

FOSSILIZATION IN LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE: AN EVALUATION OF TERMINAL LAW STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF LUBUMBASHI (DR CONGO)

NSHINDI-GERMAIN MULAMBA, TOMMY KAYAMBA BADYE & ABDON LUMBALA MUBIKAYI

Department of Letters and English Civilization
University of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2026.7218>

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates into the communicative competence and performance of university leavers at the Faculty of Law, University of Lubumbashi. It is at the same time an evaluation of the five-year Transversal English curriculum to assess how much improvement the time variable has brought to students' learning. This programme was the educational authorities' response to the researchers' claims for learners' much more exposure to English.

The results are mixed. While the good learners brilliantly succeeded, the poor ones could not even reply to 'good morning' appropriately. Fossilization concerns all the levels of language. The knowledge of the local culture of exams, however, reveals poor learners' heavy reliance on cheating as a misunderstood African solidarity (Muchiri et al. 1999) among students to survive.

Hence, suggestions of additional variables to the time factor are made to make students actually learn English.

Keywords: fossilized English, curriculum evaluation, communicative competence, poor language learners, African solidarity, Transversal English

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the performance of terminal Law students at the University of Lubumbashi (UNILU) to evaluate their communicative competence at the end of a five-year Transversal English curriculum with a view to questioning the link between the learning time and acquisition quality. As a matter of fact, when correcting final year students' exams, we unexpectedly realized error fossilization in learners' performance even in elementary interactions. Richards and Schmidt (2010: 230) define fossilization in second or foreign language learning as "a process which sometimes occurs in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language."

Paradoxically, some students' copies contain strange, wrong, and omitted answers inconsistent with the expectations of five years of English learning. Simple greetings and leave-takings, for instance, are not handled satisfactorily by everybody. This reminds us a thoughtful query by Allwright (1986) in a similar situation: "Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?" This paper tries to address this puzzle hopefully to find out why, despite all the input from teachers

and the increase to five years of exposure to English, some students' performance is fossilized and deprived of any sign of progress. We are assessing students' performance at the end of their training because we assume that, for five years, they got input from teachers. What has all this teaching process brought to these learners? What has time bought?

The investigation is guided by the following research question: Why are some students still unable to perform appropriately, even for elementary notions like the ones under study, after a five-year training?

This question is substantiated by the following subquestions: (1) what is the perception of the exam culture in this context?, and (2) can the time variable impact the English teaching/learning so as to improve learners' performance?

Tentatively, these questions can be answered as follows:

In language learning, there are good learners and poor learners. The former would take every opportunity to turn input into knowledge; but the latter will achieve less because of inability of any kind, often ending in fossilization. That is, individual factors such as the like or dislike of the target language, the future projects can determine whether or not one will progress in language learning. Given the same learning opportunities, candidates will not necessarily reach the same performance.

(1) The exam culture in this context is presented as a cat-and-mouse game in which learners try to collaborate among themselves for the sake of African solidarity, but the invigilators are ready to catch them in order to save the prestige of the university (Muchiri et al. 1999).

(2) Studies on evaluation almost always end with suggestions on increasing the time allotted to English because learners in an EFL context like the DRC have less exposure to learning opportunities than those in ESL ones (Ciamala 2012, Kabamba 2016, Lumbala 2020). At the tertiary level particularly, 30 hours of English in one year were considered insufficient. The time increase is either in terms of the number of lessons, or in that of the years of studies. The imposition of English in all grades (5 years of learning) seemed to satisfy automatically this question. The expectation is that thanks to much/more exposure to English, learners will improve their performance or learning. But, is it?

Another assumption was that students, particularly those in the final year of university, would take the exam seriously and make great efforts in order to perform well. They should care more so as to succeed and to participate (with their family members and friends) in the degree ceremony; a dream of every university leaver.

Regarding its structure, after the introduction the paper presents turn by turn the context of study, the research methodology, the interpretation of strange answers, and finally the discussion of the results and the conclusion.

1.1 Context of study

We are a team of three teachers who have been in charge of implanting the English course in the Faculty of Law. For the last ten years or so since the imposition of Transversal English as

an obligatory course in all grades, we have designed the curriculum of the entire Faculty of Law, and taught in all the classes. In broad lines, and along the official educational instructions on Transversal English, this curriculum begins with “Practical English”, a spoken component covering all the basic topics for an elementary everyday conversation. Among them we can mention: greetings and leave-takings, telephone conversation, wh-questions and introducing people, telling the time, showing directions etc. It was aimed at initiating learners into elementary conversations and to boost up listening/speaking skills. That is, it was a transitional course making a bridge between the knowledge acquired at secondary school, and the technical or specialized English expected at the tertiary level. However, on the methodological front, the large size of classes has made it impossible to stage spoken activities to facilitate teacher-learner interactions. Hence, evaluation has been written instead of spoken; the conditions do not permit to respect the theories and principles heralded in applied linguistics.

