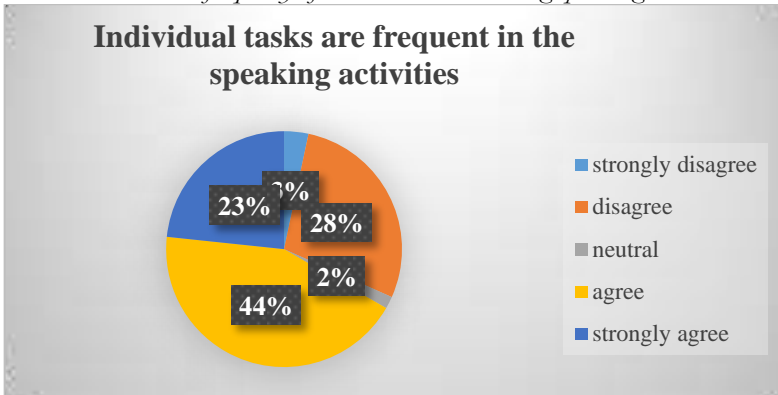
As it can be seen from the pie chart, learner's autonomy with regards to the use of English language during the speaking tasks works without the intervention of the teacher at a rate of 36, 7 % while the majority of the respondents estimated at 57, 4 % need the intervention of the teacher in to get their autonomy during the speaking tasks.

*Pie chart 5: frequency of teachers' explanation during the speaking activities*



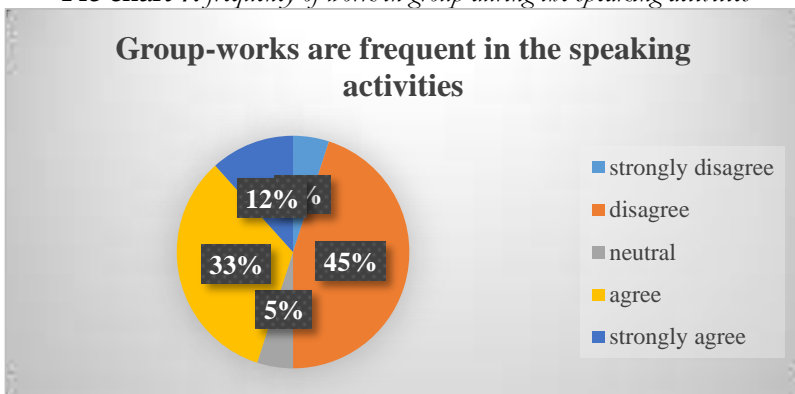
This pie chart indicates the frequency of teachers' explanation during the speaking activities. 26 % of the learners agree that teachers rarely explain the speaking activities extracted from the textbook EFA 5è, during the course. And 57 % attest that they always receive explanations from teachers in classroom. Accordingly, 17% of the respondents remain neutral.

*Pie chart 6: frequency of individual tasks during speaking activities*



This pie chart is about the use of individual tasks during speaking activities. 31% of the learners certify that individual tasks are rare during the speaking activities in the textbook. 67% representing the majority agree on the fact that individual tasks are frequent in the speaking activities.

*Pie chart 7: frequency of work in-group during the speaking activities*

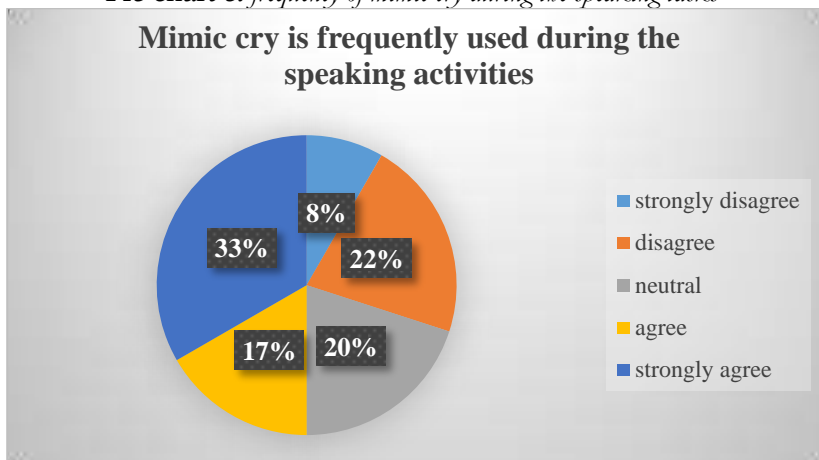


This pie chart shows the frequency of group-works during the speaking activities. 50% representing the majority of the learners disagree with the fact that they work in groups during the speaking activities. 45% of them attest that they often have group-works during



