

# STATE OF PLAY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN MADAGASCAR

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## ABSTRACT

*The Ecole Normale Supérieure of Antananarivo, also known as ENS, is a state University in charge of training teachers to teach in high schools of Madagascar. Though within the last few years, many teachers from other universities and from diverse sectors were recruited as teachers, which raises our curiosity about the uniformity of the pedagogical background and language skills of English Language Teachers in high schools. The professional skills required to be a language teacher are numerous but above all, language skills remain one of the most important ones for teaching a language, particularly the English language. This article discusses the result of an inventory of the language proficiency of in-service teachers in public high schools in Madagascar. The survey aims to find out about the level of language proficiency of teachers in public high schools in Madagascar and the challenges in maintaining English proficiency. For the processing of the results of the questionnaire, we used the statistical software IBM SPSS 21. The discussion revolves around the main difficulties of the Malagasy teachers in high schools in town and in the regions of Madagascar in the practice of English. We noticed that 'Listening', and 'Speaking' are the most difficult skills to master and also the least exploited in high schools, as far as English teaching and learning in high schools in Madagascar is concerned.*

**Keywords:** *Linguistic competence, Malagasy teachers, public high schools, difficulties, English*

## RESUME

*Les compétences professionnelles requises pour être enseignant sont nombreuses et parmi elles, la compétence linguistique reste une des plus importantes pour enseigner une langue, ici l'anglais. Cet article discute du résultat d'un état des lieux sur les compétences linguistiques des enseignant(e)s en service dans les lycées publics de Madagascar. L'article a pour objectifs d'informer sur le niveau de compétence linguistique des enseignant(e)s des lycées publics à Madagascar et des difficultés liées à la pratique de l'anglais chez les enseignants pour garder un niveau linguistique correcte. Pour le traitement des résultats du questionnaire, nous avons utilisé le logiciel de statistique IBM SPSS 21. La discussion est axée sur les principales difficultés des enseignant(e)s dans la pratique de*

*l'anglais. L'écoute et la production orale sont les compétences les plus difficiles à maîtriser et également les moins exploitées dans les classes d'anglais au lycée.*

**Mots clés :** *Compétence linguistique, enseignants malgaches, lycée, difficultés, Anglais.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The most important three professional skills in teaching English are language proficiency, linguistics competence, and English Language Teaching Methodology (ELT Methodology). Acquiring skills in teaching and learning the English language in public schools in Madagascar remains a challenge for both learners and teachers, which is why research has been undertaken; in order to present a state of the language skills of English teachers in public high schools in Madagascar and to discuss the factors that can prevent them from improving their language practice. 'It is known that the majority of EFL teachers in the world are not, in fact, native speakers' (HUBBARDS et al., 1983), 'skills of the non-native English teacher differ from those of the native teacher, the latter has a natural prerequisite of language teaching competence while the non-native has yet to develop it' (THOMAS, 1987). This is why it is important to identify the factors that can improve effectiveness to the maximum in order to enjoy the pleasure of teaching and thus obtain better results from their learners. Teachers' language skills impact teaching skills in the classroom and reduce or augment students' and Teachers' motivation and effectiveness. Malagasy students begin to learn English in sixth grade, and despite the fact that they have been learning it for 7 years (from secondary school to high school, the majority still have a poor command of the language, and this is also true for some teachers, despite the fact that they have been teaching the language for a few years, our research shows that some of them still struggle to practice and teach the language. However, they yearn for improvement and this can be done gradually, through professional development training for in-service teachers. As a teacher trainer, training teachers has always been our priority but training in-service teachers is also crucial for the benefit of future generations. We hope that readers, future English teachers, and especially practicing teachers will find ways to improve their teaching and learning strategies after reading this article. Thus, the research was conducted for the following specific objectives: (1) to address the Teachers' level of English language proficiency in public high schools in Madagascar, (2) to identify the reasons why it is difficult for them to improve their English proficiency, more specifically, listening skills and oral skills and (3) to discuss the least exploited communicative skills in the classroom.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

