

## PROBLEMATIC AREAS IN THE DIDACTICS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN KENYA

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*Performance in French as a foreign language (FFL) in secondary schools in Kenya had declined since the year 2006. Student teachers entering university to pursue studies in French are finding it more and more challenging to follow lectures delivered in French. Students' performance in the national Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations seemed to have been affected when the examination format was changed to include testing of communicative competence, in all skills. To rescue this situation, the need arose for the teachers of French to use pedagogical approaches that would enhance communicative competence in FFL teaching and learning. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach had been adopted as a method for use in the teaching of FFL in Kenya. It was observed from students' performance that there has been a decline in performance in French since this change. This implies there are problems in the implementation and/or application of this approach. This paper is based on a study conducted to investigate the pedagogical implications of use of the CLT in teaching of French in secondary schools in Kenya. The objectives of the study were to: (a) establish activities that facilitate the application of the CLT, (b) establish teachers' preparedness in using the CLT, (c) find out other methods being used to teach French, (d) identify the challenges faced by teachers and students of French and how these were mitigated, (e) establish availability and use of resources for teaching and learning of FFL. The descriptive survey design was used for the study. Ten schools in 5 Counties of the Central region of Kenya were sampled for the study. Other samples were 10 principals of secondary schools teaching French and 109 students of French. The instruments for data collection were: a classroom observation guide, a teacher's questionnaire, a principal's interview schedule and a students' focus group discussion guide. A pilot study was conducted prior to the main study. Data were collected and analysed qualitatively using basic statistics. Inferential data were analysed using the chi-square. The findings of the study showed there was a marked degree of omission in the teaching and learning of French. The number of contact hours was found to be inadequate since French is a foreign language. Lack of modern equipment and shortage of other resources had negative effects, in relation to use of the CLT. The study also showed there was a difference between teachers' knowledge of theory and practice, with regard to CLT. Conclusions and Recommendations were made to make teaching and learning of French effective in the attainment of communicative competence.*

Keywords: Communicative, Competence, Implementation, Teachers

### Introduction

French is a national language in 28 countries around the world, (Belchamber, 2010). French represents the second most commonly taught foreign language across the world. It is, along with English, the most widely used global language. French is an official language of the United Nations, the African Union and is an official working language of many international organisations such as the International Red Cross and the International Olympic Committee.

More than 50% of African countries, former colonies of France but now independent, have adopted French as the official language as well as the language of instruction, at least at secondary and tertiary levels of education (Belchamber 2010). Kenya as a member of the

African Union needs to be able to communicate effectively with all members on all issues socio-economic, cultural and political. Consequently, the teaching of French as a foreign language finds its place within the educational curriculum, in Kenya.

**History of French Teaching in Kenya**

Teaching of French in Kenyan secondary schools began in an organised and official manner after independence, in 1963. This was brought about by the need to plan for socio-economic and cultural interactions with the rest of francophone Africa, hitherto closed to any form of exchange (Chokah, 2012). The Ominde commission was the first of several commissions mandated by the Kenyan government to review the pre-existing education system with a view to making education relevant to the needs of a new emerging politically independent society (Ominde Commission, 1964). It is within that context that French was introduced as a special subject in the secondary school cycle.

The first teaching method, ‘Voix et Images de France’, a first generation Audio-Visual method was welcomed with awe at the way learners were able to pronounce French just like the native speakers. This method through which mimicking of voices was the new discovery, led methodologists to acclaim it as some kind of panacea to hitherto experienced difficulties in foreign language learning, even though, despite good acquisition of prosody, learners could not produce independently of the laid out structures in the initial dialogue, in the ‘*leçons*’ (Rivers, 1982). In Kenya the reaction was no different from that of many other parts of the world. This method persisted as *the* method for some time. Meanwhile learners were at pains to acquire capacity for strategic competences in communication in FFL. As the rest of the world moved to more communicative competence based methods, so did Kenya. In 1992, the ‘Approche Communicative’, a French version of the CLT was adopted as the method for teaching of French as a foreign language in Kenya. There has not been a clear indication that teachers were fully in-serviced on the use of CLT and the challenges that the teachers experienced with this method did not facilitate better results for Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination. A study conducted in the five counties of former Central Province indicated that there was a corresponding drop in performance in French when, in 2006, the Oral examination, incorporating aspects of the CLT was introduced, as the table below shows.

**Table.1.1: National Performance in French (2007-2011)**

| Year       | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Mean score | 6.2  | 5.7  | 5.4  | 4.9  | 4.7  |

**Training of Teachers**

The French language teacher in Kenya is usually faced with several challenges that may not be common to other subject teachers. Some of these include the question of plurilinguism among the learners. It can also be the relationship between the acquisition of and/or learning of English, and French as a foreign language (Chokah, 2012). The choice of method, as the study revealed, can also have consequences on the learning outcomes.

