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Teaching & Learning Written Comprehension in French at Post-Fundamental Level: Bujumbura City Hall

Adelin Mperejimana

Email: adelinmperejimana@gmail.com

University of Burundi, Republic of Burundi

Abstract

This article seeks to address the contribution of teaching and learning written comprehension in the new perspective of post-fundamental education recently implemented in Burundi. The students do not understand the message conveyed in the text and have missed the main thrust of the text. This problematic raised led us to ask questions and make possible hypotheses. Among the obstacles to reading comprehension are a lack of vocabulary, linguistic and semantic knowledge, and so on. To make our work effective, we used the questionnaire method, addressed to teachers of the 3rd post-fundamental language in Bujumbura town hall. Another scientific method used was the observation method, which consists in verifying the practical realities of teacher-learner interactions, as well as the methodological approaches implemented in a text lesson. To analyze the results obtained, the quantitative method was used. This method of analysis enables us to arrive at results which stipulate that learners are unable to understand what is written due to a lack of vocabulary, syntactic and semantic knowledge, extralinguistic, problems in the classroom, methodology, lack of support notebooks and problems in reading books. On the whole, students experience difficulties in reading comprehension due to a lack of lexical, linguistic and literary mastery. In this research, we have identified the problems of developing written comprehension among students in the 3rd year of post-fundamental education. These obstacles are related to the lack of vocabulary, linguistic and extralinguistic semantic knowledge, and grammatical structures. These factors remain a hindrance for students in written comprehension.

Keywords: *teaching and learning- French language- written comprehension- linguistic-extralinguistic*

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of French is part of the educational reform that Burundi has undergone since 2013 (Varly & Mazunya, 2017). Through this reform, the country aimed to bring about significant changes in the orientation of development strategies strictly in the educational field. Emphasis was placed on the progress made in educational services (MEESRS, 2015 ; Dunlop, 2023). Within the framework of teaching and learning written comprehension, the teaching of French as a foreign language adheres to the four language competencies recommended by the CECRL (Ruggia & Vanni, 2022). These are written comprehension, oral comprehension, oral expression, and written expression. However, before embarking on written comprehension, the teaching of French must be based on reading comprehension in the first place. These two competencies, reading and writing, condition all future learning. Oral comprehension seems to be a focal point as learners access the meaning of written texts in the classroom or at home. Afterwards, they proceed to construct their own texts. We are interested in the constant reality

that those who spontaneously and correctly express themselves in French are those who often practice reading or started reading at a young age. This idea is developed and supported by Weiss (2020) when he writes that reading is rediscovering oral language in writing. Reading will be easier as oral language becomes richer. Knowing how to read at 6-7 years old, he adds, means being able to mentally process the image of a word or the meaning of a sentence and express that word or sentence orally, regardless of the time taken to restore the transfer from the rest to oral expression.

This research contributes to the teaching of written comprehension at the post-fundamental level in the third year of language class. The majority of students struggle to understand the message developed in the text and provide a summary or overall content of the text. This is due to a lack of vocabulary, and grammatical structures remain a compromise for students in written comprehension. The issues raised by teaching and learning written comprehension have led us to thematic questioning upon which our research will be built. What prevents learners from developing their competence in reading comprehension? Why do they struggle to grasp the meaning of the text easily? All these questions form the core of our research that we will explore throughout this work.

METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative research design. To assess the situation of teaching and learning written comprehension in French, we employed the methods of observation and questionnaire surveys. We observed French lessons, focusing on the teaching strategies employed by the teachers. We also observed how teachers guide students' understanding through an observation checklist used during class. This approach consisted of four sections: the context, including spatial and temporal elements and student numbers; the lesson introduction; the activities during the actual lesson; and overall impressions of the lesson. We distributed the survey questionnaire to French teachers in the third year of post-fundamental education in the Ntahangwa and Mukaza districts of Bujumbura city. The respective schools included in our survey are: Lycée du Sainte Esprit (E1), Lycée Municipal Buterere (E2), Lycée Municipal Gasenyi (E3), Lycée Municipal Gihosha (E4), Lycée Municipal Gikungu (E5), Lycée Municipal Kamenge (E6), Lycée Municipal Kinama (E7), Lycée Municipal Ngagara (E8), Lycée Municipal Nyakabiga (E9), Lycée Notre de Rohero (E10), Lycée Sainte Famille de Kinama (E11), and Lycée Scheppers de Nyakabiga (E12). Since we have a total of twenty two schools with the third year of post-fundamental language class, we used random sampling to select our sample (the number of schools included in our sample). The choice of these institutions is due to their reputation as exemplary schools in terms of teaching, with well-prepared students due to the training they receive from kindergarten. Additionally, these schools represent a diverse range of educational institutions. The analysis of the results was conducted using Saldana et al. (2014) qualitative analysis technique .

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The description of results was conducted using two methods: questionnaire survey and observation method.

