

Fifty years of the teaching/learning of French as a foreign language in Kenya: Challenges for teachers and learners

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Abstract

Innovation in classroom practices is the engine that drives the process of language learning. In the fifty years that French has been taught in Kenya, there has been a proliferation of methods and approaches, from the traditional to the action based approach which reaffirms and consolidates the communicative approach. This article seeks to give a historical perspective of the teaching of French in Kenya: its expansion, challenges faced by both learners and teachers. In spite of the remarkable expansion (from less than ten schools in 1964 to about 400 in 2012), the planning for French within the school curriculum has been done with no proper policy resulting in no substantial time being allocated to its learning activities. The fact that it was introduced into a linguistically crowded context was never given the attention it deserved, more so after the change in the education system in 1985. The entire exercise of planning seems to have been left in the hands of the teacher who must find a way of getting through the content in the time given, at the expense of communicative competence on the part of the learners. Taking into account that the same teacher may not have had sufficient training in classroom practices, it is no wonder that even in the presence of so many new tools, many challenges persist.

Keywords: Methods, Approaches, Communicative approach, Teaching strategies, Learning strategies, Language policy, foreign language

Introduction

It is widely believed in language teaching that the proliferation of approaches and methods reflects the strength of the profession. The presence of a wide variety means that the teacher can choose according to his/her needs and those of the learners. To others, according to Richards and Rodgers (1986: vii), “the wide variety of method options currently available confuses rather than comforts”. Judging from the reality of the multilingual Kenyan situation, other factors intervene and merit

concerted reflection. This article proposes to look at these factors in the case of French as a foreign language in Kenya, where it was formally introduced in the education system nearly fifty years ago.

The language policy in Kenya has over the years given prominence to English as the official language and Kiswahili as the national language. With the change of the system of education in 1985, Kiswahili, while maintaining its status, also became a compulsory examinable subject at both primary and secondary level. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) further gives Kiswahili the status of official language alongside English. The status of local languages in the education system has continued to diminish over the same period (ie since independence in 1963) to an extent where they have a very minor role in the early years of learning and even then, only in a small number of schools in the rural areas. What is important to note is the fact that the more than 42 main local languages have the same linguistic status.

Foreign languages, on the other hand, have suffered from lack of clear policies that should guide their status and place in the education system. Even though they have had their place in the education system for over 45 years, there has never been a proper system of sensitization to their importance. The introduction of French in some schools, for instance, has been guided by the personal interest of the administration of the particular school. The way France and the French language are portrayed plays an important role in this decision. Whereas foreign languages are virtually nonexistent in public primary schools, the system of clustering of subjects in secondary schools has had a negative impact on all foreign languages. French has been placed in one “Group” with German, Arabic, Sign Language, Music and Business Studies. For choice of subject, French is then put in unfair competition with subjects such as Agriculture, Religion, Fine Art, in addition to the ones mentioned above. It is obvious that in a system where great importance is laid on success in examinations, students will choose subjects where they are likely to get good grades with fewer challenges.

The French language was introduced into the system of education in direct liaison with three of the objectives of Secondary School education in Kenya¹:

- Enhance understanding and respect for own and other people’s cultures and their place in contemporary society.
- Enhance understanding and appreciation of inter-relationships among nations.
- Build a firm foundation for further education and training.
- Build a foundation for technological and industrial development.

These objectives have been singled out in the official Teacher’s Handbook as having a direct connection with foreign languages such as French.

¹ Ministry of Education, Secondary French Teacher’s Handbook, 2006

Since its introduction in 1964, the French language has registered tremendous growth with the number of secondary schools now standing at around 400 in 2011, according to the Kenya Association of Teachers of French (KATF). The number of learners, according to the same source, is around 30,000 (2011). This number would appear impressive but in effect, only about 3000 pupils sit the yearly Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE) at the end of the secondary school cycle. This is due to the high rate of discontinuation due to various reasons, most of which are derived from difficulties facing both learners and teachers of this language.

The linguistic landscape of Kenya is reflected in most if not all the schools where French is taught. It is important to point out that the Kenyan society being largely multilingual, 90% of the children in the secondary schools speak at least three languages: English, Kiswahili and a local language which may not necessarily be the mother tongue. For the majority of urban children and young people, “sheng”² is the preferred language of communication outside the classroom. These learners are therefore adding French to their linguistic baggage at a time when they already speak other languages as stated above (some of them fluently).

