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**DIFFICULTIES OF EFL STUDENTS IN ESSAY
WRITING IN BENIN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: CAUSES
AND SOLUTIONS: CASE STUDY OF CLASSES OF 4^e
AND 3^e OF "COLLEGE JEAN PIAGET 1"**

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to:

- ✓ My Dear Mother and my Beloved Father who love me, and support me spiritually, morally and financially.
- ✓ The one who will be chosen to be my wife.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS USED

- **EFL: English as a Foreign Language**
- **CJP1: “Collège Jean Piaget 1”**

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Writing, as it is the fourth language skill, is generally neglected. The skill of writing involves fundamental aspects which, unfortunately, EFL learners do not pay attention to. Essay writing is an exercise which requires basic knowledge, and a real ability of thinking. Most EFL learners ignore that, as most EFL teachers are not aware of all those aspects. These aspects should necessarily be taught to learners, and serve as background knowledge and preparation to essay writing. As a result, various difficulties arise and, learners' performance in essay writing inevitably is low. Then, it becomes necessary to look for the causes of these difficulties, and to find ways to come over those problems.

However, although many research works have tried to find ways to help EFL learners develop their performance in essay writing, most learners still find it difficult to perform essay writing and to succeed in it. Some EFL teachers too, still do not know much about basics of essay writing and so, learners' preparation to that exercise is not what it should be. Thus, I have decided to carry out my research work on the following topic: *“Difficulties of students in Essay Writing in Benin secondary schools: case study of classes of 4è and 3è of CJPI”*. Through the study, I am going to identify the difficulties EFL students of **CJPI** face in essay writing, find the possible causes and suggest some solutions to these difficulties, which should be applied to all EFL learners.

This study focuses on five chapters. The first chapter treats of the identification of the study which includes the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, as well as the significance of the study, and a clarification of some concepts. The second chapter, based on the literature review, develops four main points related to writing, that are a brief history of writing and of essay, some generalities about EFL essay writing, some aspects that affect EFL students' writing, and some EFL students' writing difficulties. The third chapter deals with the methodology used during the research, providing information about the method followed for the study, the research participants,

the research instrument, the procedure of the data collection, and the method of the data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the study and its analysis that is the interpretation of the research results and the conclusive points deriving from the research results. Finally, in the fifth chapter, are made some recommendations and suggestions, addressed on the one hand to the Government officials, curriculum editors and the authorities and teachers of **CJPI**, and on the second hand, to EFL teachers, EFL learners and parents.

CHAPTER ONE: IDENTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

1-1- Statement of the problem:

The four main skills on which the teaching of English language is focused are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each of these skills is important in students' learning, and should be taught as efficiently as possible. Unfortunately, during the time of observation I spent in some secondary schools, I have noticed that most students have difficulties with the writing skill, and that some teachers do not teach it appropriately. Most of the students have great difficulties to produce a coherent written text on a given topic. In addition, some teachers do not carry out writing activities with students, or some do not design appropriate activities to teach writing skill to their students. Whereas, in class, students have to pass written exams in which, the last part is essay writing, where students are asked to produce a coherent paragraph about a given topic. Students cannot perform an exercise which they have not been prepared for. Then some questions arise: What are the difficulties students have in performing essay writing? What reasons explain those difficulties? What are the factors or problems which do not allow students to be able to write a coherent paragraph? How can we ensure that students write coherent essays by themselves?

These are the main questions which led to the decision of carrying out a research work on students' problems in essay writing and teachers' attitude towards the problem being raised.

1-2- Purpose of the study:

This study tends firstly to go through the aspects essay writing involve to have both students and teachers' opinions on the problem. It secondly aims at sorting out the difficulties related to essay writing and look for the causes of those difficulties. Thirdly, this study aims at proposing some approaches of solutions according to the various difficulties which will be found out.

1-3- Research question:

The main research question of this work can be stated as follow:

- What are the problems in which lie students' disabilities in essay writing, what are the causes of these difficulties, and what can be done to come over these problems?

There are some important aspects which are going to be developed through the answer to that question:

- Do students and teachers have an idea about what is essay writing and its importance?
- Do teachers teach essay writing to their students?
- What are the difficulties teachers faced while conducting essay writing activities with their students? And what are those the latter faced while performing essay writing?
- What are the reasons which can explain those difficulties?
- What solutions can both students and teachers propose to come over the difficulties they both come across either in learning for the former or in teaching for the latter?

1-4- Significance of the study

The educational problem of Benin, our country, is the fruit of many research works of other elders. Then, if any research work has always a part for recommendations and suggestions, it is to bring something new, a contribution, to make better our educational system.

First, this study will help EFL students know about the real aspects that must be taken into account in writing in order to improve their performance in essay writing. Be aware of how essay writing must be performed, what has to be known as background information before trying to write a paragraph or a short text, can lead students to an improvement of their ability in the concerned exercise.

Second, EFL teachers can find through this study what should be done, what should be given to students as a kind of preparation to essay writing exercise. Teachers can find the particular aspects really necessary to be taught to students in order to get them ready and used for performing essay writing.

Third, this work will be helpful not only for teachers and students, but it will also be a tool for highly qualified Professors, inspectors, and any other people who decide in agreement how, what should be our educational system. They will find in this research a way to familiarize students with essay writing and to ensure that these students can be able to produce, to write coherent paragraphs on their own.

1-5- Clarification of some concepts

1-5-1- The concept of essay

According to *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 8th Edition* (2008, p.497), an essay is “a short piece of writing by a student as part of a course of study”.

An essay is also defined as a piece of writing that methodically analyzes and evaluates a topic or an issue. Fundamentally, an essay is designed to get an opinion, a viewpoint on a particular matter.

1-5-2- The concept of writing

The concept of writing can be defined as the process of using symbols (letters of the alphabet, punctuation) to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form. In fact, writing is one of the four language skills, which involves not just a graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way.