From the second year upwards, learners were initiated into English for Academic Reading (EAR). Reading strategies (e.g. affixes and word-stems, English-French cognates, using a dictionary, sentence analysis, paragraph analysis) were taught to learners in order to empower them to exploit legal texts and documents. Concomitantly, through these texts, learners get exposure to the register and topics of the legal domain. They improve and equip their lexicon. Expectedly, at the end of five-year training, these students should have acquired the fundamentals of English for a casual conversation.

With respect to the test, for the sake of time shortage, assessment was limited to a written dialogue, and to two grammatical points (much/many and some/any) which could be designed as a closed-ended test. This dialogue tested learners on their spoken skills on elementary conversation as taught in Practical English, the first part of the curriculum. By contrast, the grammatical points checked language knowledge taught throughout the whole curriculum. Reading comprehension tests are time consuming for correction. They are thus used for quizzes during the academic year when the time pressure to hand in the marks is less tight.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study draws on both documentary and ethnographical techniques. It is based on students' exam copies for the identification of strange answers, and on the lists of marks for evaluation of successes and failures. However, it takes an ethnographical aspect when the focus is placed on the observation of the context in which the exams take place.

The sample of this research is based on the two exam sessions, 100 copies for each session, presented by terminal students (2024-2025) at the Faculty of Law. The first session was attended by 1 383 students whereas the session welcomed 528 students. In fact, the latter comprised students who were taking a second chance, as well as those who missed the first session for one reason or another. Particularly, students who were excluded for debts on the one hand, and those on ‘special registration’ on the other. Seemingly the same group, second session students do not have the same chance of succeeding because some never attended the lectures and have no average marks for the year.

The lists of marks served to get a general picture of students' results, that is, the relative rates of success and failure. Yet, the reasons behind are more complex and need some attention to

the culture of exams in this specific context of overpopulated classes, full of unmotivated students hating the course.

Finally, observation helped to shed some light on the context of study. Like for any other cultural study, the understanding of the local practices, such as the atmosphere in which the exams are conducted, happen to be a crucial factor in this enterprise. We have to talk about the exam system, the invigilators and students' strategies during test sessions. One of the key factor is communal solidarity which induces students to risk cheating in order to help comrades. Exams are seen as a cat and mouse game, with all the possible risks of failing the course, or even being chased from the university. Therefore, some observation of the context, attitude and a whole culture of examination is taken into account. Particularly, students' perception of examination, the atmosphere in which the exams take place, the strategies adopted to fight against cheating; and above, the meaning of the exams themselves.

With respect to data analysis, our assessment is limited to these aspects of English learning; domains that the students were exposed to during all their training:

- (1) Practical English: as instantiated in two short dialogues related to (self-)introduction. Can students hold a short dialogue based on the common notions of everyday conversation?

- (2) Language study: two grammatical points which are current in language study and grammar lessons/lectures, viz. (a) the use of many and much in expressing plurality with countable and uncountable nouns; and (b) the use of indefinite adjectives some and any and their compounds. The test itself is appended.

These pairs are easy to test because of their ubiquity in the English language. They are words or notions of high frequency that, after many years of training, should have become familiar to the learners as part of their active/common vocabulary.

The following observation is worth making: despite a relatively large corpus which would have called for a quantitative approach, we find it relevant to privilege a qualitative one. As Kothari (2004) argues, qualitative method aims at understanding people's behaviour in a given situation, and its goal is not to generate rules. In fact, we are more interested in understanding students' behaviour with respect to how they present an English test. What caught our attention and triggered this research was the unexpectedness and strangeness of some of the answers rather than students' performance proper. This performance indicates fossilization of students' English at an early stage of learning, and does not show that these students have benefited of the lengthening of the course from one year to five. Since our concern was to interpret strangeness of some students' answers, and given the diversity of these, generalization was neither possible, nor necessary. What was needed was detailed discussion of these answers in relation to the local culture of examination. Quantitative considerations of answers were however made just to evaluate the rates of successes and failures as shown in the lists of marks.

3.0 INTERPRETING LEARNERS' ANSWERS

As aforementioned, we focus on strange answers evidence of fossilization. Students' fossilized English only means that students have not improved their English along the increase of learning time. Poor learners are stuck at the level of beginners up to the end of their university studies.

The exam system and the culture surrounding it need questioning. Similar answers (even wrong ones in successive copies) by sections of the auditoriums (a suspicion of cheating), abstentions (unfinished tasks because of shortage of time even for elementary question like How are you?); threatening presence of invigilators holding forms to register cheaters (exams as an adversarial activity). As Muchiri et al. (1999: 356) point out, students resort to African solidarity “so that the strong can help support the weak”. In Nigerian universities, students call cheating ECOWAS, after the Economic Community of West African States. The name makes it clear that, whatever the teachers may think of it, the practice is seen by students as group resistance, not just individual cheating. Sometimes, it happens that these students later compare their quiz sheets or demand that their exam ones be checked in order to challenge the teacher’s correction. Unfortunately, with open-ended questions, correction may vary from sheet to sheet because of tiredness or other reasons.