Evolution in methods and approaches: 1964 – 2013.

French was introduced in Kenya at the time of the audio-visual approach. The Method used at the time was “**Voix et Image de France**” (1955 – 1965). The evolution in teaching methods from the Traditional Method right through to the Communicative Approach in the Kenyan situation has always been interspersed with recourse to the **Grammar – Translation** method (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Some of the main elements of the **Traditional Method**: grammar, writing and translation still form an integral part of the learning of French in Kenya. The dependency on written material in the Kenyan system is born from the fact that a lot of emphasis is placed on success in written exams (as stated above) in all subjects, languages included. Learners, from primary to university, know that they need notes to revise for exams. A habit which, unfortunately, negatively impacts on the acquisition of the other skills in language learning. Observation in language classes reveals that in a lot of cases, lessons are organized around a grammar point which serves to evaluate the progress of the learner.

The Structuro-Global Audiovisual method (SGAV) that was developed in the early sixties saw the arrival of different texts beginning with **Voix et Image de France** (1960), **De Vive Voix** (1972), **C’est le Printemps I** (1975) and **C’est le Printemps II** (1978) that were used in various Kenyan schools. However, they did not have much impact on the teaching of French due to the fact that only some schools had access to them. **The Whitmarsh French Course** and **Practical French** were tried but found unsuitable for different reasons. In the meantime, the number of schools was growing so fast that the Ministry of Education found it necessary to intervene and introduce one text

² “Sheng” is a combination of many languages to form words which may vary in meaning according to the area.

for all schools: **Pierre et Seydou**. The methodology here was based on the four stages of the SGAV method:

- Presentation of the conversation
- Explanation
- Repetition
- Adaptation and re-use of content
- Transposition.

The teacher was at the center of the whole process, first acting out the different speakers while manipulating the figurines on the flannel graph and then moving on to the rest of the steps. **Pierre et Seydou** was used and widely appreciated until the **Communicative Approach** arrived with as its main objective, to center the learning process on the learner and enable him to *communicate* in the foreign language. The shortcomings of **Pierre et Seydou** became evident and another text considered more suitable, **Contact I, II, III** made its appearance in schools that had the means to access it. Indeed, this text would have had greater impact had the Kenya Institute of Education (hereafter KIE) not decided to take advantage of the change in the education system (1985) to write a text that would be specific to the Kenyan situation: **Parlons Français**.

Although **Parlons Français** has enjoyed popularity since its release into the education system, not everyone is completely satisfied with it, hence efforts by Kenyan teachers to come up with other texts: **Au Sommet 1, 2, 3 and 4** (2003 to 2005) and **Entre Copains 1, 2, 3 and 4** (2003 to 2005). All these texts have one thing in common in that they are based on the communicative approach. However, this has not stopped experts from raising concerns about the performance of learners of French. Whereas these concerns at secondary level may be limited to performance in the national examination, Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), those at university level are more in the area of communication skills (both oral and written). This then brings us to the question of the challenges in the learning and teaching of French as a foreign language. Why, after nearly fifty years of French in the education system, are there so many gaps in the teaching and learning of this language?

Challenges in the teaching/learning of French

The difficulties that the Kenyan teachers and learners face in the learning/teaching of French have their basis in many factors, one of which is the lack of clear language policies, as indicated elsewhere in this article. The foreign languages in the system of education are given the same attention (if not less), as the other subjects. While accepting that the communicative approach is the best for language learning, not much has been done to provide a conducive learning environment. Since the clustering of subjects at the secondary school level was introduced, French, like the other foreign languages in the system, has lost a lot of the privileged status it enjoyed before the change in the education system (1985). The implications of this system are many and far-reaching.

Language and communication

Language in the context of the communicative approach is above all a communication tool or, in the words of Germain (1993: 202) « an instrument of social interaction ». According to Byram (1992: 180), the objective of this approach is to:

“put priority on the active use of language as a learning and acquisition technique and to partially take into account the nature of the language as it is realized in the acts of speech”

Learners of a foreign language need a direct experience of the language they are learning and they get this from the communicative approach. They are initiated into the use of the language as a social action through two types of activity: “those that are centered on repetition and practice of aptitudes” (ibid: 181) and those that present language “through role play and simulation”.

