



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM PRACTICES IN FRENCH: THE CASE OF THE 5TH YEAR FUNDAMENTAL IN BURUNDI

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ABSTRACT

The reform of the basic school initiated in Burundi since 2013 requires new teaching practices. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which this reform is experienced on a daily basis and implemented by 5th grade fundamental school teachers. The observation of teaching practices in 44 classes in Gitega, followed by semi-structured interviews with the teachers observed, allows us to describe the conditions in which the teaching/learning of French is carried out and to see and understand the reasons for what the teachers are doing in relation to what is planned. The qualitative-quantitative analysis of the data allows us to say that the teachers follow the pedagogical guidelines but show a lack of initiative and innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, Burundi has introduced a reform that implements the fundamental and post-fundamental cycles has been introduced into the education system (The fundamental cycle lasts 9 years and the post-fundamental 3 years). This reform introduced a new division of teaching cycles, as well as a thorough overhaul of teaching content and methods, so we wondered whether teachers had been able to grasp the spirit and the letter of the reform (Ntwari, 2018). We analyze the conditions under which the teaching/learning of French takes place in the 5th year of basic schooling, in order to see to what extent the pedagogical innovations advocated by the reform of basic schooling, applied since 2013, have been integrated and applied by teachers in the field. To achieve this objective, we undertook, on the one hand, direct observation of classroom practices in 5th grade French lessons. On the other, we conducted interviews with the teachers we observed. The focus of the observations on the teaching of French in 5th grade is justified by the fact that in Burundi, French is one of the official languages, as well as a language of instruction and teaching. What's more, 5th grade is a pivotal class from which French becomes the medium of instruction for the rest of the schooling cycle. Hence the central question: To what extent does the 5th grade French teacher implement the content and methodological procedures set out in the teacher's guide, and why?

METHODS

Using an observation grid, effective practices were observed along three complementary axes: the relational axis (the teacher's leadership role, discipline management, relations between teacher and pupils, between pupils themselves, etc.), the pedagogical axis (class management, group organization, class animation, etc.) and the didactic axis (how pupils access knowledge, the teaching strategies adopted by the teacher, etc.). The aim is to describe the conditions under which French is taught/learned in the 5th year of basic schooling, in order to see to what extent the pedagogical innovations advocated by the reform of basic schooling, implemented since 2013, are integrated and applied by teachers in the field. Classroom observation was followed by semi-directive interviews with the teachers observed to identify the teacher's positioning in relation to what is planned in terms of teaching content and methods, the main resources French teachers visit to prepare and teach it, and the facilities and difficulties they encounter. The interviews enabled us to understand the reasons behind the practices observed, the explanatory reasons for certain ways of doing things, the reasons behind certain decisions made by the teacher, and so on. During the interviews, we were interested in the resources visited during lesson preparation and implementation (Bécu-Robinault, 2007), which enabled us to find out what leads teachers to decide what they teach on the basis of the different resources they visit, so that we can establish the link between teachers' choices and the way they