In Kenya, teachers of French are trained under the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme in several public universities and in one Diploma College for the diploma certificate. By the time they finish the training course, they will have completed between 300-350 hours of French studies. This is probably not enough given that the French teachers no longer get a one year scholarship to France, for immersion programmes, as it was the case earlier.

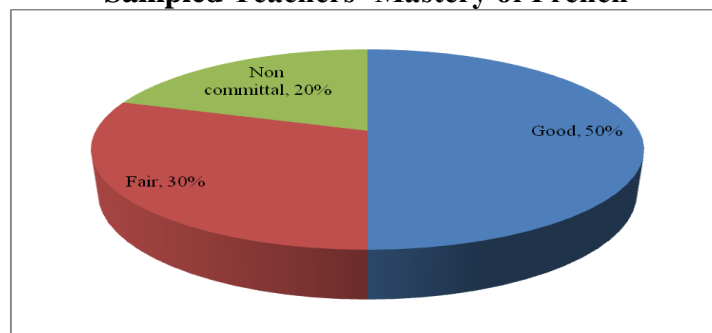
According to the Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development (KICD), formerly KIE, the objectives for teaching French at secondary level are: (a) To equip learners with the communicative skills for effective communication where French is required, (b) to give learners access to oral and written materials in French, (c) to facilitate further studies in Francophone institutions, and (d) to promote global peace through the understanding and appreciation of the cultures of French-speaking peoples and through a more positive perception of foreign peoples and their cultures. These objectives clearly point to the achievement of an underlying objective; that of enabling the learner of FFL to have the communicative competence to attain them, hence the introduction of the CLT, for that purpose.

Such objectives could be fulfilled only if the teachers themselves had the communicative competence to get their learners to that desired end. Earlier studies had shown that students enrolling into the university B.Ed. French course, to train as future teachers of the subject, were finding it increasingly difficult to follow lectures delivered in the target language, (Chokah, 2005)

Indeed one of the major criticisms levelled at CLT has been its demand for overall advanced linguistic ability in French to the extent that teachers who find themselves limited even in the socio- cultural aspect of their linguistic capacity would have challenges in their lesson delivery ability (Modard, 1990).

When teachers were asked to comment on their perceive competence in French, a large percentage were not sure they were competent enough, as the figure below indicates.

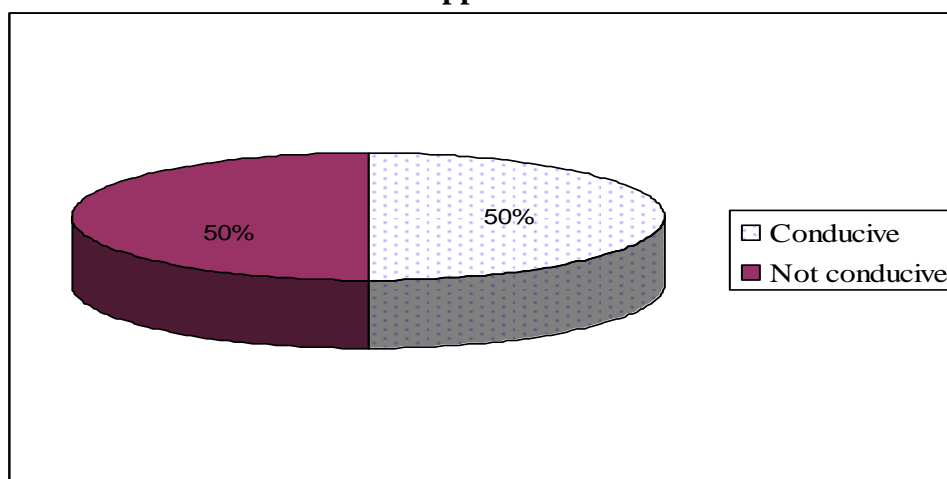
**Sampled Teachers' Mastery of French**



Only half of the teachers were sure of their capacity to communicate effectively in French. Conclusions were made that a teacher who is aware of their weakness on an issue such as communication naturally transfers this psychological state to their learners with a resulting failure to effectively facilitate the learners' objectives, desires, and needs.

The study also established that teachers rarely get in-serviced on new trends in the teaching and learning of FFL. Whenever that happens it does not involve all the teachers, especially because the numbers have increased more than thirtyfold since independence. Efforts have been made to decentralise in-service centres from Nairobi, but this has not resolved the problem due to many other issues, some of a logistical nature. This leaves teachers in a precarious position, as they continue to operate in an environment that is hardly conducive to their professional needs as the study found out in the figure below:

### Teachers' Views on School Atmosphere and Conduciveness for Use of Communicative Approach



It seems then that the problem of communicative competence for the teachers emanated from lack of adherence to the prescriptive aspects of the adopted CLT as a method for teaching FFL at its inception at the secondary school level.