There are some micro-skills involved in writing. Then, the process of writing requires using the orthography correctly, including good punctuation. It also requires the use of the correct forms of words, the use of correct vocabulary. In writing, it is also important to make the main sentence constituents, such as subject, verb, and object. Make

the text coherent so that the development of the ideas can be followed is also required in writing.

1-5-3- Essay writing:

Chakraverty, A., and Gautum, K. (2000) have defined essay writing as “*a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about a specific topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge*” [...]. This means that EFL students are asked to structure their ideas in a coherent written form to produce a short paragraph.

The exercise of essay writing can also be defined as a short composition on a particular subject, expressing a personal point of view; that is a short paragraph in which the student gives his or her opinion about a specific question raised.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to shed light on some aspects related to the EFL students' difficulties in essay writing. This chapter is divided into four main sections, each of which tackles one aspect of writing.

As such, this chapter includes review of the literature related to:

- A brief history of writing and of essay
- Some generalities about EFL essay writing
- Some aspects that affect EFL students' writing
- Some EFL students' writing difficulties

2-1- A brief history of writing and of essay

▪ *Brief history of writing*

In ancient times, nobody knew that writing needed to be invented and its invention has been the fruit of continuous advances, through a process which has lasted thousands of years and which has been progressively enriched by further development. The invention of writing happened in an independent way in different parts of the world and it followed the same fundamental steps. At the beginning, to indicate something, people used its picture or a conventional sign. Then, they moved on to a phonetic writing system based on the mechanism of the rebus, and then they went to a syllabic writing, and only at the end did they arrive at alphabetic writing.

During the upper Paleolithic, 30-40,000 years ago, people started by drawing graffiti and paintings on rocks and walls of caves. The notches engraved on bones and stones were a way to count something, as for example, the days which pass.

There is not a unique origin of writing. The first people who wrote were the Sumerians and the Egyptians around 3500-3200 Before Christ. It is not clear which of those two people invented writing first, although it seems that the Egyptian writing had

some Sumerian influence and not vice versa. They were people who felt the need for a system of notation for agricultural products, as those who felt the need to be allowed to annotate goods in the trade exchanges. The invention of writing closely followed many other innovations typical of the Neolithic age. In this period, as agriculture and breeding spread, the necessity of writing increased, for people found it important to be able to indicate goods and persons in account documents and in commercial transactions.

- ***Brief history of essay***

The context in which the history of the essay is treated is essay as a literary form. The word “**essay**” is derived from the French word ‘*essayer*’, which, in turn, is culled from ‘*exagium*’ or, more accurately, ‘*exagere*’ (a Latin word which means “to weigh” or “to sift”). It is often held that Michel de Montaigne is the father of the essay as it was he who arguably introduced the style of using a very personal voice in writing. That was in the 16th century, about 400 years back from today. Before and during Montaigne’s lifetime, literary works and almost, every published writing are governed by very formal approaches. The conversational approach was an alien concept to writing during those days. It is in *Essais*, a two-volume book published in 1580-1588, where Montaigne first used the word and applied that approach in a published work. It was a pioneering feat in the context of the history of the essay.

While the history of the essay as a literary form may be conceived as starting off with Bacon, it did not take long enough for it to grow. It only took two decades at most for Montaigne’s *Essaisto* to be followed by another seminal work. More importantly, it was Bacon who made the essay “a definite form” which was soon seized by many other writers who saw it as “a release from a traditional formality”. From then on, the essay has become one of the, if not, most widely used literary form.

2-2- Generalities about EFL essay writing:

2-2-1- Some conceptions of writing:

Some researchers have defined writing as “*a process of natural generation of ideas with focus on meaning and communication that concerns about form and grammar*”. That means that essay writing requires from EFL students a good knowledge in vocabulary as well as in grammar. Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh (2007) define writing as “*a complex activity, a social act which reflects the writer’s communicative skills which is difficult to develop and learn, especially in an EFL context*”. This definition points out the particular difficulties which the exercise of essay writing demands. Then, what about the purpose of EFL writing?

2-2-2- Purpose of EFL writing:

EFL students write for a number of reasons including the following: to be assessed, to improve their critical thinking skills, to assist their understanding and memory, to broaden their learning beyond the classroom, to enhance their communication skills, and to be prepared as future professionals in different spheres of knowledge (Coffin et al., 2003). Essay writing tends then to evaluate EFL students ability to write paragraphs ensuring coherence and cohesion, and to prepare these students to professional writing by developing in them skills of reflection, critics, and analysis. This leads to talk about EFL writing importance.

2-2-3- Importance of EFL writing:

EFL writing is important for several reasons. Tchudi (1999. 244 & 245) states that, first it clarifies one’s thinking and helps to explore one’s ideas. It is far more than just generating ideas on paper; composing is more than translating ideas into words. It is a way of developing and exploring questions that are often raised in society, that is, a way of forming deep, pertinent and useful ideas on the realities of the society. As Rao (2007) comments, EFL writing is useful in two respects: first it motivates students’ thinking, helps them organize ideas, and develops their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize. Second, it strengthens students’ learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language. In relation to the context of the current study, essay writing is significant to the learning of EFL students for the following reasons: it will firstly facilitate the acquisition of the basic

skills needed for understanding topics and expressing it in their own words from their personal point of view; and secondly it will make them be able to reflect about their own and daily experiences in real life, about their needs, their problems and their progression. What are then the aspects found to affect EFL students in essay writing?

2-3- Aspects that affect EFL students' writing:

The focus here is put on two main aspects affect the EFL learners' writing. The first is about learning-related factors such as psychological factors, students' English proficiency level, and students' background knowledge; and the second concerns instructional-related factors such as teaching large classes, different strategies to teaching writing, feedback practices and assessment challenges.

2-3-1- Learning-related factors:

2-3-1-1- Psychological factors:

The two factors reviewed here include students' motivation and self-confidence.