We have developed tools (questionnaires and grids) for collecting data. These tools were shared with teachers and students after class observations, interviews, and explanations of instructions. After two weeks, we collected the completed questionnaires and grids. For the treatment of the results, we used the statistical software IBM SPSS 21. The codification of the data allowed us to obtain quantitative variables exploited in the descriptive method and the crossing. We also did a discursive analysis for a qualitative study. We administered a questionnaire, to 63 high school English teachers from different regions of Madagascar, on their language proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFRL chart. Research has identified listening (listening skills) as the most difficult skill to master. We have noted that the more the teacher has a low level of listening skills, the less he/she includes activities related to auditory comprehension in class, which unconsciously deprives the student to progress in this area.



Fig-1: Areas of Madagascar covered by our research.

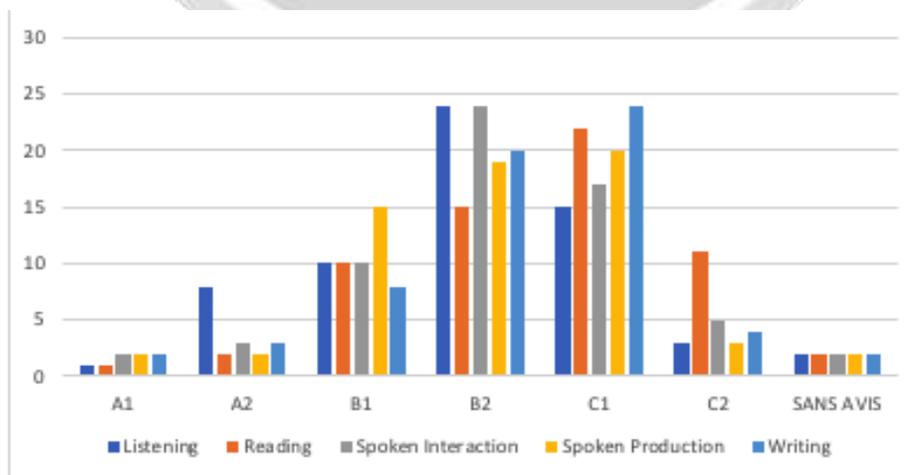
### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Language proficiency

Question 1: According to the CERFL (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) chart of level description (provided to the respondents), what Language level proficiency do you belong to?

	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Spoken Interaction</i>	<i>Spoken Production</i>	<i>Writing</i>
<b>A1</b>	1	1	2	2	2
<b>A2</b>	8	2	3	2	3
<b>B1</b>	10	10	10	15	8
<b>B2</b>	24	15	24	19	20
<b>C1</b>	15	22	17	20	24
<b>C2</b>	3	11	5	3	4
<b>N/A (non-applicable)</b>	2	2	2	2	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	63	63	63	63	63

Chart -1: English Language proficiency level of English teachers in high schools in Madagascar



**Fig -2: Representation of the English Language proficiency level of English teachers in high schools in Madagascar**

Chart -1 and Figure N°2 summarize the level of language proficiency of responding teachers in public high schools in Madagascar. In general, the sample shows that the majority of teachers are between B1 (intermediate level) and C1 (advanced level). However, there is an extreme difference between them from A1 and A2 (beginner and elementary levels) to C2 level ('Proficient' or close to native). The CEFRL is subdivided into 5 skills, and the result of the research shows that for '**Listening**', 1 teacher is at the A1 level, 8 teachers are A2 level; 10 teachers at B1; 24 teachers at the B2 level while 15 are at the C1 level, and 3 at C2 level. For '**Reading**': 1 teacher is at A1 and 2 teachers at level A2; 10 teachers at level B1 and 15 at level B2; 22 teachers are at level C1 and 11 at level C2. Regarding '**Spoken interaction**': 2 teachers are at level A1 and 3 teachers at level A2; 10 teachers are in B1 and 24 teachers in B2; 17 teachers are at level C1 and 5 are at level C2. For '**Spoken production**', 2 teachers are at level A1 and 2 teachers at level A2; 15 teachers are in B1 and 19 teachers in B2; 20 teachers are at level C1 and 3 are at level C2. In '**Writing**', 2 teachers are at level A1 and 2 teachers at level A2; 15 teachers are in B1 and 19 teachers at B2 level; 20 teachers are at C1 level, and 3 are at C2 level.