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present teaching content (Gueudet & Trouche, 2010). This makes it possible to establish the gap between actual teaching practices and the practices expected by the ministry in charge of national education in particular (Talbot, 2012). The province of Gitega, which combines urban and rural characteristics and is geographically located in the center of the country, was chosen as the target area for data collection due to its greater number of communes and the larger school network after the city of Bujumbura. 2 communes were targeted, namely the commune of Gitega (urban) and the commune of Giheta (rural). While the entire province of Gitega has a total of 359 basic schools, the commune directorates of Gitega and Giheta include 97 and 46 public basic schools respectively. There are therefore 143 basic public schools in the two communes. Of the 97 schools in the commune of Gitega, we selected a sample of 21, and of the 46 schools in Giheta, we selected 19. Finally, we visited 44 5th grade classes in 40 different schools. The analysis of teaching practices in the context of Burundi's fundamental school reform was carried out by opting for a quali-quantitative approach (describing, explaining and understanding what was happening in the classes observed), on the one hand, and cross-referencing a certain number of variables in order to understand the meaning of, or have a possible explanation for, the elements observed and/or the comments made by the teachers interviewed, on the other (quantitative approach). Thus, with regard to data processing, the data from observations of classroom practices were processed "quantitatively" using SPSS software, while the data from the interviews were generally processed "qualitatively" (content analysis). When analyzing the data and interpreting the results, the quantitative and qualitative aspects were not treated separately, but combined to give meaning to the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Relational climate prevailing in classes : Under this heading, we describe the atmosphere prevailing in the classes we visited during the teaching-learning of French. Specifically, our observations focused respectively on the communicative climate in the classroom, the degree of flexibility or rigidity of the teacher, and the attitude of the students. To assess the communicative climate in the classroom, we used the following criteria: the quality of interactions between teacher and learners (are they positive or negative?), the benevolence of the teacher observed, the degree to which learners are valued or devalued, and whether or not the teacher makes degrading remarks about the students.

We found that, in order, the majority of teachers observed performing interacted positively with their students, in the vast majority of cases demonstrated a benevolent attitude towards learners, and valued their students in large numbers, at 93.2%, 88.6% and 79.5% respectively. On the subject of valuing students, for example, we noted that in several places, the teacher asked the class to cheer a student who provided a good answer. This obviously lifts the mood in the classroom and motivates students in learning situations. It's worth noting, however, that there's still a long way to go when it comes to this particular aspect of valuing learners: around one in five (20.5%) of the teachers we observed were clearly unaware of the importance of this pedagogical strategy. On the other hand, while benevolence and positive verbal interactions are evident among the teachers observed (88.6% and 93.2% respectively), the majority of teachers (68.2%) express negative criticism of

students, and even seem to favor the mockery that the class reserves for "less successful" students. What's more, 84.1% of the teachers observed went so far as to make degrading remarks about lackluster learners. There were two extreme cases of teachers traumatizing learners: with one teacher, pupils who failed to find the correct answer were humiliated and/or punched. With another teacher, students were ordered to kneel for the simple reason that they had no answer to a question posed: "Anyone who feels unable to answer this question should kneel!").

Needless to say, this kind of behavior is likely to inhibit any initiative on the part of learners to speak up, which is very damaging in a language class. Bivariate correlational analysis of variables relating to the relational climate prevailing in 5th grade classes during French lessons reveals a statistically significant link (with a confidence level of results at 95%), between positive verbal interactions and benevolence ($r_p = 0.755^{**}$), positive verbal interactions and valuing students ($r_p = 0.535^{**}$), benevolence and valuing students ($r_p = 0.529^{**}$), criticizing students and making degrading remarks ($r_p = 0.370^{**}$). We also noted a statistically significant negative relationship between positive verbal interactions and criticism of students ($r_p = -0.396^{**}$), and degrading comments ($r_p = -0.375^{**}$). This means that some teachers are both critical of their students, while maintaining positive verbal interactions overall. But then, how can we explain the apparent contradiction between the teachers' two attitudes, i.e., maintaining a benevolent interactive climate and, at the same time, voicing criticism and degrading comments about the students? In our opinion, knowing that they are being observed, teachers strive to maintain a positive atmosphere in the classroom, as they are well aware that this aspect is paramount in the assessment of their actions. A student who deviates from the "norm", either by giving an incorrect answer or by behaving inappropriately, may therefore appear, in the eyes of the teacher, to be the one who is undermining the teacher's performance. Not wanting to lose face, the teacher is unable to hold back, and occasionally defends himself by criticizing or making negative comments about the learner.