In relation to students' motivation, low motivation can be unrewarding for learners, because students need to be motivated to doing everything that concerns any foreign language. Most of them are already unwilling to the learning of a foreign language, so they need to be really convinced before having an interest in the learning of the language, which is important to help them develop their writing skills. The other psychological factor that seems influential to EFL students' writing is self-confidence. Most of EFL students are never sure of what they write, perhaps because of fear of their vocabulary level. Then, teachers have to get them write multiple drafts, various essays on different topics, and give them the feedback, that is appreciation based on comments that focused more on content and organization than on grammatical error. This will help students produce better pieces of composition and develop more self-confidence in the exercise of essay writing. Similarly, Albertson (2006) claims that if students had confidence in their abilities to learn or try new methods, they seemed to adapt or adjust more quickly than those who had little confidence in their literacy practices. And that is the reason why they

need to be helped have confidence in their capacities, in order to increase their level of proficiency in English, which is essential to develop their writing skills.

2-3-1-2- EFL students' English proficiency level:

It is argued that proficient learners of English are said to produce good quality pieces of writing (Edelsky, 1982; Larios et al., 2001; Ito, 2004; Cumming, 2006). Edelsky (1982) stated that students' proficiency in English might influence their level of knowledge and writing in English. For those authors, proficiency is a significant factor in developing the overall quality of EFL students' written products. Other researchers have addressed the extent to which students' mother tongue proficiency affects the English writing of students. Lopez (2005) also explains that finding difficulty in writing in a foreign language may be linked to the difficulty in writing in students' first language. In fact, in Benin, EFL students are not taught to write in their mother tongue, but they just learn in the adopted first language that is French. That is the reason why students' background knowledge and their personal experiences, either in their mother tongue or in the French language, combined with their knowledge of a variety of writing topics, can be an important influence in their writing capacity.

2-3-1-3- Students' Prior Knowledge of Writing Topics

Prior knowledge in general appears to form the best possible base for comprehension and composition (Heller, 1999). Gaining background knowledge helps EFL learners write essays about interesting topics they already know about or have a certain experience about it in their real life. In addition, when students' prior knowledge is well-developed, it affects their confidence as far as producing written texts is concerned (Myhill, 2005). Ferris & Hedgcock (2004) highlight that prior knowledge and personal experiences that students bring to the composition classroom are major distinctive characteristics which can easily be noticed in their productions. They add that background knowledge and strategic proficiency can be clearly seen in students' responses to topics, that is, in the paragraphs they are asked to produce as an essay. Moreover, they explain that prior knowledge plays an essential role in activating students' minds in writing, and

this justifies the pre-writing activities EFL teachers have to do with their students, for these activities are considered as helpful stimuli to students' prior knowledge in comprehension and composition (Anderson 1984). Some researchers also find that comprehension and composition can be hindered if EFL students lack adequate background knowledge about text structure, topics and ideas.

2-3-2- Instructional-related factors:

2-3-2-1- Teaching large classes:

Teaching a large class is a big problem for both EFL teachers and students due to a number of problems, three of which are pointed out by Blatchford et al. (2007). First, classroom management is rather difficult in large classes. Second, teacher-student relationship is affected negatively, especially with shy students who suffer a lot because they cannot participate and have difficulties to express themselves, their needs, and to state questions about what they do not understand; they sometimes feel abandoned or isolated from the classroom. Thirdly, teachers' use of time for marking, planning, and assessment is also a problematic issue in large classes, especially for the particular skill of writing, where teachers will need to read students short written essays to judge their capacities and work with them to better their performance. This explains the fact that some EFL teachers do not carry out writing tasks with their students in class, and consequently EFL students' difficulties in essay writing. Moreover, teachers find it hard to encourage and involve students' interests in large classes.

Additionally, Bourke (1986) reported that large classes cause some problems such as noise, non-academic management, and teacher explaining a lot, without students not really paying attention. To avoid most of these problems, it is recommended that class size should be manageable to help EFL students learn and be very active in class activities, this reveals to be important in writing activities, for each student must write something, either correct or not, it will be up to EFL teachers to help them increase their capacity in essay writing.

2-3-2-2- Different strategies to teaching EFL writing:

Some strategies to teaching EFL writing have been reported to have an effect on developing the EFL students' writing skills. These strategies include making use of students' personal experiences, using literature, explicit instruction, and cognitive orientation of EFL students. First, some EFL writing researchers found out that making use of students' personal experiences can be useful in developing students' writing skills. They stated that authentic situations, in which EFL students usually find themselves in real life, really help them to think and produce well-written pieces of English composition in terms of content and organization. EFL teachers should often get their EFL students write short essays about their daily experiences. Second, other researchers have claimed that using literature in writing classes will help EFL students develop their ability to write. They highlight that the integration of literature adds a new dimension to EFL teaching. For example, short stories help EFL students learn all the language skills more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories.

Another strategy which can be used to develop EFL students' writing skills is explicit instruction. This strategy involves text organization, specific use of words, sentence patterns, wordiness, content information and motivation. Moreover, other researchers have paid attention to the importance of cognitive orientation of EFL students. They found that it is important for their success in essay writing. This clarifies that EFL teachers need to address cognitive issues in their teaching of writing, that is for example, link writing topics to students' real life situations or events.

2-3-2-3- Feedback practices and assessment challenges:

2-3-2-3-1- Feedback practices:

Ferris (2003) argues that providing feedback on EFL students' writing is a vital element in developing their successful and accurate writing. Studies which have investigated the impact of feedback on EFL learners' use of language on written pieces of composition, show that such feedback can lead to improve grammatical accuracy as well

as to an improvement in lexical complexity. Teacher feedback can lead EFL learners to greater improvements in essay writing.

2-3-2-3-2- Assessment challenges:

Assessing EFL students' written essays is essential for both EFL teachers and students. It helps EFL teachers and curriculum designers to know the extent to which their intended learning objectives of their writing course have been met. On the other hand, it helps EFL learners identify their weaknesses and strengths in writing, how far they have mastered a certain skill. In this way, assessment will help develop and enhance EFL students' essay writing skills and EFL teachers' planning and teaching.