For students, the collaboration they practise during the exams are normal acts of generosity and solidarity, but not shameful cheating. The invigilators fight against it, but in this ‘cat and mouse game’, when this gate-keeping is tough, students who rely on solidarity will be unable to finish the task. Hence, abstentions which unfortunately do not inform on the learners’ competence and assimilation of the course. When invigilators loosen their guard, through solidarity, answers are circulated whether they are right or wrong, and whether they are for the test series itself or for another. When under pressure, cheaters have no time to check if the series are the same or different.

Overall, apart from the correct answers, strange answers fall in the following categories:

- a) Absence of answers: exam copies are handed in with blanks without any attempt to provide answers;
- b) Misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the questions: the answers do not fit the questions, particularly in filling-in dialogues. Such is the case of wh-questions which are answered regardless of the needed information;
- c) Answers without link with the question: obviously, such answers attest to the students’ carelessness or lack of concern;
- d) Interference from local languages and French: this is often the result of lack of attention. For instance, responding to “Good evening” by “Good morning” simply attests to carelessness to ignore the time element inherent in greeting formulas in English;
- e) Disregard of the situation types or the context of interaction; greeting formulas should match with the context of formality, or informality respectively. Typical cases of errors are (1) combination of formal and informal elements (as in Hi, Sir), (2) consideration of greeting formulas as mere synonyms without restrictions of use (as in Hi given as a response to Good morning).

3.1 The meanings of students’ performance

Students’ results reflect to some extent learners’ achievement and their assimilation of the course. They are the output which shows what learners have done with the input that they received from teachers. However, this is not always the case, particularly in a context where cheating is part of the game. A student’s answer is not always a personal performance to be considered as a reliable output. Here below we try to interpret the different factors and strategies which may have led to the results before our eyes.

❖ **Results as a personal achievement**

Putting aside the suspicion of interference during the exam, we can just accept learners' results as they are and for what they are. Accordingly, we can be proud to see some students' high performance, an indication of their mastery of the course. In fact, the general tendency is that the results are better in the upper grades than in the lower ones. Good learners frequently obtain 15/20 or better, whereas poor learners can approximate 5/20. In lower grades, by contrast, students generally have average marks, an indication of their lack of mastery of the course. In compliance with some tacit wishes or instructions of Faculty authorities, we often give a bonus (2 points) to students for their lecture attendances. This bonus helps many of them either to succeed, or to reduce the failure to the level where it can be tolerated.

For instance, 5/20 is a serious failure which annihilates any chance of success. But, thanks to the bonus, the mark can be raised to 8/20; in which case it becomes a lenient failure. Such a mark can help a student to succeed if s/he has a general good percentage without more than 2 or 3 failures. It can also be beneficial to the student who has a general good percentage but with 2 or 3 failures because it can, via compensation, be absorbed to reduce the total number of failures.

While such an exercise is current in lower grades, it is less common in upper ones because students already perform quite well on their own.

❖ **Results as a collective or backed up achievement**

Admittedly, there is no reliable way to tell if a given mark is the result of the student's own effort or not. Large classes, together with the exam system, make that students resort to whatever means they can in order to succeed. These include personal efforts of course, but also cheating or simple collaboration. In their seminal paper "Importing Composition: Teaching and Researching Academic Writing beyond North-America" Muchiri et al. (1999) have convincingly shown how students resort to strategies, cheating etc. in order to succeed together. African solidarity that pervades in the other domains of their lives is even transferred and applied to studies. Outside the class this solidarity leads them to collaborate positively like in other educational systems where students practise group work. But, in the auditorium, that collaboration continues as cheating because unconsciously students believe to be in confrontational relationships with the teacher. They bind together so as to survive (or to succeed) against the teacher. To quote these authors:

In the African universities Mary, Ndoloi and Mulamba studied, students are first of all members of groups: of a small band of students with whom they survive the university, of the body of students as a whole, and of a community beyond the university, of family, village, and tribe. [...] Students were getting much of their information, she found, from what they call "survival groups" Students band together, sharing notes, sharing knowledge of lecturers, so that the strong help support the weak (1999: 356).

It goes without saying that good results are a motive of pride for the teacher who considers them as an indication of successful learning, and of a job well-done. Yet, in the context of large classes with insufficient systems of invigilation, they do not actually testify to good learning.

There may be a few students who are actually good learners, and who have shared their work with poor learners.