Still under the heading of relational climate, we sought to assess the degree of rigidity of teachers: do they exert excessive control and/or impose themselves in front of their learners? Observations showed that 40 teachers out of the 44 visited, or 90.9%, did not display excessive control over their students, but 52.3% of teachers tended to impose themselves in class. It should be noted that the correlation test (Spearman's correlation) revealed a statistically significant relationship between excessive control and assertiveness in the classroom ($r_p = 0.302^*$). The chi-square test also revealed that teachers who impose themselves in class are those who display excess control ($\chi^2 = 0.045 < 0.05$). Last but not least, 90.9% of the pupils observed participate actively in class, regularly raising their finger to answer their teacher's questions. However, only 50% were able to take the initiative, and here again, when this happened, it was to go and erase the blackboard, put objects scattered on the floor back in their place, and so on. We found that in most cases, students simply answered the teacher's questions, and that it was very rare to see students asking their teachers questions.

Organizational pedagogical interventions : In this section, the aim is to report on and characterize the way in which teachers manage their class groups, as well as the way in which

they organize and manage learning conditions. In terms of classroom management, 88.64% of teachers give students a voice, but 25% of teachers are unable to tolerate incorrect answers given by students. It shows that 88.64% of teachers give learners a fair say. Similarly, 75% of teachers give a positive response to students' answers, even if they are "incorrect". These figures may seem high enough, but given the nature of the variables they measure, it's fair to say that remedial action is still needed if all teachers are to imbibe these skills. Indeed, if more than one teacher in five (11.36%) and one in four (25%) fail respectively to ensure a fair distribution of the floor and to give a sympathetic welcome to students' responses, we can't say that these figures are negligible. Indeed, in most of the lessons we visited, the management of students' "wrong answers" remains problematic. We repeatedly noted that students' answers are not valued. Faced with a wrong answer, most teachers simply say "No", "That's not right", which constitutes negative feedback.

Curiously, contrary to what one might expect, the results show that there is no statistically significant link between the way in which the teacher manages the class (for example, whether he or she responds appropriately to even erroneous student responses) and the fact that students participate actively in class ($r_p = -0.019$). This suggests that active student participation may depend on other factors, and not necessarily on the teacher's attitude. In terms of organization and management of learning conditions, effective classroom space management scored highest (90.9%). Indications of this ability can be seen in the use of classroom space, for example, by not staying in just one corner, by providing individualized help to a given pupil, by checking that all pupils have understood the instruction, etc. It is clear that most teachers have a good understanding of the classroom environment. It is clear that most of the teachers observed have mastered this strategy. Similarly, the majority of teachers visited know how to use the right materials for the activities proposed to their pupils (79.5%). For example, after an introduction to a lesson on the use of a comic strip in the students' textbooks, teachers know the right moment to ask their students to take out their French books and start the actual use. Some teachers draw pictures on the blackboard, to ensure that the work is properly exploited. In our interviews, however, teachers were unanimous in deploring the crying lack of materials and teaching aids adapted to the teaching of French. French is taught in a very theoretical way. Some lessons, such as oral expression and comprehension, require specific materials that none of the schools can afford. Teachers are constantly talking about the need for audio-visual material, conjugation booklets and sufficient textbooks to enable every student to have access to them both in class and at home. Observations also revealed that the majority of teachers use appropriate language to stimulate students to follow lessons (79.5%). This can be seen in the appropriate use of gestures and facial expressions, the use of jokes to introduce the lesson, etc. This has a significant impact on the classroom climate, and on the sustained interest and attention of the students. From another angle, even if there are slightly more teachers who respect the timing of the lesson than those who don't (56.8% vs. 43.2%), we have to admit that this proportion is worrying, because put another way, almost one teacher in two doesn't finish the lesson within the allotted time. What's more, 22.7% of teachers, i.e. more than one in five, were unfortunately unable to reach the verification/application exercises stage. One of the causes