### 3.2 Language exposure to the language and teacher's practice habits

To find out the factors that reduce the possibility of improving the language skills of teachers, we have chosen to ask questions about the teacher's exposure to the language and their practice habits.

Question 2:	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Within the last two years, have you had the opportunity to practice English with a foreigner or a native speaker?</b>				
never	8	12.7	12.7	12.7
rarely	31	49.2	49.2	61.9
often	19	30.2	30.2	92.1
regularly	5	7.9	7.9	100.0
<b>Question 3:</b>				
<b>How often do you make some research work to improve your linguistic competences or knowledge?</b>				
never	3	4.8	4.8	4.8
rarely	6	9.5	9.5	14.3
often	34	54.0	54.0	68.3
regularly	20	31.7	31.7	100.0

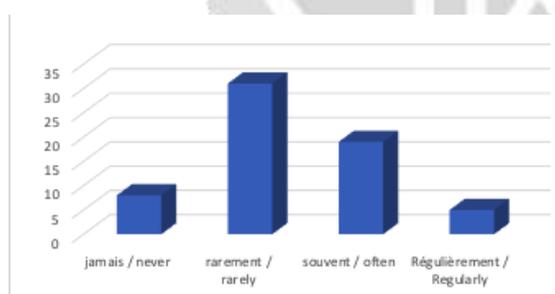
Question 4: How often have you attended an event on English Language teaching/learning within the last two years?		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	16	25.4	25.4	25.4
	rarely	27	42.9	42.9	68.3
	often	12	19.0	19.0	87.3
	regularly	8	12.7	12.7	100.0

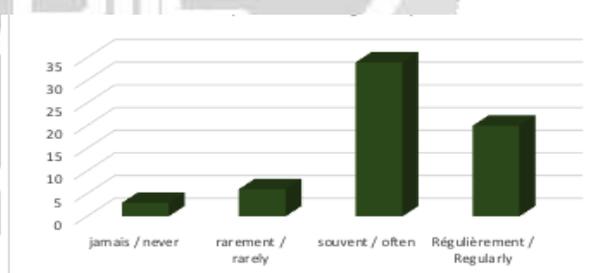
Question 5: How often do you speak English with your colleagues?		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	8	12.7	12.7	12.7
	Rarely	28	44.4	44.4	57.1
	Often	21	33.3	33.3	90.5
	regularly	6	9.5	9.5	100.0

**Chart -2: English Language Teacher exposure to the target language and practice habits.**

Chart -2 above shows us the teacher's exposure to the target language and the teacher's practical habits that can improve their language practice. 12.7% of teachers never meet foreigners or natives or rarely meet foreigners or natives with whom to practice English (49.2%). Nevertheless, 30.2% stated they do it often, while 7.9% regularly have the opportunity to practice with natives or foreigners who speak English. On the other hand, for question N°3, the majority of teachers at a rate of 54.1% often do research to improve their skills, indeed, 31.7% make regular research on English language and English Language teaching. However, 9.5% rarely do research while 4.8% never make any research. In this investigation on practice habits, the result also shows that teachers who have never attended an event in English are at 25.4%; those who have done so but rarely are at 42.9% while 19% often have opportunities to attend English-speaking events but 12.7% participate regularly in some English events. It should be noted that the teachers rarely speak English among themselves, which is the case of 44.5%; 12.7% never speak in English to their peers, while 33.3% use the English language with colleagues and 9.5% do so regularly. See the figures below:



**Fig-3: How often do you meet foreign English speakers?**



**Fig -4: How often do you make research on the English language or English Language Teaching?**

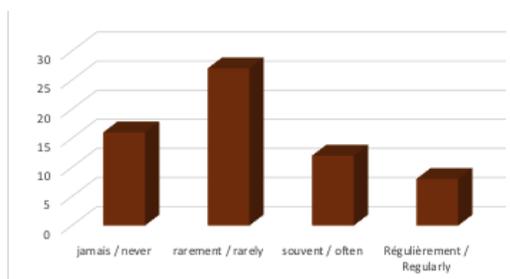


Fig -5: How often do attend meetings or events in English?