❖ Results as a learning strategy

Another way of looking at the results is to try to understand how learners face evaluation and how they develop strategies accordingly. A close look at students' copies indicates that this has been the case. As a matter of fact, our corpus contains some closed-ended questions, notably the contrastive use of many versus much, and that of the compounds of some and any. There were 4 questions on the first topic, and 3 on the second. Students' strategies varied according to every learner's confidence as follows:

1. Confident students took the risk of using the different items in their answers. By so doing, they were displaying their mastery of the grammatical rules which determine the respective uses of many and much on the one hand, and that of some and any on the other.
2. Less confident, but cunning, students preferred to not take the risk to lose all. They betted on one grammatical item to the detriment of the other. Hence, there are copies selecting many or much only in the former question, the same for the compounds of some and any in the latter. It was quite wise for them to aim for half marks rather than for the risky maximum.

It is thus clear that good marks are not always an evidence of good learning since they can also stem from cheating and strategic guessing. If the group leader finds the right answer, it will be spread via cheating. Conversely, if s/he gets it wrong, the whole group will be negatively affected.

❖ Results as an indication of lack of learning

This is the category which is of real interest to us because it has triggered this research. Given that some students could not answer correctly elementary and fundamental questions like "Good morning" and "Who are you?" we questioned the relevance of expanding English to all the grades. One of the recurrent question was "How much has time bought?" That is, if after 5 years of learning one is still incapable to perform what is usually done in the first grade, what benefit has the addition of the years of learning brought? We do not mean that it was useless to increase students' exposure to English through lengthening the period. What we suspect is that time is not the only factor. Poor learners and unmotivated students can be offered this opportunity, and yet they do not reap any benefit.

Following are illustrative examples of poor performance unexpected from learners with 5 years of experience:

3.1.1 Using many versus much

The question assesses learners' mastery over the use of many and much in expressing plurality in English. As a matter of fact, the rule of thumb that is propounded in grammar books consists in using many with plural countable nouns, but much with uncountable ones (Quirk et al. 1985, Leech and Svartvik 2004). Most countable nouns are easily recognizable thanks to their plural

marker suffixes: -s, -es. Good learners can also identify irregular plurals such as children, people, women etc. Uncountable nouns, by contrast, have no plural marker suffixes and can be mistaken for singular nouns. Such is the case for traffic, crowd, work (Leech and Svartvik 2004) etc.

With respect to agreement, learners can associate many with nouns ending with a plural marker, but much with those without. Yet, this elementary rule is hardly applied by poor learners, who usually do not even think when looking for the answers, but prefer to guess at them, or to resort to cheating and help. The test consisted in completing the following four sentences:

1. I haven't done things today because the computer isn't working.
2. There is light left to the end of the corridor.
3. They havetraffic on the roads in the morning.
4. Notpeople were expected for the meeting.

The answers fall in these categories:

- A Correct answers
- B Selection of wrong items
- C The same answer throughout
- D Irrelevant and unrelated answers
- E Blanks or abstentions

As shown in the appendix, the strange answers contained irrelevant grammatical items and words such as the, a, our, to, and, it, it is, is too, good etc. These answers can be elaborated and illustrated in different ways:

a) Correct answers

Expectedly, correct answers were provided. Whatever the strategy used, the results show that these items are common grammatical points of high frequency which happen to get into the learners' usage because of their status.

b) Selection of wrong items

Actually, these were wrong answers consisting in/of the misfortunate choice of the wrong item in the pair. They are evidence of the learners' lack of mastery over this grammatical point. It can be said that these students took the risk of failing completely and losing all.

c) The same answer throughout

Contrary to the preceding category above, some weak but cunning students adopted the strategy to minimize the risk of losing all. Hopefully, the four questions could be equally set so as to have half the points for each item. At the outset, the simple fact of (providing the same answer throughout) adopting such a strategy is a proof enough that we are in the presence of a student who did not learn the course and who relies on good luck to succeed.

d) Irrelevant and unrelated answers

Another category of students provided irrelevant and unrelated answers obviously as a result of misunderstanding the question or the task itself. As mentioned above, the, a, our, to, and, it, it is, is too, good etc. happen to be used instead of many or much to complete the sentences.

Since tests are often administered in many series, sometimes students get answers from their neighbours through cheating. Unfortunately, these answers are for different questions. Only hopeless students who heavily rely on their neighbours can copy these answers without even checking if they fit their questions.

e) Blanks and omissions

Students' results are also characterized by some rate of abstentions. On the one hand, some students are unable to work on their own and rely on cheating. They may wait for the opportunity until it is too late in case invigilation is harsh and serious. On the other hand, some disorder is created when students are asked to change rooms because of overpopulation and risk of cheating. If that is done quite late, these students may have less time to finish their task, and end up with a high rate of abstentions.