reported by the teachers surveyed is that the level of the learners is so low that it takes a long time for the teacher to make himself understood. Similarly, the failure to keep to the timing of the lesson is said to be due to the very slow speed of comprehension on the part of most learners. The general impression that emerges from our observations is that the students' level of comprehension and expression is inadequate. They have difficulty understanding what is being asked of them, find it hard to formulate sentences and are content to respond with isolated words. In our view, it's normal that in certain conditions, teachers sacrifice respect for timing in favor of taking account of learning difficulties/facilities, in the interests of their pupils. Indeed, running with the program is one thing, but adapting to learners' pace of acquisition and to the specific experience of the classroom situation is also something that every teacher must take into account. Finally, students are all the more motivated when they find meaning, interest and application for what they're learning in everyday life. One way of showing this to students is to announce the objectives of the lesson. Unfortunately, of the 44 teachers we observed, only 9 communicated the lesson's objectives to their students in some way, a figure that remains too low. This aspect should also be the subject of remediation sessions during in-service teacher training.

Didactic-epistemic management : Three parameters enabled us to measure the extent of this dimension : the epistemic aspect/conceptual development and conceptualization, the didactic management of content and the linguistic behavior of French teachers in their performances. From the point of view of epistemic management/conceptual development and conceptualization, the aim was to verify the extent to which teachers set up situations that enable students to learn new concepts on the one hand, and to reflect on the other. The results obtained indicate that over 70% of the teachers observed practising set up situations to encourage conceptual development and reflection in their pupils. However, it should be noted that, conversely, 29.5% and 27.3% of teachers respectively were unable to propose specific activities for learning new concepts and/or encouraging their students to reflect. These proportions are not to be underestimated. Could this shortcoming be inherent to the nature of the lesson or to the teachers' personal professional skills? While it's true that not all the lessons observed lent themselves easily to conceptualization and reflection, it's no less true that this skill requires a certain methodological training to which many of the teachers observed have not yet been entitled.

Didactic-epistemic management also materializes through the didactic management of content. In fact, by observing the classroom practices of French teachers in Burundi's 5th year of primary school, we sought to find out whether the teacher systematically gives the instructions for the activity, makes available the materials to be used, alternates between individual, pair and group work, and knows how to use the pupils' errors to help them access the targeted knowledge, all of which are indicators of the didactic management of content. In terms of remediation, 59.1% of teachers were able to use students' mistakes to help them gain access to knowledge. Aside from the fact that the opposite proportion is too high (40.9%), some teachers, as already mentioned, were unable to respond sympathetically to students' erroneous answers. Teachers who said they did not follow the teacher's guide to the letter felt that their intervention had to be adapted to the classroom experience, and cited the following arguments,

among others: "We need to adapt the methodology to the situation, I make adaptations to enable learners to understand better, sometimes I change according to the progression of lessons that I can split up according to their length, we make adaptations according to the subject taught because the pupils have a low level, it's not recommended to be too bookish because it's inaccessible for weak schoolchildren : we need to adapt, I give priority to what enables my learners to progress, there are additions to reinforce the pupils' knowledge, the exercises in the teacher's file are not adapted to the pupils' context, I adapt a little to the class climate, I change strategies especially when I see that the children don't understand". Those who follow the guide scrupulously believe that the official references are sufficient in themselves. They add that these are requirements that must be complied with to remain in order professionally: "The indications in the guide are sufficient, the teacher's file is well prepared, the suggested preparations are complete and sufficient, so as not to go beyond what is required, the guide enables the course to be properly delivered, and you mustn't skip a step in order to achieve an objective, You have to follow the program, because to do otherwise would be to go against the proposed methodology. It's the state program, and you have to follow it to the letter. In our opinion, the prevailing tendency among teachers is to follow the prescriptions of official documents to the letter, as this saves them a lot of extra work. When asked to formulate their most significant wishes, they suggest, among other things, that all the model lessons be presented in the teacher's guide, to avoid each teacher having to do things in his or her own way: "The program designers should put all the model lessons in the teacher's book". Similarly, teachers deplore the fact that certain chapters - in this case, tense concordance, phonetics and passive/active voice - are not planned for the 5th grade, even though they are essential for establishing good pronunciation and training sentence formation.