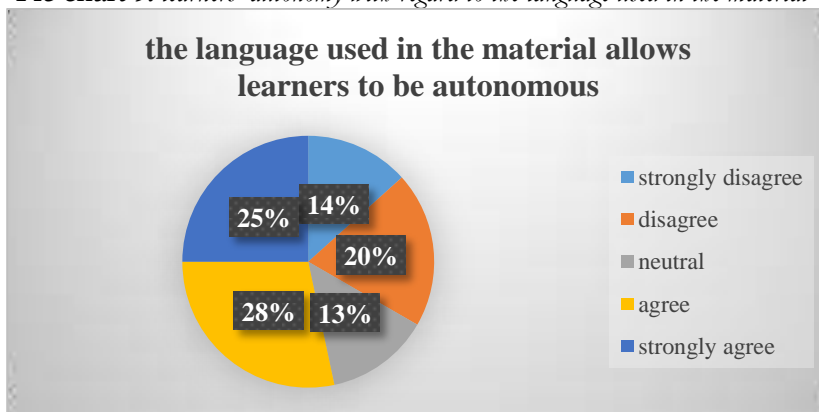
speaking activities extracted from the textbook EFA 5è. 05% of them did not say anything about this statement.

**Pie chart 8:** *frequency of mimic cry during the speaking tasks*



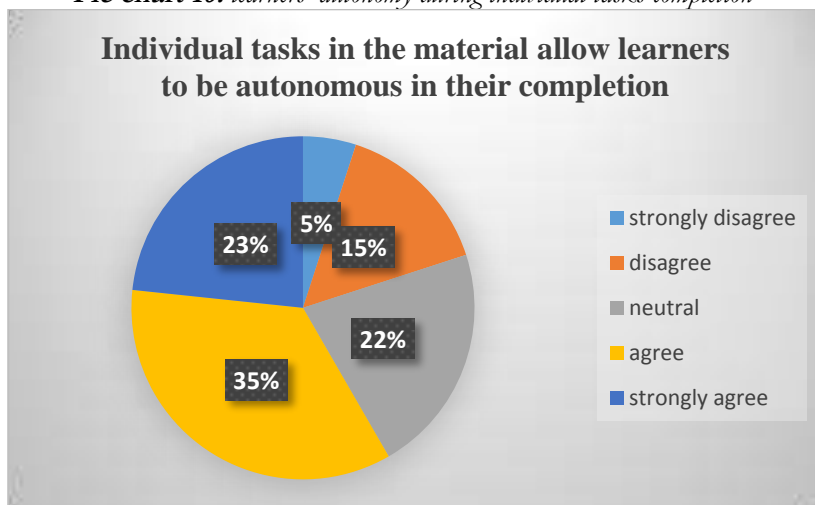
These displayed data refer to the frequency of mimic cry during speaking tasks. As it can be seen, 30% of the respondents hold a negative attitude toward the occurrence of mimic cry during speaking task in the classroom. The other group of respondents, estimated at 50%, agree with the frequent occurrence of mimic cry during the course.

**Pie chart 9:** *learners' autonomy with regard to the language used in the material*



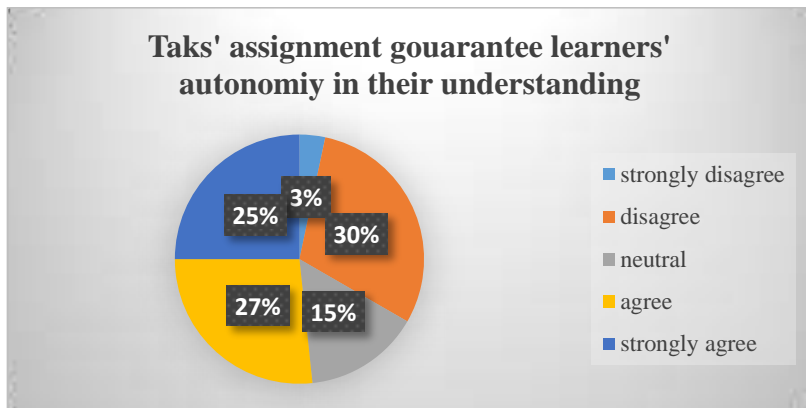
Learners' perceptions on the communicativeness of the language suggested in EFA 5è are displayed in this pie chart. According to the data, 34% of them disagree with their understanding of the speaking tasks. 53% on the other hand, are somehow satisfied with their understanding of the tasks. However, up to 13% of the respondents remained neutral.