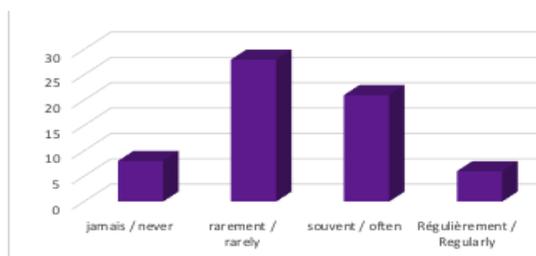


Fig -6: How often do you speak English to your colleagues?

### 3.3 Relations between teacher’s language proficiency and the teaching of language skills in the classroom

Questions	Skills	Question 7: Which do you think is the most difficult TO TEACH?				Total
		Listening	Reading	speaking	Writing	
Question 6: Which of the following do you think is the most difficult TO MASTER?	Listening	19	8	6	4	37
	Reading	0	1	1	0	2
	Speaking	4	3	3	1	11
	Writing	7	2	2	0	11
<b>Total</b>		30	14	12	5	61

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rt -3: The most difficult skill to master and the most difficult skill to teach according to the respondents.

Char -3 shows that most of the respondents have difficulty mastering ‘Listening’ (19 individuals) and in our comparison, ‘Listening’ is also the most difficult skill to teach for the respondents (19 individuals).

Question 7: How often do you teach listening skills or do some listening activities in class?

Below, we also find the frequency of listening activities done in class. The sample indicates that 20.6% of teachers often use listening activities, 15.8% do so regularly, and 4.8% state they have listening in every session. However, 31.7% of teachers rarely include listening in their teaching, and those who never do listening activities are at the rate of 6.3%.

Listening activities frequency in the classroom	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
never	4	6.3	8.0	8.0
rarely	20	31.7	40.0	48.0
often	13	20.6	26.0	74.0
regularly	10	15.9	20.0	94.0
At every session	3	4.8	6.0	100.0
Total	50	79.4	100.0	
Missing System	13	20.6		
Total	63	100.0		

Chart -4: Frequency at which listening comprehension activities are included in classes

By cross-referencing our data on the frequency of use of listening activities in the classroom with the teacher's listening proficiency level, the result shows that 20 teachers rarely use listening in class, and 4 never use listening at all; on the other side, 11 respondents often include listening in their teaching, 10 regularly do so and 3 out of 48 include it in every session.

Listening proficiency			Listening activities frequency in class					Total
			never	rarely	often	Regularly	Every session	
A1	Listening activities	Yes		1				1
		No						
A2	Listening activities	Yes	0	1		1	1	3
		No	3	0		0	0	3
B1	Listening activities	Yes		3		3		6
		No						
B2	Listening activities	Yes		10	7	3	2	22
		No						
C1	Listening activities	Yes		5	4	2		11
		No						
C2	Listening activities	Yes	0	0		1		1
		No	1	0		0		1
Total	Listening activities	Often/regularly/every session	0	0	11	10	3	24
		Never/Rarely	4	20	0	0	0	24

**Chart -5:** Frequency of use of activity related to auditory comprehension in class crossed with the level of listening skill

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 On language proficiency

One of the basics of language teaching is linguistic competence or level of language proficiency. It is obvious that you cannot teach a subject that you do not master yourself and the first sine qua non-condition for being a good teacher of English is to have a good practical mastery of this language, whether orally or written, in recognition and in production.