Overall, students' performance in the use of many and much is satisfactory, but the reasons behind it are varied and diversified. Yet, it is a bad news for teachers and for the expansion of English to the five years of learning if these elementary and common items of the English language still constitute a problem for university leavers.

3.1.2 Using some, any and their compounds

The second question concerned distinguishing the indefinite some and any in a set of sentences to fill-in with their compounds (-thing and -one). The general grammatical rule of thumb runs that some is used with assertive sentences whereas any is for non-assertive ones, viz. negative and interrogative sentences ((Quirk et al. 1985, Leech and Svartvik 2004). Besides this general rule, Leech and Svartvik (2004) mention some exceptions justifying why some can be found in non-assertive sentences and any in assertive ones:

- a) Do you have some fresh bread? (Mass nouns)
- b) Can you give me some good advice on what to buy here? (Abstract nouns)
- c) Anyone will tell you the way (= whoever you ask, he or she will...)
- d) He will eat anything. (= He will eat whatever you give him.)

At the advanced level of language use like in pragmatic interpretations, some and any are handled in forms more complex than the rule of thumb above. In his book Principles of Pragmatics, Leech (1983) discusses in depth the some versus any divide in assertive and non-assertive sentences. Particularly, the differences are blurred in interrogative sentences, depending on whether the question itself is positive or negative. Leech classifies questions into two categories: (1) normal questions and (2) loaded questions. The former are positive and can lead to either a yes or a no answer. The latter are often negative, and are perceived as loaded and challenge the addressee. That is, the speaker suspects a situation and is trying to check their premonition, as in:

1. Are you Peter's friend?: tell me about your relationship with Peter.

2. Aren't you Peter's friend?: I have some reasons to believe that you are in friendship with Peter. I challenge you about your familiarity with Peter.

Leech resorts to the context of customs, particularly to the common interactions between the customs official and passengers in order to contrast some and any in interrogative sentences:

3. Have you anything to declare?
4. Have you something to declare?
5. Haven't you anything to declare?
6. Haven't you something to declare?

Pragmatically, sentence (3) is the routine question which is asked by the customs official, and it is neutral. It is in line with the grammatical general rules on the use of any in non-assertive sentences, but some in assertive ones. Sentences (4) to (6) are abnormal and loaded questions; they change the relationship between the customs official and the passenger. Sentence (4) fictionalizes/dramatizes the situation where the customs official suspects that the passenger has something dutiable. S/he is encouraging the latter (for their honesty) to go to the right post indicated "Something to declare" in order to perform the act.

Sentence (5) implies the situation where the customs official sees for instance a passenger with a large quantity of suitcases. S/he is almost convinced that among all that luggage there must be something that should be declared. He challenges the passenger about their honesty to declare dutiable items.

Sentence (6) fictionalizes the situation where that the customs official sees a passenger walking freely through the "Nothing to declare" gate with visible dutiable items. S/he is actually accusing him of smuggling.

In short, these indefinite adjectives are sometimes complex to use depending on the level of the language analysis. Yet, the test was based on the general use so that the choice between some and any was unproblematic.

The test consisted in completing the following three sentences:

1. The nurse gave me (something/anything) for my toothache.
2. Does (someone/anyone) know where Mario has gone?
3. You should find (someone/anyone) to help you move that luggage.

Like in the case of much and many above, the answers fall in the same categories; an indication that students were using the same or similar strategies during the test:

- A Correct answers
- B Selection of wrong items
- C The same answer everywhere
- D Irrelevant and unrelated answer
- E Blanks or abstentions

The contrast involved something and anything; and the compounds in –one, -body, and –where were not listed. Yet, some students mentioned them. Strange answers contain unexpected and

irrelevant words such as from, to, blanks, have, these is, they have, from is, when Mario has, to help you etc. They attest to students' incapacity to understand the task so as to respond appropriately. All the answer categories can be interpreted in the following terms:

a) Correct answers

As it could be expected, correct answers were provided for some and any. Whatever the strategy used, the results show that these items are common grammatical points of high frequency which happen to get into the learners' usage because of their status.

b) Selection of wrong items

Actually, these were wrong answers consisting of the unfortunate choice of the wrong item in the pair. They are an evidence of the learners' lack of mastery over this grammatical point. It can be said that these students took the risk of failing completely and losing all.

c) The same answer throughout

Like in the case of many and much, some weak but cunning students adopted this strategy to minimize the risk of losing all.

d) Irrelevant and unrelated answers

We identified the words and structures like from, to, blanks, have, these is, they have, from is, when Mario has, to help you in place of the proposed any and some compounds. The reasons for such a strategy were already given in the discussion of many and much.

e) Blanks and omissions

Finally, some blanks were observed like in the case of many and much, and for the same reasons.