2-4- EFL students' writing difficulties:

Essay writing proves to be a difficult skill for EFL students. Composing a coherent and cohesive paragraph is a scary task for most EFL students. This section reviews then EFL writing difficulties. The difficulties reviewed here are the organizational difficulties including coherence and cohesion; lexical and technical difficulties such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

2-4-1- Organizational difficulties:

2-4-1-1- Coherence difficulties:

Hinkel (2004) defines coherence as “the organization of discourse with all elements present and fitting together logically”. This denotes that a coherent essay consists of an introduction, a thesis statement and a conclusion. Generally, low English proficiency EFL students find it difficult to write coherent essays due to the fact that attention is more given to language matters rather than making meaning. EFL students not only need to generate, present, and relate intricately linked ideas, but they also need a large body of associated information that can be used to elaborate, reinforce, argue, and support their viewpoint.

Similarly, Cooley (1987) found out that content and structural features of written discourse are responsible for the coherence of a text. He also found out that coherence is both content-based and structural: it relies upon a well-sequenced presentation of consistent ideas. It will then be up to EFL teachers to find strategies to help their EFL learners develop their coherence skills.

2-4-1-2- Cohesion difficulties:

Many researchers agree that cohesion is related to linking ideas, and it is concerned with connecting sentences and phrases. Cohesion depends upon lexical and grammatical relationships that facilitate the understanding of sentence sequences as a connected discourse rather than as independent or single sentences. And this is a great problem most EFL students encounter in essay writing. Sentences are put together without a real rationale. Essays stand as meaningful essays by means of cohesion. Bailey (2003) emphasizes that text cohesion is highly dependent on its clarity and readability through linking all phrases together. He adds that this could be achieved by using conjunctions and linking words. Hinkel (2004) refers to cohesion as the connectedness of ideas in discourse and sentences to one another in text to produce a unified flow of information.

2-4-2- Lexical difficulties and Technical difficulties:

2-4-2-1- Lexical difficulties:

Having a repertoire of vocabulary is an essential prerequisite for essay writing. However, some research studies have stressed that EFL students face some difficulty in vocabulary. These vocabulary problems can be literal translation, that is, translation word by word of words and expressions in the adopted language which is the French language; confusion of words, phonetically similar or similar in form; confusion of related or unrelated words with similar meanings; unfamiliarity with word formation or derivation; and overgeneralization, where EFL learners produce deviant forms when trying to apply, most of the time, some grammatical rules.

2-4-2-2- Technical difficulties:

Grammar is perceived by some researchers as a tool for developing awareness of how linguistic structures shape meaning. Unfortunately, most EFL students are not proficient in English grammar. Whereas being proficient in grammar helps EFL learners be aware of how to shape meaning. Learning how to use English grammar is important in language learning, especially in an EFL context. Knowledge and competency of English grammar can help EFL students use language effectively and think about how language structures are used to form meaningful paragraphs and write correct essays. Researchers found out that, EFL students' difficulties in verbs and articles were the most frequent.

Concerning **punctuation**, it is often underestimated as a writing skill by EFL students. This often results in students' difficulties and problems in coherence and cohesion. In this respect, Flower (1979) illustrates that, lack of punctuation skills leads to incorrect cues about how to divide the sentence.

As far as **spelling** is concerned, it is an important factor in essay writing. EFL students often misspell words, and, this results in the misuse of these words in their compositions. It is thus important for EFL teachers to master spelling skills because if words are misspelled, they might mean something completely different to learners, leading them to problems of comprehension.

CHAPTER THREE: THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This chapter presents information about the research methodology of the study, the participants, the data collection instruments and procedure as well as details related to the data analysis procedure.

3-1- The method followed for the study:

The research method used for this study is a description and an interpretation of a case study. Quantitative and qualitative methods are both used in this research work.

I used the quantitative method because as this study focuses on a common problem to Benin secondary schools, and as data could not be collected in all those schools, it was necessary to choose a research population in order to have limited data to work with.

As far as the qualitative method is concerned, I used it because this method is used by researchers to study social and cultural facts. A qualitative research tends to explore and find solutions to a specific problem being raised, and about little is known. Then, I would like through this research to look for the various difficulties EFL students face in essay writing, find the possible causes of those difficulties, and propose some solutions to these difficulties. And since I have not set any hypothesis to begin the research, the qualitative method which is an inductive method proved to be the appropriate method.

3-2- Research participants:

The implementation of this investigation has taken into account two groups of participants. The first group is the group of EFL teachers, and the second group is the one of EFL learners of third and fourth form. I have made such a choice because this current research work has to do with the difficulties EFL students encounter in essay writing, which not only involves EFL learners, but also EFL teachers. In that respect, I have selected the EFL learners and teachers of “Collège Jean Piaget1”, a private school I choose for my case study.

The first group of participants was composed of 13 EFL teachers, 11 males, and 2 females, including novice and experienced teachers.

The second group was composed of 45 EFL learners of third form and 55 of the fourth form, which, combined together, gives a total of 100 EFL learners.

3-3- The research instrument:

The main instrument that I have used to collect data in the study is the questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed for the purpose of obtaining useful information about the topic. I have made such a choice because this instrument is more practical to succeed in obtaining good responses, and because it has proved to be the one with which respondents really feel free and more confident to answer.

It is important to point out that, due to the fact that students are already in holidays, and also because of the little time available, I did carry out neither classrooms observation nor use interviews, which particularly, often take time.

3-4- Procedure of the data collection:

The EFL teachers and EFL learners were asked to answer a series of different questions by filling in the questionnaire themselves. As the case study was about “Collège Jean Piaget1”, the secondary school I attended, with the contribution of one of my former English teacher, the questionnaires of both teachers and students were distributed and collected early.

3-5- Method of data analysis:

After the data collection, I have classified and organized the questionnaires. The classification is to help make clear comparisons between patterns of data and to make sense of them. The next stage then was the analysis and the interpretation of the data collected.