The result obtained during our research is scattered but the majority of teachers are between B1 (intermediate); B2 (upper-intermediate) and C1 (advanced). However, a significant part has A2 (elementary) and even A1 (beginner) levels. The disparity in the level of respondents is explained, in some way, by the recruitment criteria within the Ministry of National Education (MEN) in Madagascar, because during the recruitment there is no language test or ways to check candidates' ability to speak and teach the language, candidates are recruited from different universities, some do not even have English background but become English teachers unexpectedly. In France, for example, to be a professional in teaching English, you can require a minimum B2 level or a CAPES (Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second Degré); in the UK, there is the TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and the CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) which is, according to Cambridge University Press and assessment, 'one of the most valued qualifications in its category. It is an extremely comprehensive English teaching qualification that provides the essential knowledge and skills to be able to teach English. It is the most recognized English language teaching qualification in the world and the most often requested by employers: three out of four jobs involving teaching English require a CELTA qualification.' In Madagascar, before the introduction of the LMD system (License-Master-Doctorate system), the reference in teaching was to have the CAPEN (Certificate of Pedagogical Aptitude from the Ecole Normale Supérieure), a diploma that ceased to exist in 2015 after the migration to the License-Master-Doctorate system or LMD system. The CNELA known as 'National Center for the Teaching of English' is currently the only state center that delivers a language-level test in Madagascar but it is not specific to the teaching of English. Private centers have launched international tests but few teachers sit for them.

Below is a sample of the language tests and levels recommended for English teachers to obtain official accreditation abroad.

Level	University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations	IELTS (International English Language Testing System)	TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet Based (iBT))
C2	CPE Certificate of <b>Proficiency</b> in English	from 8,0	88-100
C1	CAE Certificate of <b>Advanced</b> English	6,5-7,5	70-88
B2	FCE <b>First</b> Certificate in English	5,0-5,5	50-70

**Chart -6:** Sample of the language tests and levels recommended for English teachers

Source : <https://www.voscours.fr/blog/comment-devenir-professeur-anglais>

The TOEFL is offered in private centers in Antananarivo but most of the participants are future scholarship holders or future employees who migrate abroad. According to the results in Chart -1 and Fig -1, it can be seen that the teachers present low or average levels especially in "listening" (or auditory comprehension) and in "speaking" (or oral production). Yet to communicate and specifically to teach, the teacher has no choice, he/she must have a higher level in the four skills, Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Indeed, Harmer, 1983, points out that "Different native speakers will have different sub-skills. Not all Englishmen are good at writing academic papers! It is also true that not all native speakers are competent in the use of the four major skills. There are a great number of illiterate people in the world, so called because they can neither read nor write", but 'in 2008, Dr. MANORO Régis, a Malagasy lecturer at the University of Antananarivo, is convinced that in NO CASE this should be the case for a teacher, the teacher is a model for the student and as the learner behaves like a sponge "*absorbing all the information we provide them (sometimes despite ourselves), they learn in a social way. For example, they observe a person's behaviors and then imitate them. (...) this is called social learning*" (Aimie-Lee Juteau, researcher in psychology, 2021.)