3.1.3 Answers in dialogues

One question concerned testing university learners' performance to identify their intakes of practical English, the very first component of the five-year curriculum. Given the large size of the class, there was no way to proceed to spoken dialogue. It has never been the case throughout the learning, anyway. Hence, a written dialogue was proposed and it consisted in filling-in the blanks in response to conversation prompts.

Following are details of the answers provided by these learners, together with some comments to shed light on the reasons behind them.

3.1.3.1 Answers in dialogue I

1. Hi

This is a greeting formula typical of informal situation and calling for idiomatic expressions. Actually, not all students are aware of the formal-informal situation divide, and of the choice

of language that it implies. What matters for them is to respond to the greeting in whatever formula can come to their mind. Students provided a variety of the following responses among which:

Hi		
Hi	Hey, hello	God morning to you live
Hi, sister	Thanks, good night, see yo tomorrow	Dialogue
Morning	Allo!	Of (everywhere)

a) Hi: sometimes replaced by hello! It is the right and appropriate answer insofar as it fits the informal situation.

b) Good morning: this is a formal formula which is inappropriate in/for an informal situation. It can be considered ‘correct’ as a conversational act but inappropriate with respect to usage.

c) Allo!; it is obviously a misspelling of ‘hello’, but it also looks more like interference from the French telephone answer ‘Allo!’. In either case, it is neither correct, nor appropriate.

d) Hi, how are you?: the formula begins appropriately but ends up in interference from African ethnography of communication. As observed by Mulamba and Masu (2015) in their paper on Africanisms in some novels by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo, greetings are not limited to the interlocutors, but they are extended even to family members not present at the event. Enquiries are made about the health condition of children, their mothers etc.:

(7) Hallo, J. How are you doing? How is your wife? How are your children? (AOG: 226)

By trying to be enthusiastic, the student got away from the exam task which consisted in doing restitution of what the teacher had taught.

e) Thank you!: it is quite hard to believe this formula used as a greeting despite its frequency in students’ copies. Interference from students’ French can be hypothesized to be the source of this misuse.

f) Blanks or abstentions: some copies had no answers either because of shortage of time, or because of lack of concern.

In short, these were some of the answers provided by students in their copies. They hardly attest to students’ mastery of English after five years of learning.

2. Where? Where do you live?

The question enquired about the notion of place, particularly students’ addresses. Following are some of the answers:

Where?	<i>Where do you live?</i>	
To teach	In train	Cool

The live is good nice	I come to university	I'm leave to Hewa Bora
Yes, you live to Law	Not Y am seek	It is good

- a) **Correct answers:** some students identified the notion of time. However, the answers were not all of the same quality, particularly with respect to the use prepositions to indicate the address. Some other answers like "I live in DRC" were inappropriate because of lack of precision. When asked for address, people do not mention the country.
- b) **Misunderstanding of the question:** some answers do not express the notion of time and they were off the point. In fact, many students still struggle with wh-questions and fail to get the aim of the questions themselves. They answer a different wh-question rather than the one at stake (e.g. where instead of when, why instead of how etc.). This point remains an evidence of failure of English teaching throughout the curriculum. Students are unable to hold elementary conversations because they do not understand the message.
- c) **Irrelevant answers:** these were answers not related to wh-questions.
- d) **Blanks or abstentions:** for unknown reasons, some copies mentioned no answers.

3. How? How do you come to university?

The question enquired about students' means of reaching the campus, implicitly the used means of transport.

Like in the question above on "where?", students' answers fall in the same categories as (1) correct answers, (2) misunderstandings of the question, (3) irrelevant answers, and (4) blanks or abstentions. Prepositions constitute a big hurdle in students' expression of the means of transport. Hence, we find answers such as "to come to university by foot" instead of "on foot" etc.

How?	<i>How do you come to university?</i>	
I come to university but education	I'am studying at university the low	Yes, I coming to university today
To study	No I have angry	I come to university for study
A pied	I'm to university of Lubumbashi	

This array of answers shows that weak students are still unable to understand the question so as to provide the appropriate answer. The student who understood could not express himself in English, and gave his answer in French (à pied), that is, 'on foot'.

4. Why? Why do you study Law at university?

The question enquired about the reason why students opted for the Faculty of Law. They had to argue so as to justify their choice.

The answers fall in the four categories identified above for the other wh-questions, and for the same reasons to a great extent.

Why?	<i>Why do you study Law at university?</i>	
We have a terminal phase	I'm study law at university at faculty of droit	Because I have a but for you
Pour etre avocate	Yes, I doing to study low at university	At university I study the droit privee I'm teach, yes I'm study

None of these answers gives the “reason” why the action takes place. The only good answer is unfortunately in French (pour être avocate), that is, ‘to be a lawyer’. The level of communicative competence is very low.

5. Goodbye!

Goodbye is a leave-taking expression which ends a conversation. It has alternatives and synonyms like bye!, bye-bye! See you next time etc. It also varies according to whether the situation is formal or informal.