The sets of questions addressed to EFL teachers and EFL learners are put in the appendix of this work.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND ITS ANALYSIS

This chapter is mainly concerned with the presentation and the interpretation of the collected data in “Collège Jean Piaget1” concerning EFL teachers and EFL students.

4-1- Interpretation of the research results

4-1-1- Presentation and analysis of the EFL teachers’ answers

“Collège Jean Piaget1” has thirteen teachers of English (as mentioned in CHAPTER THREE) who were all required to fill the questionnaire addressed to EFL teachers. I made no difference as far as teachers’ gender is concerned.

The first part of the questionnaire helps us know about the experience of the EFL teachers of the school. Through the analysis of this part, I can say that the teaching staff of the school is experienced, for 76.92% of the teachers’ answer that they have been teaching for more than five years now, and only 23.07% of them answer that they have been teachers of English in the gap of one to five years.

Yes or No Questions

Questions	Number of Answers		Total
	Yes	No	
Question 1	11	2	13
	Percentage	84.61%	
Question 2	13	0	
Percentage	100%	0%	
Question 4	13	0	

Percentage	100%	0%	
Question 5	13	0	
Percentage	100%	0%	
Question 6	13	0	
Percentage	100%	0%	
Question 8	13	0	
Percentage	100%	0%	
Question 9	13	0	
Percentage	100%	0%	

Table 1

Question 3: How long did your writing activities last?

	1/3 of the class time	2/3 of the class time	TOTAL
Less than 1/3 of the class time			
4	6	3	13
30.76%	46.15%	23.07%	100%

Table 2

Question 7: Are your topics broad or narrowed?

Broad	Narrowed	TOTAL
1	12	13
7.69%	92.30%	100%

Table 3

Question 10: How often do you teach essay writing in your class?

Always	Sometimes	Never	TOTAL
2	11	0	13
15.38%	84.61%	0%	100%

Table 4

Question 11: How do you feel after your writing class?

Satisfied	Happy	Disappointed	TOTAL
6	2	5	13
46.15%	15.38%	38.46%	100%

Table 5

As far as question n°12 is concerned, the answers provided by the respondent teachers allow us to conclude that the great majority of them encounter some difficulties like a lack of students' understanding because of their low level in vocabulary and grammar, as well as in reading. Another difficulty they have is that their students are not able to express their ideas in English, which clearly results in a problem of coherence and cohesion. In addition, another difficulty teachers raised is that of very long explanations

during the writing class, without having students really understand. They also point out that some of their learners are not willing to perform the essay writing exercise.

When asked in question n°13 to state the possible causes of the difficulties they give in the previous question, the respondent teachers with their different answers come to almost the same causes. These causes are their students' low level in the language, including of course grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and all the basics related to the English language learning. They also found as causes the problem of motivation, learners' lack of interest in essay writing, and the problem of learners' laziness.

With the answers provided for question n°14 to come over the various difficulties, the respondent teachers propose to teach writing more frequently to their students with an emphasis on the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and sentence making. Also do they propose to help students make more efforts to improve their level of knowledge by encouraging them to read a lot and often check words' meaning in the dictionary. In the same way, they propose to perform quizzes in essay writing more often, and they suggest that a novel should be introduced in the program only for the purpose of reading and dictation. In addition, teachers propose to frequently have their students discuss about common essay topics.

4-1-2- Presentation and analysis of the EFL students' answers

Forty-five students of third form and fifty-five of fourth form that is 100 students of the school (**CJP1**) received the questionnaire sheets, and all of them answered back, that is 100%. I have to mention that, after the distribution of the questionnaires, learners have been prepared for each question before they answer. No distinction was made between classes as far as the answers' presentation is concerned.

Yes or No Questions

Questions	Number of Answers	Total
------------------	--------------------------	--------------

	Yes	No	
Question 1	100	0	100
Percentage	100%	0%	
Question 2	95	5	
Percentage	95%	5%	
Question 3	91	9	
Percentage	91%	9%	
Question 4	40	60	
Percentage	40%	60%	

Table 1

Question 5: How do you find essay writing activity?

Very interesting	Very difficult	Not interesting	Easy	Very easy	TOTAL
30	60	0	10	0	100
30%	60%	0%	10%	0%	100%

Table2

Question 6: Does your teacher teach you...?

	Always	Never	Sometimes	TOTAL
Grammar	47	0	53	100
Vocabulary	47	0	53	100
	47%	0%	53%	100%

Table 3

Question 9: How do you feel after a writing class?

Satisfied	Happy	Disappointed	TOTAL
22	8	70	100
22%	8%	70%	100%

Table 4

About question n°7, students' difficulties can be stated as follows: difficulty to make sentences, difficulty to express their thoughts and ideas in English, difficulty to conjugate verbs into correct tenses, problem with irregular verbs. In addition, some of the learners point out the fact that they do not know about the structure of an essay. Others said that they find it difficult to put ideas in a correct order, that is, to structure their ideas (problem of coherence and cohesion). Moreover, most of the respondent learners state a crucial difficulty, that is, they do not understand the questions asked in essay writing, and sometimes they do not have much information about the topics on which they are asked to write an essay. This is briefly what I note from learners' answers as far as their difficulties in essay writing are concerned.

For question n°8, the majority of the respondent learners that is 71%, said that they do not know about the causes of these difficulties; but next to that, there is a minority of 29% of learners who attributes their difficulties to their level of knowledge in the language, and also to the fact that they don't know about the various topics on which essays are based, as well as the different types of questions asked in essays.

Finally, for the question n°10, most learners mainly suggest that they have the opportunity to read books, and that they are taught more about how to perform essay writing.

4-2- Conclusive points deriving from the research results

In the light of the data collected through the questionnaires addressed to EFL teachers and EFL learners, the **difficulties** EFL students face in essay writing can be stated as follow:

- coherence and cohesion difficulties
- grammar and vocabulary difficulties
- difficulty with the structure of an essay and with the types of essay questions
- lack of background information about the various essay topics

The possible **causes** that have been found are:

- students' low level of knowledge in the language
- their unfamiliarity with essay writing common topics
- their lack of comprehension as far as essay questions are concerned
- students' lack of books reading.