If teachers saw so much need to teach these chapters, why wouldn't they take the initiative to add them to what they teach? Of the 44 teachers surveyed, 36 said they relied exclusively on the teacher's and pupil's books to prepare and teach French lessons. In other words, there is little room for initiative, creativity and innovation in the teaching practices of the teachers we observed. With regard to the use of French as the language of instruction, it should be remembered that in Burundi, French becomes the language of instruction from the 5th year onwards, replacing Kirundi as the mother tongue for the rest of the schooling. This change is causing difficulties for pupils in understanding French, as the teachers we interviewed pointed out. Learners develop a fear of learning and speaking French in class. Respondents also point out that pupils are demotivated to learn French, resulting in visible fatigue and disruption in the classroom. As this foreign language coexists with other languages, and more particularly with Kirundi, the mother tongue, its teaching takes place in delicate conditions, where recourse to Kirundi to better establish skills in French becomes a necessity in line with the didactics of bi-plurilingualism. We therefore set out to explore how this coexistence of languages is managed in the French classroom, based on two indicators: the alternative use of the two languages and the use of a language level adapted to the students' level. We found that 65.9% of the teachers observed mixed French and Kirundi when teaching French, and the same percentage of teachers adapted their language to the level of the pupils.

The adaptation of language to the level of the pupils calls for no particular comment, except that it is a laudable effort to be encouraged at this pivotal level in the teaching of French. When it comes to the alternative use of Kirundi and French, the majority of teachers apply the official recommendations, which are unequivocal on this subject: teachers are allowed to mix languages during teaching, in order to foster understanding (Curriculum, 2015). In interviews, teachers acknowledge that using Kirundi as their mother tongue helps explain certain French concepts : "I mix French and Kirundi to facilitate understanding"; "I use Kirundi to explain". However, while we would have expected this to be the result of a deliberate strategy to use the plurilingual didactics recognized as highly effective in such an environment, it seems that the alternative use of the two languages is dictated instead by the feeling that not all students have the level required to understand everything in French. The teacher therefore uses Kirundi more to make himself understood in class than to use it as a springboard to a better understanding of the second language. In other words, convergent or integrative pedagogy is not yet the order of the day, and large-scale training in the didactics of plurilingualism is more than necessary. This training is all the more necessary as even the official guidelines do not seem to be precise on this point, since the use of the mother tongue is not seen as a strategy aimed at acquiring plurilingual competence, i.e. in both the first and second languages, but simply to help students understand the concepts of the second language. That said, it's regrettable that the percentage of teachers who don't mix languages in their classrooms, and who use language that isn't adapted to the students' level, remains high (34.1%). Once again, this is proof that remedial action needs to be taken with regard to teachers.

From another angle, our observations suggest that some teachers lack the language skills that would enable them to express themselves easily in French at all times. For this category of teachers, the use of Kirundi is not a reasoned methodological choice, but rather a sign of linguistic incompetence in French. This observation is all the more likely given that, when we analyzed the teacher's file, we found spelling and grammatical errors that some teachers fail to notice or correct, and which are passed on unchanged to the pupils. Most of the teachers we visited overuse Kirundi. The majority of teachers expressed themselves more than 90% in Kirundi in a French lesson.

Needs expressed by French teachers : Teachers deplore the fact that the 4th grade French program cannot be completed before students enter 5th grade. As a result, 5th grade teachers are forced to spend the first two quarters of the year working on the content of the 4th grade textbooks before starting on the content for their class. As a result, 4th grade textbooks are shared by both classes during the teaching-learning process, which is a major inconvenience. One of the direct consequences of this measure has been a reduction in the number of sessions previously devoted to the teaching of French, without reducing the French curriculum, in order to find time to devote to other languages (Kiswahili and English). Teachers suggest that French programs should be stable and proportional to the school calendar, while taking into account the major disciplines, in this case French, and the secondary disciplines (sports, drawing, singing, etc.). The respondents formulated their wishes as follows: "Develop stable programs that are proportional to the school calendar", "Specify the

major and secondary disciplines in order to increase the hourly load of the majors".