**Pie chart 10:** learners' autonomy during individual tasks completion



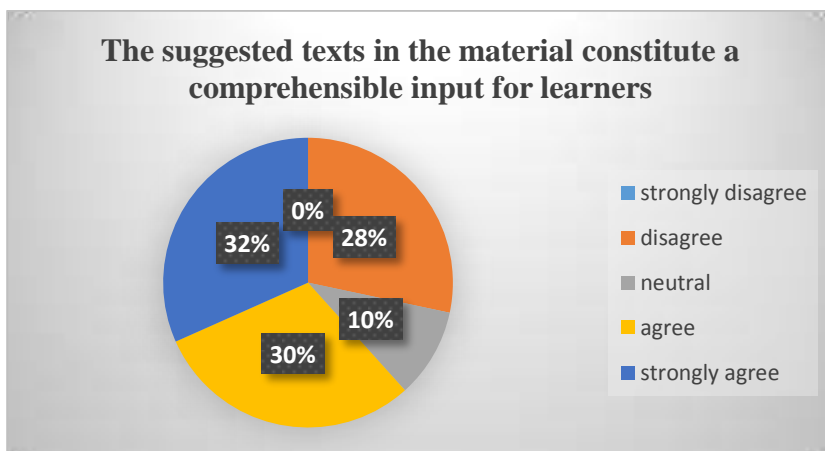
Learners' perceptions on the communicativeness of the tasks suggested in EFA 5è, namely their autonomy, are emphasized in this pie chart. According to the data, 58% of them agree that the tasks are understandable and allow them to be autonomous. 20% of the respondents disagree with the communicative dimension of the tasks suggested in the book. As such, 22% of the whole population paid no attention to this statement. Based the respondents who actually scored the statement, it can be assumed that the materials used facilitate learners' autonomy in the completion of the speaking tasks. Therefore, the tasks suggested can be considered as communicative.

*Pie chart 11: learners' autonomy in the understanding of the task's assignments*



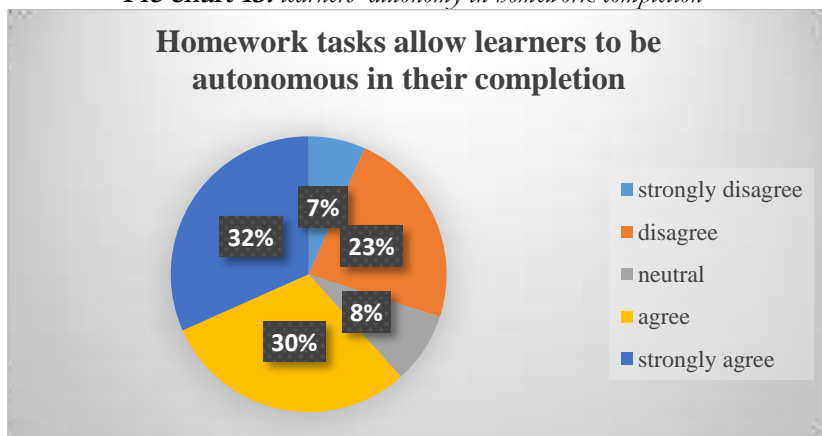
This pie chart displays learners' perceptions on the communicativeness of the assignments suggested in EFA 5è. According to the data, 52% of them agree that they understand the assignments. Among them, 27% strongly agree that they understand those assignments. However, 33% show their disagreement. From this, it can be concluded that the materials used facilitate learners' autonomy in the completion of the tasks. Then, the assignments suggested are said to be communicative.

*Pie chart 12: learners understanding of the texts suggested*



This pie chart describes learners' perceptions on the communicativeness of the texts suggested in EFA 5è. According to the data, 62% of them agree that they understand them. Among them, 32% strongly agree that they understand those texts. However, 28% show disagreement. The difference between 62% and 28% is significant despite the homogeneity of the population. As a result, the materials used facilitate learners' autonomy in the completion of the tasks. Then, the texts suggested are communicative.

***Pie chart 13:** learners' autonomy in homework completion*



This pie chart describes learners' perception of their autonomy during the completion of their homework. 62% of them agree that the material used allow them to complete homework. Most of them strongly agree that such an autonomy depends on the relevance of the tasks suggested. On the other hand, 30% of the respondents showed disagreement, and 8% were neutral.

The data spelt out that the speaking tasks in the material have both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses regarding the communicative dimension of the speaking tasks are chiefly concerned with the lack of pictures likely to motivate learners throughout the activities; the frequent occurrence of individual work, which does not actually promote language use among the learners; group-work or pair-work are not emphasized during the speaking activities. As for the

strengths, it is worth mentioning that the assignments in the speaking activities promote communication. Also, learners are somehow autonomous in language use during the speaking activities. It is also important to mention that those speaking activities allow the teacher to play the role of a guide, a monitor, and facilitator.

#### **4. discussion**

This section puts to interpret and discuss the findings in the light of the literature and the theoretical foundation of the study. These interpretations and discussion are related to the communicativeness of the themes, assignments, language in EFA 5è.

The importance of the thematic dimension in communicative approaches is widely recognized by the literature developed on the teaching of English to foreign speakers. Authors, including Claude Germain (2000), Bailly (2007) and Richards (2001) are unanimous on the principle of attractiveness of teaching related to the themes.