The **solutions** that have been suggested are:

- the teaching of the structure of an essay to learners, as well as the types of questions
- students' motivation by teachers through class discussions on students' real life situations
- the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and sentence making to students.

Taking into account all those points, suggestions and recommendations are made in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This chapter deals with the recommendations and the suggestions. On the one hand, recommendations are addressed to the Government officials, curriculum editors, and to the authorities of “Collège Jean Piaget¹”. On the other hand, suggestions are made to both EFL teachers and learners, for the former, about significant aspects of essay writing to know in order to improve their teaching of writing skill, and for the latter about important elements or notions to bear in mind to succeed in developing their performance in essay writing. Parents also have been suggested a role to help their children develop writing skills.

5-1- Recommendations to the Government officials, to curriculum editors, and to the authorities and teachers of CJP1

5-1-1- To the Government officials

Education proves to be a very important aspect in the development of a country. Then, more attention should be given to that field in our country. And the intention of this research work is to make EFL teaching and learning more effective in Beninese secondary schools. It is the responsibility of the Government to help EFL teachers and learners, be more successful. Therefore, as reading contributes in enriching EFL learners' minds with a variety of broad topics, and cultural and social facts, the Government should provide public secondary schools with libraries, and ask private schools to do the same. This will get learners' interest in reading because reading participates a lot in, and can facilitate essay writing for EFL students, as they will be used to a variety of topics.

The need for teachers' training has also to be mentioned. The Government has made a lot of efforts so far. However, it remains to be done. It is indeed essential for educational authorities and the other actors of education to train and recruit well-trained English teachers. For, there is a considerable lack of well-trained teachers of English. If there is not adequate training in English, this will result in low proficiency of EFL learners in the different skills. It is therefore up to the Government to recruit professionally trained teachers, to encourage them to do their job as the Competency-Based Approach used in our country recommends it.

5-1-2- To curriculum editors

Curriculum editors are the one who design what to teach and what to learn, as well as how, where and when to teach and to learn this or that. Thus, they are very important to the educational system. I then suggest that, in the students' books, they design more writing activities, with a focus on specific topics related to our social aspects, facts or problems. In addition, I would like them to put explicit instructions for the different writing activities they propose, to avoid having learners be confused or understand

wrongly what they will be asked to do. An emphasis must also be put on the design of the procedure to be followed by teachers to carry out writing activities with students. Procedure must be clearly stated especially to enable teachers who do not have much experience to be more orientated and to perform easily and correctly the writing activities with their students.

5-1-3- To the authorities and teachers of CJP1

The investigation carried out on the students in third and fourth form of **CJP1** enables those students to raise some difficulties in their performance in essay writing. I thereby recommend to the authorities of the school to provide the school with a library so that students will have the opportunity to read a lot of books. This will better their background knowledge with a variety of topics, and develop their general knowledge.

Apropos of the teachers of **CJP1**, I suggest that they spend more time doing many writing activities with their students, especially about the familiar situations in which their students usually find themselves in real life. For, essay writing topics are just about what happens in our society and our daily life.

5-2- Suggestions to EFL teachers, EFL learners and to parents

5-2-1- To EFL teachers

Let me first point out that EFL teachers should know that the job of teaching is a vocation. Without a real feeling to practice teaching, a person cannot be a teacher, more particularly a good teacher. This is important because a teacher teaches knowledge as well as his/her personality.

As far as essay writing is concerned, there are a number of aspects that EFL teachers should bear in mind to teach writing skills to their students. As I said at the end of CHAPTER ONE after the definition of essay writing, I am going to give more details about the constitutive parts of essay writing, and about the different types of essay. These are basic notions in essay writing EFL teachers should on the one hand mastered, and on

the second hand teach their students. After that, I will give some important habits EFL teachers need to develop in their class to help their students succeed in essay writing.

- **Parts of essay writing**

Essay writing consists of the following parts: the *introduction*, the *body* and the *conclusion*.

- ***The introduction***

The purpose of the introduction is to introduce the reader, that is, the teacher to the essay. It tells the teacher what the essay is about. From reading an introduction the teacher should be able to determine the **thesis statement** (the topic) of the essay and the main points that will be discussed, and the order in which they will be discussed.

The thesis is a clear and concise statement of the position that the student will defend in the essay. It also contains the focus of the essay and tells the teacher what the essay is going to be about. The thesis statement is usually stated clearly in one or two sentences at the end of the essay's introduction.

- ***The body***

The body is where the supporting points and details are found. Through the body, the students give more specific information so that the teacher can form an opinion. Sentences must be grammatically correct, logically arranged and provide a clear framework for ideas, that is, they should respect coherence and cohesion.

- ***The conclusion***

The conclusion serves two specific functions: first, it summarizes what has been said in the body of the essay without repeating it; and second, it provides the teacher with a relevant final thought on what the student wants him/her to understand.

- **Types of essay writing**

Essays can be classified into four types: the *expository* essay, the *descriptive* essay, the *argumentative* essay and the *narrative* essay.

The **expository** essay, which is also called the analytical or the information essay, is that kind which explains and analyzes a specific issue. It requires the students to give information about an issue, to investigate an idea, to evaluate evidence, and set an argument concerning that idea. This can be accomplished through definition, comparison and contrast.

On the other hand, the **descriptive** essay is that essay which describes an object, a person, a place, an experience, an emotion, a situation, an event, etc.

As for the **argumentative** essay, it is that one in which the student attempts to persuade the teacher of his/her point of view. Here, the student tries to convince the teacher of the validity of his/her opinion by developing pertinent reasons.

Finally, the **narrative** essay is that kind which tells a story. Generally the narrative essay tells of a personal experience. This essay could tell a single, life-shaping event, or simply a daily experience.

From time to time, in their classes, EFL teachers should engage discussions, debates with their learners on various topics. In fact, the particularity these topics should have to really serve the learners is that they should focus on those learners' real life situations they usually find themselves in. These debates should take place in a good environment, where students feel comfortable and free to speak, to express their minds, their ideas. It is indeed important that learners participate actively in those discussions to give their viewpoints, their opinions.