Similarly, as reported by the teachers interviewed, textbooks are in short supply or are in such poor condition that some pages are torn. According to the teachers, the number of books/textbooks should be increased so that every student has one. This would make revision at home much easier. By the same token, didactic materials and aids are imperative for quality French teaching. This is why materials such as radios, televisions, CD-ROMs, etc. are necessary for the teaching of certain language skills in 5th grade: "We need to increase the number of books for students and teachers", "Provide sufficient school materials", "Make audio-visual materials such as radios, televisions, CD-ROMs available". Finally, material conditions leave much to be desired. Teachers report a shortage of desks and cramped classrooms, in stark contrast to the plethora of pupils in 5th grade. They also report that, in several places, classroom windows are broken. During the rainy season, pupils find it difficult to follow lessons as they cluster in the middle row of the classroom to avoid getting wet. Concrete actions need to be considered and implemented. Among other things, schools need to be built to keep pace with learner numbers. According to teachers, we also need to organize in-service training for teachers, increase the number of desks in class, review the conditions for moving from one class to another, regularly monitor teachers and pupils, reduce class sizes, reinforce the level of French from the earliest grades and formally institute reinforcement time.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the aim of which is to explore the extent to which the reform of the basic school is experienced on a daily basis and implemented by teachers in the 5th year of basic schooling, we observed their practices in the French classroom. At the end of each lesson observed, a semi-directive interview was conducted with the teacher. The data obtained underwent an analysis integrating both quantitative and qualitative aspects. It emerges that one teacher in five feels that his or her skills in teaching French are not sufficient. This declared gap could have been filled by in-service training, but over 80% of teachers have never taken advantage of it. The climate in the classrooms was generally good, except for the aspect of valuing students' "wrong" answers. The teachers' interventions are likely to create a climate of benevolence. Nonetheless, 52.3% of the teachers observed are still intent on imposing themselves in the classroom, a tenacious survival of traditional methods. In terms of organizational pedagogical interventions, over 90% of the teachers observed managed the classroom space effectively, while 88.6% of teachers distributed the floor appropriately, encouraging student participation at the same time. What's more, although teachers rigorously followed the preparation sheet (70.5%) and the teacher's guide (47.7%), beyond their apparent compliance with official directives, we felt that this indicated a lack of initiative and innovation on their part. As for teachers' linguistic behavior in the face of the multilingualism of pupils' mother tongue Kirundi and French as a second language and medium of instruction, we estimated that 90% of teachers used Kirundi in French lessons, not as a pedagogical strategy for applying a multilingual didactic approach, but rather as a means of making themselves understood by pupils, whose level of French is so inadequate.

As far as the needs expressed by the teachers are concerned, they relate to the reorganization of the curriculum as a whole, the provision of materials and equipment, and the improvement of living conditions for pupils and teachers. In view of the results obtained, we can affirm that, on the whole, the pedagogical innovations advocated by the basic school reform, implemented since 2013, are being integrated and applied by teachers in the field. We propose that other researchers complement us, by exploring, for example, the impact of the same reform on the teaching/learning of language disciplines other than French, or on that of non-linguistic disciplines. Finally, to improve classroom practices in the basic level, we recommend training teachers in active pedagogy in the Burundian context (taking into account local constraints such as large class sizes...). We therefore need to design, organize and provide in-service training for teachers, with a view to strengthening their skills in French (subject knowledge, communication, oral and written expression). Such training would be preceded by a prior analysis of teachers' real needs to maximize its effectiveness. The didactics of multilingualism should also be introduced into initial and in-service teacher training.

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