The study sought to know whether the CLT was implemented effectively, at the beginning, and what needed to be done in order for the teachers to acquire the required competence in order to be more effective in their delivery processes.

Moreover when teachers were asked to express their opinion on the quality of training they had received on FFL teaching, only 40% were able to say with certainty that they had received adequate training. The table below shows the teachers' responses.

**Teachers' Views on their Training to Teach French**

| Opinion          | f  | %     |
|------------------|----|-------|
| Well trained     | 4  | 40.0% |
| Not well trained | 6  | 60.0% |
| Total            | 10 | 100%  |

This table clearly indicates that the training that 60% the respondents had received was lacking in certain ways and that needed to be addressed.

#### Preparing Learners for Communicative Competence in Examinations

National Examinations are controlled and managed by the Kenya National Examinations Council. The Examinations have been constantly revised to reflect the changes in curriculum. With French, the realisation to effect changes only came belatedly, in 2006, ten years after the adoption of the CLT as the teaching approach for FFL. These changes introduced a revised Oral Paper in which candidates had to handle various tasks in the examination, both in the exposé and dialogue sections. (The other areas remained largely grammar-based, and not necessarily reality based). Performance in these areas tended to show lower scores than anticipated, and indeed had an overall effect of lowering the national mean.

A low ability in general exposure to regular task-based learning, in foreign language, as opposed to use of more traditionally grammar-based methods, would probably yield lower communicative competence among learners. This is the reason there has been a shift towards more task-resolution based methods in recent years. The Focus Group Discussion members were asked to give their level of competence in all the skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Their replies in the table below show their responses.

**FGD Competence in Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in French**

| Skill     | Very good |     | Good |      | Average |      | Poor |      |
|-----------|-----------|-----|------|------|---------|------|------|------|
|           | f         | %   | f    | %    | f       | %    | f    | %    |
| Listening | 1         | 5.6 | 5    | 27.7 | 12      | 66.7 | -    | -    |
| Speaking  | 1         | 5.6 | 1    | 5.6  | 11      | 61.1 | 5    | 27.7 |
| Reading   | 1         | 5.6 | 6    | 33.3 | 11      | 61.1 | -    | -    |
| Writing   | 1         | 5.6 | 3    | 16.7 | 11      | 61.1 | 3    | 16.7 |

Learners had poor ability in speech in French. Only 11% of the learners were good in communication, while 30% were unable to communicate in French at all. Any facilitator not aware of the need to apply these new task-based approaches would be denying learners opportunities to acquire speech ability in class, faster. As indicated earlier, every method comes with a certain degree of prescription. The CLT has certain basic activities which well applied in the classroom would help learners to achieve more communicative competence. The study required Focus Group Discussion (18 in number) members to indicate which activities their teachers engaged them in, in order to help them attain ability in communication. Their responses were indicated as shown below.

**Activities Used by Teachers to Encourage Speech Among Learners**

| Activities                  | f  | %    |
|-----------------------------|----|------|
| Role play                   | 3  | 16.7 |
| Classroom grammar exercises | 11 | 61.1 |
| Listening to the radio      | 6  | 33.3 |
| Question and answers        | 16 | 88.8 |
| Reading passages            | 9  | 50.0 |

Looking at the table above, it is clear that the role play did not seem a priority during learning, yet it is a guiding force in the completion of a speech act.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were:

1. Which factors facilitated the use of CLT in the teaching of FFL?
2. How prepared were teachers, to use the Communicative Approach in teaching FFL?
3. What other methods were teachers using to teach FFL?
4. What challenges did teachers and students face while teaching and learning FFL and how did they handle the challenges?
5. What FFL teaching and learning resources were available in schools?

**Pilot Study**

The main reason for the pilot study was to find out whether indeed the instruments were measuring what they were supposed to measure, (Kombo and Tromp, 2009). The researcher selected and visited three secondary schools, in central Kenya and arranged for pilot testing of the instruments namely; the questionnaire, observation of teaching and learning session, interview with Principals, and focus group discussion, in a Form three French lesson. The three selected schools did not take part of the main study. The researcher observed a teaching session as he filled the observation schedule. This enabled him to see if there was need to include any additional information, necessary for the completion of the schedule. Item ‘j’ was found to have a certain degree of redundancy and was therefore readjusted and incorporated into items ‘e’ and ‘f’, for more clarity of observation. The researcher then administered the questionnaire on the teachers. After that, the researcher organized for the focused group

discussion (FGD). This was done through random selection of six students from the class list, while ensuring gender parity. These discussions were recorded on magnetic tapes. Finally the researcher conducted the interview with the Principal of the school. The information was then analysed with the aim of establishing whether there was a need to modify it on the research instruments. As there was none, apart from the changes in the observation schedule, the instruments were ready for application in the actual research.