The role of the teacher will then be to fix students on what they should know and understand about these topics. EFL teachers should foster their students' knowledge and develop their ability to think and write in the language they are learning. This is a significant work that EFL teachers can do to help their students develop their performance in essay writing.

Another point which needs to be mentioned is that of teachers' pronunciation. EFL teachers should often work on their own pronunciation, for investigations reveal that students write words on sounds, that is on the basis of the pronunciation of their teachers. So, teachers' good pronunciation can help learners avoid these writing errors.

5-2-2- To EFL learners

EFL learners have to understand that their success in essay writing depends a lot on basic notions they should know, and some attitudes they should develop towards learning.

The basic essay is generally composed of three main parts, which are the *introduction*, the *body* and the *conclusion*. What learners need to put in these parts can be structured as follows.

The Introduction

- *Orientate the teacher to the general topic of the essay*
- *Define and explain key terms if necessary*
- *Identify the focus/purpose of the essay*
- *Outline the scope, that is the points to be covered in the essay*
- *State thesis*

The Body

Topic sentence 1

- *Supporting details*
- *Concluding sentence 1*

Topic sentence 2

- *Supporting details*

- *Concluding sentence 2*
Topic sentence 3

- *Supporting details*

- *Concluding sentence 3*

The Conclusion

- *Restate/Reaffirm thesis*

- *Summarize argument*

Learners must be aware of the fact that each section, the introduction, the body and the conclusion, has a specific purpose, which means the teacher will be looking for this purpose through the development of the essay. That is the reason why in the following lines, I will give a process they can follow to perform essay writing and really succeed in it.

There are three main steps EFL students can follow to perform a good essay.

Step 1: Analyze the question.

Some essay questions are written in such a way that the content and structure of the essay is outlined in the question. This often occurs in a long question, so learners don't have to be put off by the length of the question. However, other questions require that you first analyze them to determine the direction that is required. Thus, the following *key word analysis* will help students ensure that they understand and answer correctly the question.

Key word analysis

- Look for the **content words** of the question that determine what you are expected to write about, that is to pay attention to words that indicate the :
 - general topic (this often helps you make a good introductory sentence for the introduction); and the

- focus of the question (that is what the teacher wants you to specifically address).
- Note the **task** or **directional words** that will dictate how you are expected to approach the question.

All these are sometimes contained within the instructions leading up to the question.

Task words are important because they determine the depth of analysis or thinking required. Task words such as compare, contrast, analyze, discuss and evaluate require that learners demonstrate their ability to think. Words such as describe, explain and outline are often short answer questions. However, learners can be asked to express their viewpoint, that means that they will have to argue, supporting their opinions with evidence, discussion and valid reasoning.

Here is a list of the common task words and their description.

- **Analyze:** Find the main ideas and show how they are related, what their function is and why they are important.
- **Comment on:** Discuss, criticize, or explain the meaning.
- **Compare:** Note the similarities and differences of what you have been asked to compare.
- **Contrast:** Compare by showing the differences.
- **Criticize:** Make a judgment about the merit of theories and opinions or about a statement. Support this by discussing the evidence. Discuss the strong and weak points and include your own analysis.
- **Define:** Give the formal meaning of a word, term or phrase, and short additional information about it.
- **Describe:** Give a detail account in a logical sequence. Emphasize the important points. An explanation or interpretation is not required.
- **Discuss:** Investigate and examine by argument giving the reasons for and against. Present a point of view. This will require both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen reasons.

- **Enumerate:** List the main ideas in point form.
- **Evaluate:** Assess and give your judgment about the importance or usefulness of something. Include the advantages and the disadvantages. Include also your own opinion.
- **Explain:** Interpret the facts. The main focus here should be on the ‘why’ or ‘how’, with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes, and effects.
- **Illustrate:** Use concrete examples to make an idea clear and explicit.
- **Justify:** Give the reasons why you think it is so.
- **List:** Give a concise list of words or sentences explaining a particular aspect; same as enumerate.
- **Narrate:** Outline what happened.
- **Prove:** Show by argument or logic that it is true. Establish certainty by logical reasoning.
- **Relate:** Show the connections and how, one causes, or is like another.
- **Summarize:** Give a concise account of the main points. Omit details and examples.
- **To what extent...:** Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which it is not true.

Step 2: Plan your essay on draft.

After you have analyzed and understood the assignment question, you might be able to formulate a plan, by first jotting down all the ideas coming into your mind so far, then group or categorize them to present them into a series of points in a logical order. Your aim is to develop a logical and coherent structure. Thus, what you have to do here is to:

- Formulate your thesis or viewpoint
- Decide which points you are going to include in supporting your thesis
- Check if there is a logical grouping of points or ideas
- Decide an order of presentation. For example, order could be determined by level of importance, but it should follow the order indicated in the introduction

- Now, review the points of your thesis, and delete any points that you consider irrelevant or not necessary.

Step 3: Write now the final version of your essay.

As you have already plan your essay on draft, it just remains the phase of arranging it. Then, here you have to:

- Follow your plan.
- Take care if you change terms used in the question, to avoid changing the meaning.
- Remember to pay attention to your topic sentences. Make it clear to the teacher what point you are making in each paragraph and why.
- Relate the points you are developing to the question/your thesis.
- Do not use the first person, such as ‘I think’, ‘I believe’..., and avoid long sentences.
- Use full and correct sentences to communicate your ideas.