In order to communicate in the second or the foreign language, one needs more than a knowledge “of rules, vocabulary and grammatical structures”, according to Germain (ibid). They are necessary, it is true, but they are not sufficient for effective communication. Competence in grammar, for instance, constitutes just a component of communicative competence. A learner who manages to formulate sentences without mistakes (following the teacher’s instructions) during a grammar lesson cannot be said to be competent in communication. According to Holtzer (1981: 16), communicative competence is perceived as knowledge of *grammatical as well as sociolinguistic* rules. In order for an individual to be considered as being able to participate in social life as the speaker of a language, one needs to go further and analyze his ability to integrate the use of language to other modes of communication, including non-verbal communication.

All kinds of interaction come into play depending on the situation and the learner *will be* exposed to different situations of communication in which he will need to know how to transmit his message. It comes as a surprise to many learners of French in Kenya for instance, that one does not address a subordinate, a stranger, a friend/family member or a superior in the same way. The presence of accents, gender and agreements poses difficulties that are only overcome through hard work and concentration. Politeness for instance, is expressed differently in different cultures and therefore languages. According to L’Hote (1995), an individual should be able to adapt to new linguistic competencies to situations of communication well mastered in the first language (L1). When a language is taught without paying attention to all these factors, the whole concept of communicative competence becomes illusive.

It is true that learning a language far from its natural context has its own challenges, made more evident in the Kenyan situation by lack of sufficient learning/teaching material. This means that the learning activity is for the most part limited to the classroom where the only resource besides the teacher is the class text which in most cases is shared. Only the very gifted or the very motivated make meaningful progress towards communicative competence. This challenge goes

hand in hand with the lack of opportunities to practice the language they are learning. The setting up of regional resource centers in various parts of the country through the FSP project (2008 – 2013) was a brilliant effort by the French government through its Language Cooperation Office (BCL) to respond to these challenges.

These centers were very well received and the impact would have been greater if the schools did not themselves have other problems. Lack of good will (and proper planning) on the part of heads of institutions has meant that not many learners are able to frequent the resource centers to access the available material. But there are other challenges as well: lack of time on the school timetable to organize meaningful visits, lack of transport to ferry students to these centers which in most cases are not a walking distance away. The learners find themselves isolated and resort to all kinds of learning strategies in order to make progress.

Learning Strategies

It is important to bear in mind that the learner is not an empty vase (Giaisson: 1990) when he is introduced to French. They have learnt both English and Kiswahili, the only difference being that this is their first foreign language. They have therefore acquired some learning strategies which they will try to apply to their learning of this new language. These strategies include the following:

- Memorization of rules and structures
- Repetition and imitation of the teacher's pronunciation
- Use of formulas to internalize grammatical rules and structures
- Note taking and paraphrasing
- Direct translation from the various spoken languages including English and Kiswahili

While some of these strategies may work, others may not, resulting in the distortion and gaps in their learning of the new language. It may for instance be possible to translate word for word from English to French but this will not work in cases where other techniques such as Transposition will be required. There is also the problem of “faux amis” where words may look the same but have completely different meanings: **habit** (English) = **habitude** (French); **habit** (French) = **dress** (English), **bride** (English) = **mariée** (French) but **bride** (French) = **reins** (English); etc. It should not come as a surprise then that Kenyan learners are taught French but they speak “*franglais*”³ (Kazadi 2006).

Teachers on the other hand, face challenges at several levels, some of which are similar to those of the learners. It is important to remember that a teacher of French in Kenya goes into teacher training with roughly 350 hours which do not adequately prepare him for the programme that awaits him/her at the university or teacher training college. He/she is still very much a learner himself/herself having far from mastered the language. Another 595 hours and a 3-month Teaching

³ A mixture of French and English

Practice later, he/she goes out to teach and discovers challenges for which his/her training did not prepare him/her.

Some of the challenges teachers face are as follows:

- Inadequate initial training where certain areas are not given sufficient attention
- Lack of sufficient exposure to the language
- Lack of resource materials for self improvement through research
- Large classes, leading to other problems such as lack of time and learning material
- Interference from other spoken languages
- Learners' negative attitude where they only learn for fear of exams.

The foreign language teacher in a situation where he/she depends a lot on his/her own initiative. In the Kenyan context, he is at the center of the learning experience whatever the approach chosen.