Findings 1: Questionnaire survey

This step involves presenting results obtained from the research field. It includes the questions asked and the respondents' answers. When asked to evaluate the French program in the third year of language class, four out of twelve teachers responded that the curriculum is extensive. However, it does not sufficiently develop the material that nurtures literary laureates. Notions related to French and African literature have been eliminated, even though they place learners in a historical and current context that opens up future perspectives. On the same

question, two teachers responded that the reform is good and the texts used reflect the realities that students experience. The taught grammatical tools help students master the language. Additionally, each lesson has practical exercises that encourage students to express themselves and think. Six teachers responded that the program needs improvement. The French curriculum has not been well elaborated because the textbooks are poor. They only provide introductions, which forces teachers to make significant efforts to enrich the notes.

What are the difficulties often encountered during written comprehension lessons? In response to this question, three teachers highlighted the problem of students lacking textbooks to access the texts being taught. Three teachers mentioned students' disinterest in this learning process. Five teachers stated that they face difficulties due to managing overcrowded classes. One teacher mentioned difficulties of a methodological nature.

What is the major problem your students face in written comprehension? E1 expressed that students have problems related to a lack of general and linguistic knowledge. E2, on the other hand, mentioned that students have problems related to lexical and semantic knowledge. E3 stated that students face difficulties related to lexical, syntactic, and semantic knowledge. E4 shared the same idea as the previous response (E3). E5 mentioned that students have difficulties due to a lack of lexical knowledge. E6 stated that students encounter difficulties related to a lack of lexical, semantic, syntactic, and general extralinguistic knowledge. E7 shared the same idea as the previous teacher (E6). E8 expressed that students face difficulties related to a lack of lexical and semantic knowledge. E9 mentioned that students have difficulties related to a lack of lexical, syntactic, semantic, and general extralinguistic knowledge. E10 stated that students encounter difficulties related to a lack of semantic and syntactic knowledge. E11 mentioned that the major problem in written comprehension is related to a lack of semantic knowledge. E12, according to him, the major problem in written comprehension is linked to a lack of syntactic knowledge and general extralinguistic knowledge.

How do you evaluate the pedagogy of integration as a teaching and learning method in the third year of language class? The teachers interviewed expressed their opinions, stating that the integration approach is essential to assess the success of the pedagogy of integration (PI). As the writing lesson precedes reading, reading comprehension lessons are supposed to be taught in the same integrated approach. The text should serve as the key element on which the evaluation, known as the Integration Situation (SI) is built. We would like to mention that this integration pedagogy is well received by all twelve French teachers for text lessons.

Do you assign reading tasks to your students to get them used to reading? Why? Eleven teachers answered "Yes," and one teacher answered "No." The teachers who answered "No" explained that the curriculum is extensive, which doesn't allow for additional activities to be proposed to the students. However, a significant number of teachers (11) responded positively, stating that the low level of written comprehension in French disrupts the reading tasks they assign. They also mentioned the students' lack of mastery of punctuation marks and pronunciation during expressive reading.

Findings 2: Observation Checklist for Text Lessons

The elements of the identification sheet are as follows:

Used reading methods: The four observed teachers responded that they use three reading methods simultaneously, namely silent reading, teacher-led reading, and oral reading. Regarding the question of comprehension, whether formulated by the teachers, by the students, or by the questions provided in the textbooks, the four teachers answered that the comprehension questions are from the textbook.

On the question of student participation in activities, whether they constitute the majority, minority, or remain the same, two out of the four interviewed teachers responded that

the majority of students participate. The other two teachers responded that the minority participates in the activities.

When asked if the students respond spontaneously to the teacher when directly solicited, two out of four teachers answered that the students respond spontaneously. The other two teachers responded that the students respond when directly solicited.

To determine whether students respond to teacher's questions in small groups or individually, three out of the four teachers stated that students respond to the teacher's questions in small groups. One teacher mentioned that the students respond individually.

Overall, students seem to be interested and active, interested but not very active, indifferent, or bored. Two teachers responded that the students are interested and active. The remaining two teachers responded that the students are interested but not very active.

Discussion

Regarding the question of evaluating the French program in the third year of language class, four out of twelve teachers, or 33%, responded that the curriculum is extensive. However, it does not sufficiently develop the material that nurtures the literary laureate's mind. Notions related to French and African literature have been eliminated, even though they place learners in a historical and current context that opens up future perspectives. Supporting this idea, Nsengiyumva & Manirambona (2018, p.105) affirm the following: *"In Burundi, the primary school program does not give appropriate importance to literature. That is why the exploitation of literary texts, which practically starts in the post-fundamental cycle in the new programs, poses difficulties."* On the same question, two teachers, or 17%, responded that the reform is good and the texts used reflect the realities that students experience. The taught grammatical tools help students master the language. Additionally, each lesson has practical exercises that encourage students to express themselves and think. Six teachers, or 50%, responded that the program needs improvement. The French curriculum has not been well elaborated because the textbooks are poor (Sinabajije & Bento, 2022). They only provide introductions, which forces the teacher to make significant efforts to enrich the notes.