Some useful linking words and phrases

To indicate a contrast:

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| - however | - on the other hand | - in contrast |
| - alternatively | - on the contrary | - conversely |
| - in comparison | - rather | - in fact |
| - but | - despite this | - in spite of |
| - yet | - nevertheless | - instead |
| - all the same | - better | - although |

To provide an illustration:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| - for example | - as follows | - that is |
| - that is to say | - for instance | - namely |
| - such as | - mainly | - most importantly |
| - notably | - especially | - including |
| - a particular example is | | - in particular |

To extend a point or to give more explanation:

- similarly - equally - in addition
- indeed - in the same way - likewise
- too - besides - also
- as well - furthermore

To show the next step:

- First(ly) - to begin with - to start with
- First and most importantly - first and foremost - in the first place
- Second(ly) - after - next - in the second place
- Third(ly) - then - afterwards - finally

To show cause and effect/conclusion:

- so - therefore - accordingly
- thus - then - it follows that
- for this reason - this implies - in this/that case
- consequently - because of this/that - owing to
- this suggests that - as a result - resulting from this
- in consequence of this - as a consequence - assuming this
- accepting this - in brief - due to the fact that
- To conclude - in conclusion - in short - in all

This is a simple way to perform essay writing and ensure that it is a good one. However, EFL learners should, in addition, develop some useful learning attitudes to succeed more in essay writing.

Learners have to read a lot, for reading participates in fostering their cultural knowledge. Reading is a way for them to increase their level in grammar and vocabulary. They should also be interested in the various facts of the society, the culture of their environment and its civilization. This will make them become familiar to the various topics on which essays are based.

5-2-3- To parents

As they are the ones who finance the education of their children, parents must necessarily involve themselves in their learning. Indeed, they have to play a crucial role in their children's learning. Students' learning does not take place only at school, but it also continues at home. And since the teacher is not going to follow the students at home, parents are the ones who supply the role of the teacher at home. This is a kind of relationship parents should establish with the school in which they have their children.

Thus, at home, parents can choose a topic related to any aspect of the society and raise discussions with their children. This is an opportunity for them, as elders, to communicate the information they have about various aspects of the society, their own experiences about real life situations to their children. It will, in fact, be very useful to the learners as they will be able to use it as examples to write essays. By doing this, parents will familiarize their children with a number of topics, then enriching their background knowledge. And this can be done either in local language or in French.

Moreover, literate parents whose level is more or less high in education can often make their children produce paragraphs or short texts on a given topic of the various ones they have discussed with them. It will be a way to check if their children have been keeping in mind what they have been discussing so far.

In addition, it is necessary that parents often come to the school of their children to meet teachers, and to know about the difficulties their children encounter in class. They will then be able to know what the learners need and decide how to work with them at home to help them better their performance.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

All things considered, it is worth noting that the writing skill is as important as the other language skills. Essay writing has progressively become an important part of EFL learning. As it has previously been said, essay writing involves first of all knowing the structure of an essay, and then a number of elements, mainly such as: coherence and cohesion between sentences, correct orthography, and correct development of ideas. The difficulties EFL students face in essay writing are mostly due to their ignorance of those different aspects.

The investigation I carried out by means of the questionnaire gives some information I have interpreted, and from which I derive some important points. Thus, EFL teachers too, are not aware of what they should teach, and how they should teach as far as the basics of essay writing are concerned. The structure of essay writing should necessarily be taught to learners, and be followed by consolidation exercises to have learners write on their own. Vocabulary, grammar and reading are in fact skills that can help EFL students succeed in essay writing. Discussions in class about various topics, related to learners' daily life experiences, can help learners have an idea about the common writing topics. Unfortunately, many EFL teachers do neither devote time to teach these skills to their learners, nor adopt those useful habits in their class. Whereas, this should normally serve EFL learners as a preparation, and help them develop their level of knowledge in the language.

This research work helps me realize that the implication of EFL students in learning is not real enough, for they lack motivation, which is mainly due to the fact that there are not factors of motivation such as libraries around their environment. However, taking into account the recommendations and suggestions of the study, both EFL teachers and learners can find a way to better their performance.

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APPENDIX

Research instrument: The questionnaire

Topic: DIFFICULTIES OF STUDENTS IN ESSAY WRITING IN BENIN SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS: CASE STUDY OF CLASSES OF 4è AND 3è OF CJP1.

Questionnaire addressed to EFL teachers:

Dear Teacher, to suggest solutions to the various difficulties faced by students in Essay Writing, I would like you to answer to the questions below. Please, cross one square for your selected answer.

School's name:.....

Teaching Years: 1-5 More than 5

1- Are your students interested in learning English? Yes No

2- Do you often work with your students on Essay Writing in class?
Yes No

3- How long did your writing activities last?

One third of the class time

Less than one third of the class time

Two third of the class time

Do your students find Essay Writing difficult to perform? Yes No

Do you often teach your students new vocabulary? Yes No

4- Do you often vary topics on which you have students write essays?

Yes No

5- Are your topics broad or narrowed? Broad Narrowed

6- Do your topics involve real life situations which students usually are confronted with?

Yes No

7- Do you teach your students grammar? Yes No

8- How often do you teach Essay Writing in your class?

Always Sometimes Never

9- How do you feel after your writing class?

Satisfied Happy Disappointed

10-What are the difficulties you have when teaching how to perform Essay Writing to your students?

.....
.....

11-What do you think are the causes of those difficulties?

.....
.....

12-Suggest some solutions to these difficulties?

.....
.....

Questionnaire addressed to EFL students :

Dear student, to suggest solutions to the various difficulties you have in performing Essay Writing, I would like you to answer to the questions below.

Direction: Cross one square for your selected answer.

School's name: Class:.....

1- Do you like English Language? Yes No

2- Do you know about Essay Writing? Yes No

3- Does your teacher teach you how to perform Essay Writing in class?

Yes No

4- Does your teacher perform exercises on Essay Writing with you in class?

Yes No

5- How do you find Essay Writing activity?

Very interesting Very difficult Not interesting

Easy Very easy

6- Does your teacher teach you.....?

Grammar: Always Never Sometimes

Vocabulary: Always Never Sometimes

7- What are the difficulties you have when performing Essay Writing?

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8- What do you think are the causes of those difficulties

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9- How do you feel after a writing class?

Happy Satisfied Disappointed

10- Suggest some solutions to the difficulties you face when performing Essay writing?

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