The interpretation of the data collected makes it possible to confirm that the themes addressed in EFA 5è somehow correspond to the learning needs that learners encounter in real communication situations excepted two lessons. Learners agree that the topics of the tasks of speaking suggested in EFA 5è allow them to talk about their own lives. Such a situation is due to the fact that those topics are about problems related to their social environment.

As a result, I can conclude that the topics are linked to the different aspects of the learners' life; they are adapted to the communicative objectives of the tasks because they are authentic and generally deal with their society.

The communicativeness of the language is to be assessed from the familiarity of the learners with the linguistic and paralinguistic resources of the texts on which one relies to carry out the course of oral expression. Analysis of the data collected in turn from learners and teachers has shown that even if this language must be criticized for its fabricated nature, it is significant. The interpretation of the data obtained makes it possible to conclude that the language used in the writing of the texts is not authentic. Authenticity is a central concept used in communicative pedagogies to describe the correspondence of a

material with the needs, interests and characteristics of the learners. Students coming from 6è do not have a rich vocabulary, because most of the time it is the first time for them to be in touch with the language.

According to Widdoson (1987), the authenticity of material depends on the relationship it has to do with the contextual use of the language by native speakers. This opinion is contradicted by Richards J. and Rodgers T. (2001) who criticize it for being utopian. For these two authors, it is not possible to use exclusively formal language in the classroom. From this, it is clear that the use of formal language in the EFA 5th manual implies the need for a balance between authenticity and significance.

The data collected from learners show that the assignments suggested in the textbook EFA 5è are not valid because they are not authentic. The assignments analyzed show a focus on meaning, use of the classroom dialect and cooperative learning through the opinion and information share activities. They are said to focus on the learning contents and the pedagogical objectives of the classes. Such a conclusion implies two main outcomes to discuss.

On the one hand, it means that these assignments are valid. Validity is generally used to refer to how accurately a conclusion, measurement, or concept corresponds to what is being tested. According to the theoretical tenets of this study, a valid assignment is one which can be understood by learners but still comprises some level of challenge. A valid test in the context of CLT checks the appropriation by learners of the taught contents but in terms of competence.

On the other hand, though the assignments suggested in the textbook allow learners and teachers to measure the level of success realized, they are not reliable. Reliability refers to how dependably or consistently a test measures a characteristic. The tests don't feel the features of reliability because they are not unpredictable. The respondents mentioned that the assignments were easy to understand not because they were meaningful and linked to learner's genuine life situations but because there was not a variety of assignments.

## Conclusion

The teaching of the English language in Côte d'Ivoire has been framed within the bounds of the communicative language teaching approach for years now. Accordingly, the teaching materials used in the classroom are expected to cope with the requirements of this approach. However, with regard to the difficulties experienced by EFL learners to speak the language, it is quite important to question the communicativeness of the materials used in the teaching of English. This was the aim of the present paper when it tried to evaluate the communicative dimension of the speaking tasks in the EFA 5è textbook.

To achieve that goal, the analysis of learners' perceptions of the communicative dimension of speaking tasks in EFA 5ème, was achieved through a quantitative method. The findings of the study showed that the textbook under focus contains both strengths and weaknesses regarding the communicativeness of the speaking tasks.

About the weaknesses, the analysis of the data showed a problem of authenticity of the assignments in the book. The assignments analyzed show a focus on meaning, use of the classroom dialect and cooperative learning through the opinion and information share activities. This actually poses a problem of their validity. Also, the findings show that the language used in the writing of the texts is not authentic. In addition, the speaking tasks in the textbook resemble teacher-centered tasks given the explanations to be provided by the teacher.

About the strengths, it was found that the themes addressed in EFA 5è somehow correspond to the learning needs that learners encounter in real communication situations excepted two lessons. Learners agree that the topics of the speaking tasks suggested in EFA 5è allow them to talk about their own lives. As can be seen, the textbook EFA 5è, to some extent, fulfils the requirements of the communicative language teaching even though perfection is yet to be attained. Nevertheless, suggesting some innovative ways to design speaking tasks in order to meet their communicative goals would be an opportune occasion for improvement. In this perspective, materials designers would be encouraged to emphasize learners' needs in terms of themes,

comprehensible input, authenticity of the assignments for the material to help develop learners' communicative competence. Also, teachers using this textbook in their teaching can be encouraged to be oriented toward adaptation rather than adoption as regard the selection of the speaking activities suggested in the textbook.

This study can help textbook designers get insights into innovative ideas for the integration of classroom activities that actually integrate the communicative dimension of the speaking tasks. Also, given that the CLT approach goes in line with the current concern of Ivorian educational authorities, the outcomes of this reflection might contribute to the operation of adequate choices for classroom practices. If its outcomes truly affect the choice or design of EFL textbooks, learners will find up-coming textbooks more motivating and the learning process less laborious.

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