Following are some of the observed answers:

Goodbye!

Bye teacher	Bye	Goodbye morning
Bye-bye my sister	See you a next day	Yes, goodbye!
Bye Mr	Thank's, I am very well	Is goodbye in the university

a) Goodbye!: it is typical of the formal situation, and it is appropriate in this context of a formal situation.

b) See you!: it is an alternative leave-taking formula appropriate in/for informal situation. As mentioned earlier, students are unaware of the formal-informal situation divide, and even less of the appropriate choices to make in order to match each formula with its context. It has as synonyms bye!, bye-bye! See you next time etc.

c) Irrelevant answers: for unknown reasons, some students provided answers not related to leave-taking.

d) Interference from local languages: forms like Bye teacher, bye Mr and bye my sister are close to the local communication habits of adding a vocative to a greeting formula. The title Mr cannot be used alone; whereas teacher and my sister have a high degree of familiar status. Likewise, goodbye morning betrays the user’s insecurity in handling greeting formulas. More generally, some poor students even confuse sir with the French sœur (‘sister’), which is a strange interference.

e) **Blanks or abstentions:** shortage of time often compels students to not finish the task. This impacts on the performance as a whole since we cannot ascertain students' level of learning.

3.1.3.2 Answers to dialogue II

The second dialogue was an alternative to the first in order to create a different exam series so as to minimize cheating. Therefore, it also turns around wh-questions, greeting and leave-taking formulas in a different order. To avoid redundancy, occasional comments are made on relevant points only.

Good evening!

Good evening, how are you?	Evening	Good morning
Good evening, good morning	Thanks you	Hi sir
Good evening teacher	Same to you	Good evening at tomorrow
Yes, I'm very well	Hello!	Good evening too

6. Good evening!:

Contrary to the first dialogue, here the formal greeting is used instead of the informal 'Hi!'. Students' responses are alike to a great extent, particularly with respect to unawareness of distinction of situations. Another proof of interference is the answer "Good morning" and "good evening, good morning" an indication that the student was referring to a language in which the time of the day is not important in the choice of the greeting formula. Yet, it is a blow for teachers to realize that after five years of hard work, their learners cannot even master such an elementary notion.

Good evening, how are you?: it is a formula reminiscent of the local ethnography of communication. The exchange is not limited to the greeting, but it is also extended to the health conditions.

Same to you: it is an atypical response since it is a wish instead of a greeting. Concerning wishes, some of them use 'good night' as a greeting. Yet it is a wish.

Hi sir: a mixing of the informal Hi and the formal Sir; a distinction that students are scarcely aware of.

The other answers have their respective aspect of inappropriateness.

7. When? When do you leave?

This question misled students the most for two reasons. Some did not perceive the notion of time, but most confused leave with live (as in I leave at Lubumbashi). This confusion is also a proof of ignorance because the two verbs enquire about different notions: time (when) for leave, but place (where) for live.

When? *When do you leave?*

Yes, yes	My leave is good	Goodbye (<i>throughout</i>)
Yes	I leave at Lubumbashi	Etudiants

The strange answers show students' incapacity to understand the question. But some answers lack seriousness that should accompany an exam. For instance, one candidate completed the whole dialogue with "goodbye" for each question.

8. Why? Why do you come to university?

The question concerned the reason why students present themselves to university. The answers include the following:

Why?	<i>Why do you come to university?</i>	
Yes, today evening	I come to university at 8h30	I'm etudiant to university
Yes, I come to university	The you	Yes, I do

These strange answers attest to students' inability to grasp the question. One candidate does not even know the English for "étudiant".

9. How? How do you study at university?

The question enquired in the manner or ways of studying at university. Like in the other cases of wh-questions, some students did not grasp the question and did not indicate the needed information on the manner.

How?	<i>How do you study at university?</i>	
Yes	I study law at university	I'm study the droit at university
Law	Step by step the buck finish the nid	Droit

The answer "step by step the buck finish the nid" illustrates lack of students' seriousness. By contrast, the answers law, droit, and I study law at university indicate sufficiently that the candidates still confuse the question words how and what. It is a real case of fossilization as learners' communicative competence does not improve with the time.

10. See you!

This is a leave-taking formula for an informal situation; contrary to "Goodbye!" which was used in the first dialogue. Students behaved alike in not recognizing the formal-informal situation divide and provided their answers unwittingly.

See you!

Bye!	By!	Goodbye, see you!
Bye-bye my sister	Thank's, I am very well	Where Maria has gone

See you!

Bye Mr

Dbye dbye

Like for goodbye, the answers are also diversified and inappropriate for different reasons. Misspellings like by and dbye dbye attest to learners' lack of progress even for mastering current words. It can also be a form of lack of seriousness, especially from students who think that English is useless for Congolese lawyers. They can write and invent whatever they like without consequence. It is thus necessary that the government design an ambitious language policy equal to the international realities.