Regarding the difficulties often encountered during written comprehension lessons, three teachers, or 25%, highlighted the problem of students lacking textbooks to access the texts being taught. Three teachers, or 25%, mentioned students' disinterest in this learning process. Five teachers, or 41.66%, responded that they face difficulties in managing overcrowded classes. One teacher, or 8.33%, mentioned difficulties of a methodological nature. We find that a significant number of surveyed teachers mention the challenge of managing overcrowded classes. Teachers should receive continuous training on the pedagogy of large groups, an approach that involves grouping students into small groups to succeed in a lesson in a large class. Fatima et al. (2019) recommend the following: "Since overcrowding is an obstacle to the effectiveness of teaching and learning actions, the teacher should organize the class group into subgroups that they can supervise more effectively. These tasks involve spatial organization, subgroup organization, and activity monitoring and evaluation."

Regarding the question of assigning reading tasks to students to get them used to reading, eleven teachers, or 91.66%, responded "Yes," and 1 teacher, or 8.33%, responded "No." The teacher who answered "No" explained that the curriculum is extensive, which doesn't allow for additional activities to be proposed to the students. However, a significant number of teachers (11) mentioned a positive response, stating that the low level of written comprehension in French disrupts the reading tasks they assign. They also mentioned students' lack of mastery of punctuation marks and pronunciation during expressive reading. Referring to a study titled "reading and writing in CP" (Reading and Writing in Primary School) that shows that weaker students make progress with a teacher who promotes student engagement

(Goiroux, 2016,p.372-373), teachers should increase students' engagement time in reading and writing tasks, both in and outside the classroom.

Regarding the major problem faced by students in written comprehension, all surveyed teachers mentioned common difficulties that significantly hinder written comprehension, specifically a lack of lexical, syntactic, and semantic knowledge. In fact, recognizing a word involves using multiple types of information that characterize it, including its frequency and its proximity orthographically or semantically to other words. The semantic proximity of a word to another is a first characteristic that affects reading performance through the priming effect. This effect manifests as a faster decision time when facing a word preceded by another word associated with it semantically. This observation is shared by Dalcq et al. (1999, p.5), who confirms that:

"The language difficulties encountered by students faced with a scientific text are of two types: many words, even common ones, are poorly or vaguely understood (...). In addition to vocabulary, problems are also observed in understanding the logical connections in texts, i.e., all the function words like adverbs, conjunctions, or prepositions that serve to link ideas, structure a text, and mark logical transitions."

The observed teachers showed different responses. Starting with the first item regarding the readings used during the text lesson, we found that all four teachers use three readings simultaneously. The second item is about the source of comprehension questions that the teacher poses to the students. We noticed that two teachers ask comprehension questions that they formulate themselves as well as those provided in the teacher's guide. The other two teachers only use the comprehension questions provided in the teacher's guide. The third item concerns the level of student participation, especially in responding to comprehension questions. We observed that in the classes of the teachers, two teachers affirmed that the majority of students participate, while the other two teachers mentioned that the minority participates in the activities. Regarding how students participate, two teachers mentioned spontaneous responses from students, while the other two teachers mentioned responses when directly solicited. The fifth item is about whether students respond to questions in groups. Only 1 teacher responded that they do not require the formation of small groups to answer the teacher's questions.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the contribution of teaching and learning written comprehension in French, conducted in the third-year language class in Bujumbura. In this article, we have analyzed the responses provided by teachers in a questionnaire administered as part of this research. We have tried to identify the difficulties that hinder the development of writing skills among third-year students in the post-fundamental stage, Language section. The issues related to managing overcrowded classrooms and the lack of lexical and semantic knowledge characterize this teaching and learning process. The questionnaire responses complement the results obtained from four sessions of observing text lessons. In the observation section of text lessons, teachers justify that students respond to the teacher's questions in small groups. Students participate either in the majority or minority when directly solicited by the teacher in class. This means that those who participate in the minority struggle with lexical comprehension. Overall, students face several difficulties that impede written comprehension. The results observed through the teachers' questionnaire responses highlight the challenges faced by students in learning French reading. They lack sufficient linguistic and literary knowledge. Therefore, it is important for teachers to engage in reading books themselves, as it is a crucial factor for successful learning. They should motivate students in French classes and consider various methodological approaches to ensure successful text lessons. Teachers should

prioritize reading activities in and outside the classroom and encourage students to engage in further reading.

Several researchers, such as Tagliante (2006), Giasson (1996), and Nsengiyumva (2018), have conducted scientific studies on approaches to contextualize a text for successful comprehension in French language teaching and learning. Mélanie Le Picaut (2012) states that the understanding of written texts is influenced by visual reading. According to her, images allow for anticipation and memorization of the story's meaning. Students validate their understanding of the text through the images. The relationship between text and image has three essential functions. Firstly, a descriptive function provides additional details regarding the description of places and characters that the text alone cannot convey within the space of the book. Secondly, a narrative function (complementarity) allows the sequence of images to reconstruct the story. The text and image often complement each other, as the text can bridge the narrative gap between two images, and the image can also take over from the text. Lastly, a connotative function (shift) enriches the text with references, humorous nods, and cultural allusions.

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