#### 4.2 Factors contributing to the improvement of teachers' language skills

In order to be able to improve their language skills, teachers and students must, first of all, change their state of mind or 'mindset'. Indeed, we must stop considering the English language as a subject to be taught, it is a language and as such, it must be practiced as the primary objective for which one learns a language is to communicate. On communication theory, Hymes, D., On communicative competence; J.B. Pride & J. Homes, 1972 point out that '*linguistic needed to be seen as part of a more general theory incorporating communication and culture,*' and '*not just the ability to master grammar 'perfectly'*' (Chomsky, 1965). The State of play on the practice habits and exposure of teachers to the English language (Table N° 2) nevertheless remains far from these theories. It is important to mention that for this communication to take place, there must be conditions allowing the practice, such as immersion in the language, interactions, and cultural connections. Teachers have little or almost no opportunity to practice the language outside the classroom since they do not often meet natives or English speakers of the target language. Also, there are few events that allow the long-term practice. Despite the fact that the teacher does not fail to deepen his skills through research (reading books or researching on the internet), this remains a 'solitary' activity in his learning, '*it is even a narrow and self-centered view of teaching that fails to capitalize on the potential for learning and growth that comes from participating in a community of teachers who share goals, values, and interests. -centered view of teaching that fails to capitalize on the potential for learning and growth that comes from participating in a community of teachers having shared goals, values, and interests.*' RICHARDS, 2011. For instance, being part of a community of practice has considerable advantages for personal development and professional development. English Language teachers are encouraged to practice with their colleagues. Professional development can be done in different forms, such as group reading, action research, peer learning or peer teaching, peer observation, peer coaching, group discussion.... these practices begin to spread thanks to some teachers' initiatives and the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar and Comoros support. Being part of a community of practice requires open mindset such as accepting to share and accepting constructive criticism, not being afraid to make mistakes because as a human being, perfection does not exist and "*error is a great learning opportunity*" according to Jane NELSEN, a psychologist. The teacher must therefore create his own opportunities with his own means, create regular events that allow them to assert themselves and use the language with their colleagues and students

and why not create a community of practitioners in their regions, high schools... The teacher must apply what he 'preaches', use the language outside the classroom, create 'English' moments (watch films, shows or make exhibitions, discussion group on teaching learning, exchanges of experience). *"While experience is crucial in developing pedagogical reasoning skills, working with more experienced teachers through shared planning, team teaching, observation, and other forms of collaboration can also play an important role in helping less experienced teachers understand the thinking processes employed by other more experienced teachers"* (RICHARDS, 2011) We ourselves had this experience during various activities organized with the United States Embassy in Madagascar and were able to observe changes in behavior and language practices among many experienced and novice teachers. A new and contagious state of mind that has a positive outcome on students.

#### 4.3 Listening comprehension, the least used skill in the classroom in Madagascar

According to the results of our research, few teachers integrate activities related to listening in class (Chart - 4). It is also noted that the more the teachers are at the beginner, elementary, or intermediate level in 'listening', the less they integrate the activities related to auditory comprehension (Chart-5). Again, you cannot control what you do not control. Listening and oral comprehension are naturally linked, the difficulty nevertheless seems coherent since, from college to high school and even to university, the acquisition of this foreign language is essentially done on the basis of texts from textbooks or others but above all, favoring reading and writing to the detriment of other skills. In addition, the curriculum does not suggest a specific examination for each skill. The official examination in Madagascar, is in a written form so little effort is put into other skills, yet the main objective of learning English is communication and it is quite inconceivable to eliminate listening and speaking skills. It is still advisable to find the best strategies to create a situation close to real-life listening and speaking. *"Conventionally, linguists have broken language down into three main components: the phonology, or sound system of the language, the lexis or the words or phrases which express concepts; the structure, or the way words or bits of words are strung to make acceptable sentences or sentences. Language teachers define these conveniently as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar"*, UR, 1996. Vocabulary and grammar are certainly present in teachers' classes but few teachers teach pronunciation. It is, therefore, necessary to take into account learners' accuracy in the following points:

➤ **Pronunciation** involves knowledge of sounds in English (here based on the International Phonetic Alphabet or IPA), the articulation between vowels, consonants, semi-vowels, and diphthongs especially when we know that the sounds in Malagasy vowels are limited compared to English; it is also important to know how to differentiate one sound from another and the change in meaning that this implies (sound discrimination), for example, 'hit' / 'bit' / 'lit'; hear/fear/dear/... We must also have the correct accent and intonation in words as in sentences, for example, PERmit -perMIT; Is KOTO in the classroom? Koto is NOT in the Classroom. Pronunciation is related to listening, forming, and connecting sounds, so if one is not working with authentic materials and asking the right questions when practicing listening or listening comprehension, learners tend to focus on words while they should focus on sounds and their connection. The difficulty arises when the learner cannot recognize the words because they are presented differently: swallowing or changing for instance in class if you hear "you shouldn't have missed the course", generally, the teacher insists on each word so that the student understands each word well but in a normal conversation it gives like: 'u shdntv mistda kors' which is a different perception for the learner as he was not trained to listen or speak this way. Same for the L sounds (talk, walk pronounced tok or wok); the schwa in sofa pronounced sewfe; TH and GH (thought), T (waiter pronounced waide); not to mention the fact that the teacher is expected to master correct standard English, *"in any case, even assuming that you are teaching one 'standard' variety as a model, it's a good idea to give learners at least some exposure to others, through the use of 'live' speakers or recordings, in order to raise awareness of the other possible accents and, of course, for listening practice"* UR, 1996.