At the end of this analysis of students' answers, it can be concluded that despite the five years of English teaching/learning, poor language learners do not seem to have benefited from the lengthening of exposure to English. Time alone does not improve learning. There must be other factors to also address when designing a curriculum. Allwright's question "Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?" remains unanswered as usual because learning is multifarious and cannot be detected via a single, or a few parameters.

4.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper was an investigation into university leavers' performance in English as a test of their communicative competence after five years of learning. It was triggered by our observation of strange answers in terminal year students' copies against all expectation of improvement, the logical consequence of the expansion of the English course from one to five years.

The analysis of the results, backed up with the knowledge of the local culture of exams, reveals that heavy reliance on cheating as a misunderstood solidarity among students remains the main cause of their poor performance. Weak students do not learn what the teachers teach presumably because they know that they can rely on students' solidarity during the tests. In fact, it is unbelievable that at this level of studies some candidates do not even provide answers to greetings and leave-takings such as "Hi", "Good evening" or "Goodbye!". On the other hand, these blanks also stem from the cat-and-mouse game taking place between students and their invigilators. Because of the lack of mutual confidence between these actors, the latter sometimes withdraw the copies from students before these could finish the task. Other answers like the choice of one answer throughout reveal both learners' strategies in exam doing, and their lack of confidence and mastery of the course.

Fossilization is evidenced in a variety of ways. Some students are unable to copy the words which are already well-spelt in the questions. For instance, the simple answer "Bye" or "bye-bye" is provided in a variety of spellings according to every candidate's imagination. Answers to wh-questions, the basis of any conversation and practical English, show how poor learners misunderstand these questions, and fail to communicate.

The time factor, which is commonly evoked in studies on evaluation (Nkongolo 2008, Ciamala 2012, Kabamba 2016, Lumbala 2020, Thindwa 2020, Masu 2021), does not seem to be the only crucial variable in improving English learning in the Congolese context. We have to account for some others such as motivation towards English learning, realization of the importance of English in the professional world, or the change of the status of English from

EFL to ESL in the language policy of the DRC and the like, in order to make students really long to learn this language.

WORKS CITED

1. Allwright, R. L. 1984. Why Don't Learners Learn What Teachers Teach? – The Interaction Hypothesis. In Singleton, D. M. and D. G. Little (eds.) *Language Learning in Formal and Informal Contexts*. Dublin: IRAAL.
2. Ciamala, K. 2012. "Evaluation of EFL Teaching Materials Used at Secondary School in DR Congo." Doctoral Thesis. Lubumbashi: Université de Lubumbashi.
3. Kabamba, M. 2016. Failure in the Acquisition/Learning of English by Adults in the DRC. A Doctoral Thesis in Linguistics. Lubumbashi: Université de Lubumbashi, Département des Lettres et Civilisation Anglaises.
4. Leech, G. N. 1983. *The Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
5. Leech, G. N. and J. Svartvik. 2002. *A Communicative Grammar of English*. Third Edition. London: Longman.
6. Lumbala, L. 2020. *Cognitive Translation Studies and the Translator Training: An Evaluation of the DRC Programme*. A Doctoral Thesis in Linguistics. Kinshasa: Université de Kinshasa, Département des Lettres et Civilisation Anglaises
7. Masu, M. D. 2021. *English as a Transversal Course at the Tertiary Level in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Investigation into Curriculum Design*. Mémoire de DEA. Lubumbashi: Université de Lubumbashi, Département des Lettres et Civilisation Anglaises.
8. Muchiri, M. N.; Mulamba, N. G.; Myers, G. and D. B. Ndoloi. 1999. Importing Composition: Teaching and Researching Academic Writing beyond North America. In Ede, L. (ed.) *On Writing Research: The Braddock Essays 1975-1998*, pp. 352-371. Boston: Bedford/St Martin's.
9. Mulamba, N. G. and D. M. Masu. 2015. Africanisms in Chinua Achebe's and Ngugi wa Thiongo's Novels. *Cahiers du CERUKI* N° 50, Nouvelle série, pp. 383-403. Bukavu: CERUKI.
10. Nkongolo, M. 2008. *A Critical Review of the English Curriculum in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Third Year Dissertation. Lubumbashi: ISP, English Department.
11. Quirk, R.; Greenbaum, S.; Leech, G. and J. Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
12. Richards, J. and R. Schmidt. 2002. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Third Edition. London: Longman.
13. Schmied, J. 1991. *English in Africa: An Introduction*. London: Longman.
14. Thindwa, M. K. 2020. "A Critical Analysis of the English Syllabus for the English Course in Secondary Schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo." Doctoral Dissertation. Lubumbashi: University of Lubumbashi, English Department.