### **Data Collection**

A research permit was sought from the Ministry of Education after a presentation of an introductory letter from Kenyatta University. On obtention of the permit, the researcher, together with his assistant visited the selected schools in which the research was to be carried out to introduce himself to the schools administration, including teachers. Relevant times agreeable to all parties were established, including length of a lesson (one hour for the FGD session). The procedure was carried out in an orderly fashion such that the teacher would begin by filling in the questionnaire, while the researcher and his assistant simultaneously carried out the FGD session. Each FGD group had six students (Krueger, 2002). Rooms were availed for installation of recording device. The researcher introduced himself and made members ready. As discussions continued notes were made according to members' contribution to each question.

### **Data Analysis**

The data from teacher questionnaires was of both qualitative and quantitative nature. Answers to each of the open-ended questionnaires were read and categorized on theme basis. This information was coded. It was then entered into the computer for analysis, using the software known as the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The data was now ready for presentation and interpretation, using the descriptive analysis. Closed-ended questionnaires, already pre-coded, were entered into the computer and the information was treated, using the SPSS program, to generate statistics for descriptive analyses.

The data from the class observation schedule was mainly of qualitative nature, with a small amount being quantitative, in its raw state. Qualitative data was studied, interpreted for establishment of themes. Next, it was coded, and entered into the computer using the SPSS software. Quantitative data was entered in the computer and analyzed, again using the Statistical Package for Social Science. The data was then ready for interpretation and reporting.

Qualitative data from open-ended questions was transcribed from audiotapes of magnetic nature, and arranged according to themes emerging from each question. The information was coded and entered into the computer for analysis using the SPSS programme. The quantitative data already pre-coded, was entered into the computer and analyzed using the SPSS software, ready for reporting.

The data collected from interviews with School Principals was read and categorized into themes. It was then coded and entered into the computer, to generate descriptive analysis, using the Statistical Package for Social Science, (SPSS).

### **Outcome of the Study**

Even though respondents were conversant with the CLT, they felt that their mastery of French was not at the expected level, throwing into doubt their communicative competence. Most respondents did not have a conceptual understanding of the CLT. Schools environments were not conducive to learning French using the CLT. Learners were not keen to learn...perhaps due to improper application of learning methods or other extraneous factors such as need for speedy coverage of syllabus. Only a few respondents were confident of their ability to cope with the rigors of the CLT, particularly in relation to idiolect. Key markers of CLT such as

speech acts, negotiation of meaning et cetera, were used only sparingly and sociocultural references were absent in the lessons Teachers seemed to spend too much time talking, not availing enough time to learners to acquire competence in communication, and the concept of translation, in the CLT was misappropriated. Teachers seemed to revert back to methods such as Audio-visual, from which the CLT evolved, which were relatively less effective in the teaching of communicative competence. Some of the teachers were not able to establish what methods they were using whilst handling certain aspects of their lesson progression. Time was a major challenge. Teachers felt that lessons per week were too few to cover syllabus satisfactorily.

There was generalized paucity in teaching resources and existing textbooks. Textbooks such as “Parlons Français” were lagging behind in terms of content, presentation and relevance particularly with regard to the CLT requirements.

### **Conclusion**

The following section gives some suggestions for further research on areas related to this study. The study focused on implementation of the CLT across the independent variables of the FFL syllabus, time allocation, the resources available and teacher qualification; and implications of that implementation on FFL pedagogy in secondary schools. Although the study revealed gaps in the application of CLT, there was a need for additional research to throw more light on the findings.

This study revealed that teachers felt they understood the nature of the CLT in a theoretical sense, yet their application of the same showed many lapses across the board. Better understanding of causes of these lapses calls for further inquiry into the way in which the CLT was introduced to teachers, with in-depth into matters relating to details such as lesson entry behavior, and how to handle the components of the CLT within the context of practical application of this approach.

The need to study extraneous factors that may possibly contribute to failure for teachers to be aggressive and resourceful towards the fulfillment of learners needs in the attempt to acquire communicative competence in FFL learning could also be looked into. Such issues may involve, for example, levels of motivation for the teachers in relation to workload, exposure to immersion programmes et cetera. Further research into this would probably bring out areas KICD, MOE and training institutions, all involved in FFL pedagogy, need to remedy in order that learners and teachers alike could benefit from the approach they are using, in teaching and learning.

The Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Examination of French needs to be reexamined with emphasis on study of whether it is fully communicative competence based, for the Kenyan learner as per the modes of assessment under the CLT. This does not mean review of the oral examination only. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the CLT needs to be effected across all the skills of language teaching and learning.

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