➤ **Grammar** is "a set of rules to follow to speak and write a language correctly". It is a part of linguistics that includes phonology, morphology, and syntax. While observing the different establishments in Antananarivo and Toamasina, we noticed that most teachers still adopt traditional teaching though it can be taught or practiced in a communicative way, using communicative approaches and integrating grammar items into skills, or cognitive skills in order to avoid cutting the language into pieces. It should be known that most of the time, *"children learn inductively while adolescents and adults need explanations and reasons for such and such a rule in order to be able to understand the 'process' and apply it, it is the deductive way"* stated Rivers & Temperley, 1978.

➤ **Vocabulary** is part of grammar, for example, phrasal verbs, and words with suffixes or prefixes. Grammar is not only about tenses. Making a list of vocabulary is only the first step, it is not enough to learn them by heart, the best way is to integrate new words into a context. Memorization is not enough, it is absolutely necessary to use them, to insert them into everyday conversations. It is up to the teacher and the learner to create these opportunities.

➤ The '**language skills**' or communicative skills are 'Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing' and they are not treated one by one in a real communication situation, indeed, at least two or three are combined, and this must also be the case in class even if it is true that the activities in class are artificial, that is to say, different from the situation in a real English language context.

## 5. Conclusion

Linguistic competence, linguistics competence, and English Language Teaching Methodology are fundamental competencies for a teacher whatever the conditions or level of teaching. The teacher is different from all learners because he is not only the one who holds the knowledge, he is the one who shows how to apply this knowledge and the one who helps to perfect this knowledge, as observed, one cannot teach what one does not control. In our research, apart from the problems of infrastructure and teaching materials, teachers face other difficulties in practicing the language and maintaining a correct level. Research has shown that the levels of language proficiency are disparate and that few teachers are at level B2 or C1, the minimum level required to be an English teacher according to international criteria like in France or in England. Public high school teachers in Madagascar say that speaking and especially listening are the most difficult skills to master and also the most difficult to teach. English language practice is very limited because the conditions for this to happen are few, there is no permanent or regular contact with English speakers, and events promoting the language as a means of communication or transmission of knowledge and culture, are rare, especially outside the capital of Madagascar. Teachers are not used to communicating in English with their colleagues, and despite the fact that the teacher often does research (in books or on the internet), this seems insufficient to improve practice and language proficiency because the teacher remains alone in his quest and does not exploit his community enough. Indeed, from our point of view, the teaching community and language practitioners should not be compartmentalized but should identify and help each other, exchange experiences regularly, affirm their passions and their opinions in fun events, group discussions (whether face-to-face or virtually), work with peers (peer observation, peer teaching, peer coaching, etc.) and why not organize language camps or trips for total immersion. The teacher must practice what he preaches. It is easy to tell our students to practice the target language although you undergo the same issue. Let us show them the right way! English is not simply a subject to be taught but a language for communicating, transmitting messages, for understanding and discovering other cultures, and sharing our own culture. Teachers are to adopt good practice habits to be effective and efficient. Therefore, the teacher will be more at ease to explain his lessons and regains self-confidence in his pedagogical activities. Nowadays, there are numerous 21<sup>st</sup>-century strategies and techniques suggested to English language teachers in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) or IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) conferences so it will be interesting to find out new strategies or techniques that can be undertaken for large classes, in public high schools in Madagascar.

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