Teaching Strategies

The following strategies feature in most of the classes:

- Resort to translation into and from English, since all learners speak this language
- Memorization and use of formulas to internalize rules, especially for grammar
- Group activities where authentic documents may be introduced into the lesson
- To overcome the challenge of lack of time for evaluation in the large classes, many teachers resort to group correction: learners exchange books, teacher gives the answers and the learners award marks.

New approaches in the teaching of French as a foreign language: the relevance for Kenya

No approach has had as strong an impact on the teaching of French as the Communicative Approach which places the learner at the centre of the learning process. Unfortunately, an observation of classes in the Kenyan situation shows that the teaching/learning culture of dependence on the teacher does not easily allow for the complete independence of the learner. It is easy to see, even when it is not intentional, that the teacher is central in most classroom interactions. The first thing that learners do when they arrive in class is to take out their exercise books and pens, ready to take down notes from the teacher and this, whatever their level.

The Action-based Approach (**Perspective Actionnelle**) introduced by the **European Common Framework of Reference for Languages** (ECFRL) serves to reinforce the fundamental principle of the communicative approach while laying emphasis on the idea of a task to be accomplished by the learner. Surprisingly, the introduction of this approach has been met with mixed reactions. While agreeing that it does not deviate from the communicative approach, most Kenyan teachers just do not see how they can integrate it in their programme. This attitude is easily

attributed to the fact that they have to follow class text is to the letter in order to prepare the learner for the all important KCSE exam at the end of the secondary cycle. The teacher, rather than playing the role of “mediator” or “facilitator” (Anquetil: 2009) or “guide” (Desmons, Ferchand et Al: 2005), is forced to play center role and very often resorts to drilling the learners to get *expected* results. While as a mediator he/she is supposed to represent the “bridge between the learner and the text” according to Morin (2009), he/she often finds himself/herself in a position where he/she and the text are on one side while the learner reminds on the other. These factors, together with the fact that he/she has not been trained to use this new approach, might explain why there is reluctance to move from the *comfort zone*.

ICT in the language class

Most teachers of French in Kenya are aware of the relevance of ICT in the language class. The resource centers referred to above comprise reading material, computers with internet connection and television with access to the French channel TV5. The aim was to enable both learners and teachers to use the internet for learning and research and the TV to give a glimpse of the French-speaking world. Some centers have also been equipped with the interactive whiteboard. Teachers who have visited the relevant websites: www.tv5.org; www.rfi.fr; www.franccparler.org; will agree that these sites represent whole libraries of teaching/learning material. No one can deny the relevance of the internet in education.

Learners today have access to many sources of information and therefore a wide choice of learning material, whatever their field of study. The keen interest in the social media: *facebook*, *twitter* and the ability to surf the internet among young people should be seen as an opportunity rather than a hindrance to learning. The introduction of the interactive white board into the programme at Kenyatta University has had a great impact on the way French is taught. With all these innovations, the role of the teacher and that of the learner cannot remain the same and therein lies the challenge.

How does the teacher begin to accept the new role of mediator or guide when he has always been at the center of the learning process, the one with all the answers? In our exam-oriented system, the teacher holds the key to success and is given due respect. The learner’s role whatever the approach remains one of submission: the teacher knows best and anything learnt out of the classroom is likely to be considered at worst irrelevant. The teacher in turn is far from being independent to choose his approach as his success is hinged on success in the national exam KCSE. The integrated approach proposed by the KIE for the languages does not really respect the needs of the foreign language learner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to make the following remarks:

- New methods and approaches are a necessary aspect of language teaching/learning but what is more important is for the teacher to know how to make use of them: how to manipulate the new tools available to him and adapt them to his needs and those of his learners.
- The way we train our teachers must be adapted to the rate of the evolution in approaches and methods. Too much is left to chance with the assumption that all languages are the same and methodologies should also be the same. Nothing is farther from the truth!
- Training programmes should be continually assessed to ensure that they remain relevant and respond to existing needs of both the learner and the teacher.
- A needs analysis must be carried out from time to time to ensure relevance of the training programmes.
- Learners must be encouraged to see French more as a tool they can use than just another examinable subject!

There is a need for further studies in the area of training of teachers for multilingual contexts such as the Eastern Africa region.

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